

## MARA SALVATRUCHA: MS-13

I joined the maras when I was eleven. I felt alone without my mom, my dad and my sisters around, without anyone to guide me...When I first joined the mara it was nice, because I had a lot of friends, brothers and sisters.<sup>1</sup>

Like many children from poverty-stricken homes in Guatemala, Rosa Jiménez, 12, saw in the Mara Salvatrucha gang everything she sought after—money, clothes, a sense of belonging, and guidance.

Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, as it is most commonly known, has quickly grown into a transnational gang. It originated in the 12-year civil war between the military and any possible influences of Nicaragua's Sandinista guerrilla movement within El Salvador dating from the overthrow of Gen. Carlos Humberto Romero in October 1979. For the next ten years, war raged between the ever-changing government and the guerrillas of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The war killed about 75,000 people and almost one million refugees and immigrants fled to the United States and neighboring countries to seek protection.<sup>2</sup> Some had been trained by paramilitary groups like the FMLN and brought what they learned to their new destinations. In the United States, they settled in the predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods of southern California and the Washington, DC area. These communities did not readily accept the new El Salvadoran population, consisting of peasants and farmers. The refugees became targets of Mexican and other local Hispanic gangs. The Mara Salvatrucha gang formed citing the needs of self-preservation and defense. At first, they only recruited Salvadorans, but soon they accepted other Hispanics.

The Salvadoran government and the FMLN signed the Chapultepec Accord in 1992, the temporary legal status of the Salvadorans residing in the US expired, and many who had fled war-ravaged El Salvador in the 1980's returned. Many Mara Salvatrucha members, however, returned to the United States and established factions across the country. Today, *clicas* or cliques are in 33 U.S. states including Oregon, Arkansas, Georgia, and North Carolina.<sup>3</sup> Others remained in El Salvador or expanded throughout Central America (*See Chart 1*).<sup>4</sup>

Today, MS-13 recruits at a very early age. Members range between the ages 11 and 40.<sup>5</sup> They target young Hispanic men with problems at home and whose families are experiencing financial hardships. MS-13 looks for young men from unstable backgrounds in order to play a more important role in their lives. MS offers potential recruits money, a second family, women, and power. Women are not members of MS-13 but accessories or tools. Members beat and sometimes rape them. If the recruit is unwilling to join, he puts his family and everyone he knows in danger as MS-13 does not hesitate to eliminate those who defy it. For those who join, initiation rites vary with location and clique. Some recruits describe members beating them for 13 seconds, 13 members beating them, or giving them 13 lashings.<sup>6</sup> To identify themselves, members brand themselves with tattoos of the number "13," "MS," "SUR," their area code, and the name of their particular clique.

The Mara Salvatrucha gang is involved in many illegal activities. There is no evidence of hierarchy or organization beyond the local cliques. They traffick in drugs, weapons, and human beings. In drugs, they deal primarily with cocaine, marijuana, heroin, and methamphetamine. Authorities have charged also members with theft, murder, rape, and witness intimidation. MS-13 is allegedly responsible for the bus bombing in Honduras on December 23, 2004 which killed 28

people and the hijacking of three buses in San Pedro Sula, which left 13 dead. Mara Salvatrucha has fought armed battles with its rival gang, *Calle 18*, in prisons all over Guatemala and Mexico<sup>7</sup>

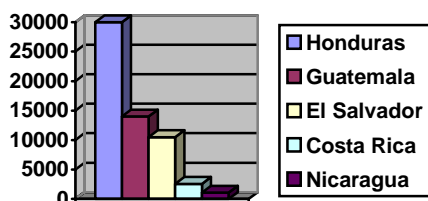
The United States and several Central American governments have responded with special gang task forces or legislation. The presidents of Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala met on April 1, 2005 in Tegucigalpa, Honduras to discuss the issues.<sup>8</sup> The Federal Bureau of Investigation formed the National Gang Task Force (NGTF) “to enable local, state, and federal, as well as international law enforcement agencies, to easily exchange information on MS-13; to enable local and state law enforcement agencies to identify the presence of MS-13 in their territories; to identify related investigations; and to coordinate regional and/or nationwide, multi-jurisdictional law enforcement action.” The Drug Enforcement Administration, Customs and Border Protection, the Bureau of Prisons, and the Department of State offered to support the NGTF with personnel, intelligence, expertise, and jurisdiction.<sup>9</sup>

Central American leaders have responded with their own measures as well. President Ricardo Maduro of Honduras pledged “zero tolerance” with *Operación Libertad*. Authorities have sent countless alleged gang members to overcrowded prisons, often based merely on their clothing and tattoos. A May 2004 fire in San Pedro Sula prison left 103 inmates dead and an April 2003 riot in El Porvenir prison claimed the lives of 69. Pres. Maduro’s administration founded the Special Unit for the Investigation of Violent Deaths of Children in 2002. Unfortunately, it has addressed only 400 out of 2,300 cases, resulting in only 3 convictions.<sup>10</sup>

Guatemala hasn’t passed any anti-gang legislation but the country’s National Progressive Party introduced a bill in support of President Oscar Berger’s “Plan Escoba.” This plan would imprison convicted gang members for 8 to 12 years. Former Salvadoran president Francisco Flores implemented the “Mano Dura” law. Law enforcement and military squads conduct night raids to clear streets of gang activity.

MS-13 has troubled the Americas for almost two decades. It has caught the attention of heads of state, but legislation has not been able to address the problem. It has targeted disadvantaged youths in North American cities, and terrorized thousands of victims and their families. Much like the *marabunta*, the fire ant it is named after, MS-13 has left only destruction in its wake.

**Chart 1: MS-13 Membership**



Source: “Bringing it all back home,” *Economist*, May 20, 2004

<sup>1</sup> World Vision International

<sup>2</sup> “El Salvador: Civil War,” *Encarta Encyclopedia*

<sup>3</sup> Country of Origin Research: El Salvador, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

<sup>4</sup> “Bringing it all back home,” *Economist*, May 20, 2004

<sup>5</sup> Investigator Al Valdez, Orange County District Attorney’s Office, National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations, *A South American Import*

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Walker, Gang Identification Training and Expert Witness, "Mara Salvatrucha-MS 13."

<sup>7</sup> "Vuelve la Guerra entre las maras," *Univision, Agence France-Presse*

<sup>8</sup> "4 Presidents Seek Help in Gang Battle," *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 2005

<sup>9</sup> Chris Wrecker, Assistant Director, Criminal Investigative Division, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Congressional Testimony, April 20, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> "Honduras' Response to Violence Has Made a Bad Situation Worse," Council on Hemispheric Affairs, September 9, 2004.