

# Cocaine wars fuel brutal gangs in Honduras

In Central America murder rates are rocketing, fuelled by Mexican cartels and the drug trade from Columbia to the USA. A UN report suggests that governments are losing control.



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San Pedro Sula in Honduras is the most dangerous city in the world. Pick a person at random from its streets, and the chance they will be murdered this year is one in six hundred.

Honduras and its Central American neighbours are well acquainted with strife. The civil wars between conservatives and revolutionaries that tore through the region from the late 1970s were some of the most destructive in modern times – Guatemala's lasted for 36 years.

Few bullets now fly in the name of capitalism or socialism. But the guns that fired them remain, and there is no shortage of people willing to use them. These days, they serve a different cause: cocaine.

This week, the UN's annual report on narcotics warned that drug-related violence in Central America has reached 'alarming and unprecedented levels.' Situated between the producers of cocaine in Columbia and its consumers in the USA, the region is becoming a major



US border authorities intercept a shipment of cocaine from Latin America © Getty Images

hub in the international drugs trade.

Cities like San Pedro Sula are terrorised by gangs called 'maras,' of which there are over 900. They are known for their elaborate tattoos and horrifyingly cruel acts of violence; many, such as the infamous Mara Salvatrucha, span several countries.

Mara Salvatrucha's earliest members were poor, conflict-scarred immigrants in Los Angeles. And those who returned to Central America found the region's poverty-stricken slums to be fertile recruiting grounds for new members. National governments were largely too weak to curb the brutality – many police even joined the gang.

Now maras are joining forces with highly organised Mexican cartels, who are using their huge income from the narcotics trade to extend their territorial reach. Cocaine is refined in cities like San Pedro Sula before being smuggled over the Mexican border.

And it is not only war-torn countries like Honduras that are at risk: even Costa Rica, a haven of democracy and pacifism, is now riddled with organised crime. The UN report raises fears for the stability of the entire region.

## THIS MEANS WAR?

Different countries have different responses to the threat. In Guatemala, the authorities are taking the fight to the maras and cartels. The death penalty has been introduced and millions of dollars poured into increasingly tough law enforcement. This is war, they say: the gangs must be crushed by any means and at any cost.

Costa Rica, on the other hand, has no army and distrusts this combative approach. Defeating the gangs by force alone, argues its president, is the path to civil war. An honest police force, transparent courts and rehabilitation for drug addicts and gang members: these are the solutions, she says, not street battles.

## Q & A

### Q Is this just a regional problem?

A Cocaine is an enormous global trade worth over £50 billion. This international black market fuels organised crime everywhere: the UN report also raised concerns about the growth of drugs gangs in the UK, although of course no Western country

has experienced anything approaching the vicious gang terror of Latin America. So stopping the illegal drug trade would make communities safer all over the world.

### Q Any chance of that happening?

A One of the reasons for Central America's problems is that drug cartels are finding it tougher to work in Mexico. The Mexican and US governments have spent monumental

sums on the 'war on drugs', and clearly it is having some effect. But trade is still strong after decades of fighting, and an end to the violence still looks distant.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'You can't beat violence with violence.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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### WORD WATCH

**Socialism** – In the second half of the 20th century the cause of socialist revolution became popular in many Central American countries. The USA was extremely scared of a communist bloc so close to home, and supported anti-revolutionary regimes. The resulting civil wars were long,

bloody and pockmarked by human rights abuses.

**Cocaine** – Cocaine is a powder extracted from the coca leaf, which is traditionally chewed in South America as a mild drug. Most processed cocaine is transported via sophisticated trade routes (including Central America) to Europe and the USA, where criminal gangs can

sell it at a huge profit. Cocaine is one of the world's most addictive drugs.

**Costa Rica** – Costa Rica, literally 'rich coast,' has had a stable democracy far longer than any other country in Latin America. It is also one of the world's greenest nations – the government has pledged to be carbon neutral by 2021.

### YOU DECIDE

1. Is democracy more important than stability?
2. Can violent gangs be beaten using brute force?

### ACTIVITIES

1. Design a poster aimed at Western cocaine users highlighting its effects in Central America.

2. Why do people join gangs? Research the issue and make a list of five main reasons.

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 **NOTES**

