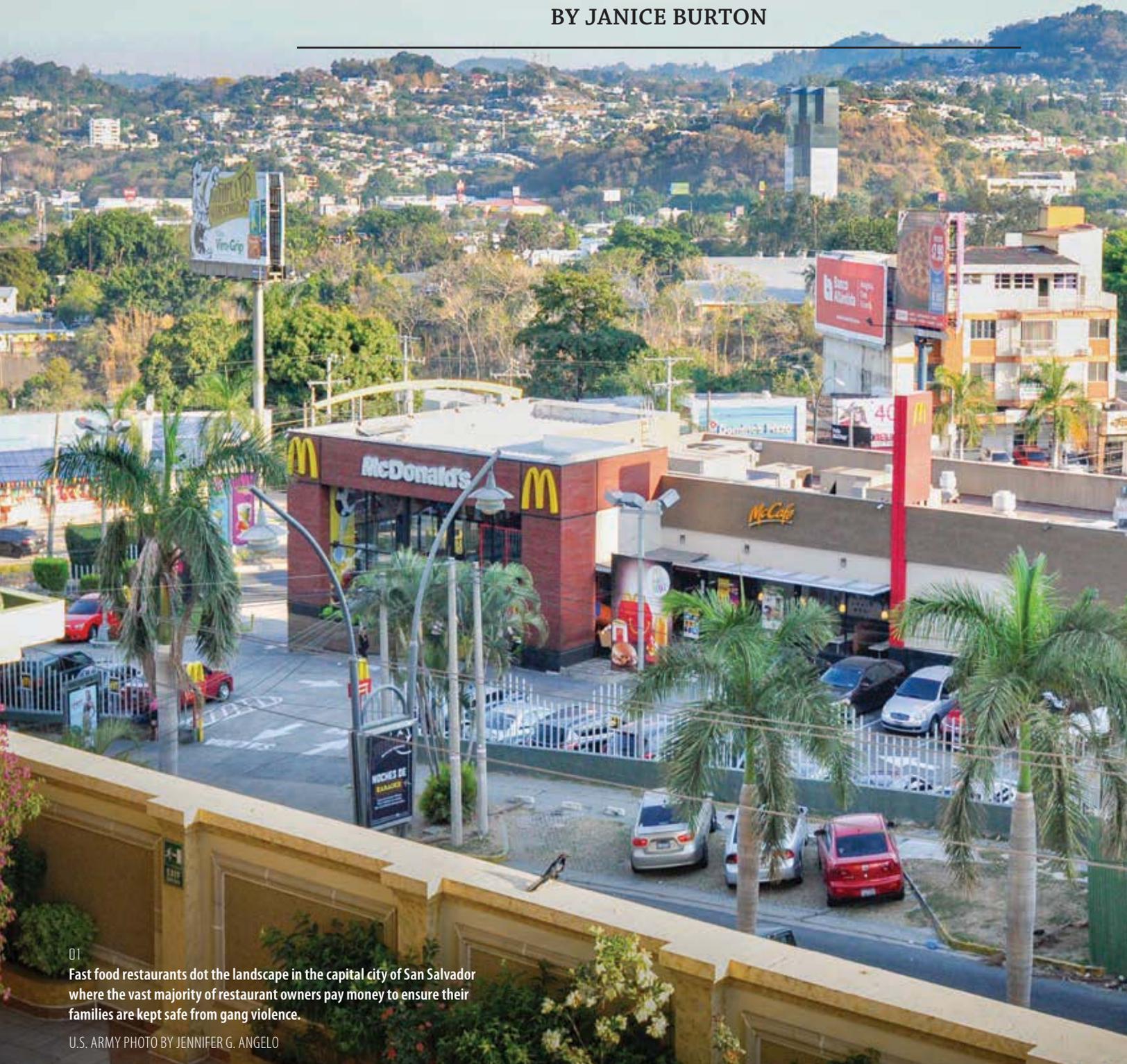




EL SALVADOR

BY JANICE BURTON



01
Fast food restaurants dot the landscape in the capital city of San Salvador where the vast majority of restaurant owners pay money to ensure their families are kept safe from gang violence.

U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO



The airport in El Salvador seems quite a distance from the capital city of San Salvador, but it's really not. As you exit the doorway of the airport, the heat quickly overwhelms you. As you looked around, you recognize a country in transition, on that is trying to blend the new and the old.

Adjacent to the airport is brand new Harley Davidson dealership, but the cantina just a few miles away still serves a meal for a less than a dollar on non-matching tables with wooden benches. El Salvador is a nation torn between the past, the present — and sometimes even its future.

The ride from the airport to San Salvador is an adventure. Brand new vehicles whizz by horse-drawn carts and bicycles. Like many countries El Salvador has a deep divide between the rich and the poor, which can be seen in not only the roads, but also the homes where people live.

Visitors to the country are quickly informed that there are many safe places to be in the city. Tourism is quickly becoming one of El Salvador's economic mainstays due to its beautiful beaches that are known for surfing. That being said, there

of its neighbors. Security measures have been put into place in San Salvador's most troubled areas. The government understands the need for stability that is brought about by the rule of law, and is working many avenues, including safety campaigns and recreational activities to keep youth from joining the gangs. A security camera program was also implemented so the police can monitor the most heavily trafficked areas of the city.

Entrepreneurs who recognize what El Salvador can become have invested money into the economy.



01

are places in El Salvador that are still very much the Wild West. Leaving the city center of San Salvador, it is suggested you keep your windows closed because people are robbed at stoplights. A traditional marketplace not that far from the city center is not somewhere you want to go during the day or night according to local residents. The market has a reputation for fighting and for killing. Police and emergency personnel scoop up bodies in the morning, following a night of partying. This is the home of MS13, and the gang's impact on the country is crushing.

In 2002, crime rates doubled, although today it is no worse than many

Looking out the window from the posh Barcelona Hotel, you can see restaurants of every type and flavor – for Americans, it might look a little too much like home with McDonald's, Denny's, Tony Roma's and many other franchise restaurants dotting the landscapes. Those entrepreneurs know there is a price to be paid for doing business. The businessmen who are hoping to bring the country forward have to pay protection money to the gangs to ensure they can keep their doors open. It is nothing for a restaurant owner to pay \$2,000 or more a month.

The impacts of the gangs and their business practices have major



02

repercussions in the country and particularly to its economy. The Central Bank of El Salvador estimates that Salvadorans spend \$756 million in extortion fees every year — and overall violence costs the country 16 percent of its GDP.⁰¹

Just days prior to *Special Warfare's* visit to El Salvador, the country hosted national elections, which many believed would create instability within the capital city. Since the end of the El Salvador's civil war in the '80s, the government was under the direction of the ARENA Party, a conservative party, for 17 years. During that time, the country saw an improvement in the economy and in living conditions for the people of the country. Corruption by some in the ARENA party led to their ousting from power in the 2009 elections. The former president, Tony Saca is now in jail for corruption; his fall ushered in two elections that were won by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front — the actual rebel group



LIKE MANY COUNTRIES EL SALVADOR HAS A DEEP DIVIDE BETWEEN THE RICH AND THE POOR, WHICH CAN BE SEEN IN NOT ONLY THE ROADS, BUT ALSO THE HOMES WHERE PEOPLE LIVE.

that caused the civil war. While the FMLN was in power, foreign direct investment decreased by 71 percent and unemployment hit highs in the 7 percent range.⁰²

On March 4, El Salvador held its legislative and municipal elections, which brought the ARENA Party back into power. The elections had the lowest turnout of voters at 45.8 percent since 2009.⁰³ The ARENA Party won by a huge margin, and has the seats and majority to overrule any decision made by current President, Salvador Sánchez Cerén, a member of the FMLN. Cerén will leave office in 2019 with a record of “anemic economic growth, weak govern-

ment effectiveness, and a surge in violence and drug trafficking and rising gang-related homicides.”⁰⁴

It is in this landscape that U.S. Special Operations Forces work with partner-nation forces in El Salvador to try and bring about stability. As in most countries in the SOCSOUTH AOR, operations and missions conducted by special operations forces fall under the auspices of the Special Operations Forces Liaison Element and the Special Operations Liaison Officer. In El Salvador, Military Information Support Teams and Civil Affairs Teams that work within the population conduct the bulk of the SOF mission. Special Forces teams

work directly with the El Salvadoran military to enhance training.

Efforts of the CA teams in country and those of the MIST teams, work hand in glove. The MIST Team Leader in El Salvador explained, “From a PSYOP standpoint, we have been concentrating on two campaigns: Heroes of El Salvador, and most recently we started a new campaign, Denied Revenue.”

The Heroes of El Salvador campaign focuses on increasing the image enhancement for the El Salvador Police, while Denied Revenue focuses on countering extortion attempts by the gangs. These two



03

01 Inside the “safe zone” of the San Salvador armed police officers and security guards stand constant watch at the entrance of nearly every business or home compound. The safe zone started with a small area in the middle of the city and as the security presence expands and crime is pushed out, the zone continues to grow larger.

02 Just outside the safe zone in San Salvador is the heart of MS-13 territory where crime and extreme poverty is rampant, a stark contrast to the manicured landscapes and strong security presence just a few blocks away.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO

03

A social media product from the El-Salvador anti-extortion campaign reads “You do not have to pay extortion.” This advertisement and others like it are part of an anti-extortion campaign started in 2017 in joint effort between the National Civil Police Force and the Regional PSYOP Team.



01



02

campaigns allow the El Salvadoran people to see that the government can and will protect them, but it also calls on the people to be active participants in building a safer El Salvador. One campaign builds on the other.

The MIST leader explained, that the success of the “Heroes” campaign increases the perception of the police to the civilian population. That increase in belief of the ability of the police to protect them, makes the community members more likely to report extortion attempts by the gangs. As those reports are received, they turn into investigations, and the investigations turn into arrests. When the arrests happen, the MIST teams again showcase the arrests to the population, again, increasing the perception of the police and of their security in their communities, businesses and homes.

The Civil Affairs team in country does humanitarian projects in conjunction with the military and police. The projects build support for the government within the community, but also provide access

and placement for the MIST teams to do analysis and assessments on the changes in perception and behavior within the population. The MIST team leader explained, “We have do the analysis and we have to do the work. We have to look at the conditions and vulnerabilities within the communities and the government that allow the gangs to operate. We have to look at the people and the media situation – how are the people receiving media? When we compile all of this information, we can see where and how we can have the greatest effect on influencing the population and achieving the goals of the embassy and the TSOC commander.”

The MIST assessments also play a big role in where the CA teams want to go and where they want to be. From a CA standpoint, their partner of choice is the El Salvadoran military. The U.S. CA teams work directly with the commanders of El Salvadoran Army Brigades and their C5, which is the CA element within the brigades. PSYOP’s work to this point has been more closely

aligned with the police due to the nature of the campaigns; however, the MIST teams in country work diligently to make connections to military leaders and to identify beneficial partners for the embassy.

“In El Salvador, the people running CA and PSYOP are the same people within the Army. We work closely with these individuals because no one knows El Salvador better than the El Salvadoran people.”

Making enduring connections with El Salvadoran, similar to those already established in countries like Panama and Colombia is very important. A key to building those relationships is an understanding of the language and culture. During the *Special Warfare* visit to El Salvador, the CA Team Sergeant was a native speaker, born and raised in Puerto Rico. Even though he is fluent in Spanish, he noted that for SOF to be truly effective, they must be more than fluent.

“In these South American countries certain words are unique. If you come to a country like El Salvador, it is important that you

01, 04
Civil Affairs team members coordinate future engagement events with Salvadoran counterparts in El Salvador. U.S. ARMY PHOTOS

02
Students play sports with Salvadoran police officers in Zacatecoluca, El Salvador during a community engagement event. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. MATTHEW FLAHERTY



learn those words before you come because they can aide in building a relationship or tearing it down.”

He explained that understanding the nuances of the language allows Soldiers to build immediate rapport with their partners. Lack of that understanding can build barriers, as can lack of cultural understanding.

“In many South American countries, the people do not want to tell you no, so they will say yes in a certain way that if you understand the culture, you will know they are really saying no,” he explained. “This is not something you can learn in the classroom. Understanding words and actions only comes from exposure. Immersion should really be a part of pre-mission training. Speaking the language alone is not enough. You must be able to pick up on the norm from country to country. As a PSYOP team it is of the utmost importance because

you want to deliver a message that resonates with the people, but by simply using a certain word, you could cause more problems and not achieve your effects at all.”

Also important to understand in El Salvador is the rank structure. The NCO Corps in many countries is not as well developed as in the United States and officers frequently do not want to talk with the team sergeant and may even become insulted if the team sergeant injects instead of the officer.

“It is a very definite officer-led environment here in El Salvador. If the Team Leader cannot communicate, it falls to the NCO. Before we ever enter a meeting, we’ve discussed the end states and how we want to communicate our message. They want to see the officer in charge at least try to communicate, and once that has been established, they are fine with the NCO commu-



03



04



05

03
A Psychological Operations Soldier talks with a Salvadoran police officer during a community engagement event in Zacatecoluca, El Salvador.
U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. DAYMIEN MCMILLIAN

05
A Civil Affairs medic treats a local citizen during a medical readiness event in El Salvador.
U.S. ARMY PHOTO

nicating, and that begins the establishment of trust,” he explained.

A 7th SFG(A) Warrant Officer serving as the detachment commander in El Salvador explained that the mission in El Salvador is very complex.

“We are conducting split team operations, with half of the team in Honduras, the other half here in El Salvador. We identified and are working with partner-nation military units that are SOF specific.”

He said that the detachment is focusing on training at the tactical and operational level. At the tactical level, the team is conducting training on basic rifle marksmanship, advanced marksmanship, and advanced marksmanship in the urban terrain and special reconnaissance; while at the operational level training focuses



02

on intelligence and operations fusion, operations synchronization with intelligence and targeting.

The Detachment Commander noted that the problem sets in El Salvador can be divided into three main categories: political, cultural and geographical.

“These problem sets are very complex and are unique to El Salvador,” he said.

Much of the complexity stems from the country’s civil war in the ‘80s. As noted earlier, El Salvador has two competing parties — the FLMN and ARENA, with the FLMN leaning to the left and ARENA leaning to the right. At the end of the war, the peace accords stipulated that commanders who fought with the FLMN would be integrated into the nascent police force, while ARENA commanders were tied closely to the military.

“We have these two parties fighting for power on the political front and that causes clashes between the military and police. Many of those in command at higher levels in the police and military knew each other in the war – and they were fighting on different sides – so when it comes time cooperate that doesn’t always happen,” he continued. “They don’t trust each other because of the war.”

While he believes it will take a long time for all of the wounds to heal, the team is making inroads. They are engaging key personalities in the military and the police and conducting training in a joint environment, which helps the leaders understand what a positive relationship between the police and the military could do to stabilize the country and move it forward.



01, 02, 03
Special Forces Soldiers from 7th SFG(A) train with partner forces in El Salvador.
 U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY
 JENNIFER G. ANGELO

To date, the team has conducted joint training between the military and police to develop tactics, techniques and procedures that will allow them to operate together. Additionally, the team has hosted subject matter engagements at the operational level. The team brought personnel from the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation to host a seminar for 11 different agencies to help them identify information gaps between the agencies by utilizing practical exercises working together and understanding the operating environment. The Warrant Officer said that the event was key in building

relationships and identifying gaps in their ability to work together.

Another problem facing the police and the military is a lack of funding.

“There is no doubt that the partner force is very capable,” he said. The problem is funding, equipment and modernization of the force. On the other side, the gangs have diversified their income streams and have the capability to modernize their weapons and training. That is a big problem.”

In regards to the relationship with the partner force, he noted, “It is a solid relationship. They are open to any support the U.S. Can provide and they adapt it to their situation here in El Salvador.” **SW**



ADDITIONAL CONTENT ONLINE AT:

<https://www.soc.mil/swcs/SWmag/archive/SW3103/video.htm>

NOTES 01. <https://www.marketplace.org/2018/03/05/world/violent-crime-el-salvador-has-taken-damaging-toll-countrys-economy>. 02. <https://tradingeconomics.com/el-salvador/unemployment-rate>. 03. <https://panamapost.com/sabrina-martin/2018/03/06/right-wins-in-elsalvador>. 04. IBID.



01

MS-13'S STRANGLEHOLD ON A NATION

USSOF's need to shift focus in El Salvador.

BY CAPTAIN ANDREW L. MAYVILLE

Nestled between the Pacific Ocean to the west, and the Sierra Madre mountain ranges to the east, El Salvador's geography is as rich as its culture. At just over 8,000 square miles, the country is approximately the size of Massachusetts and, although the smallest country in the region, its population of 6.1 million people makes it the most densely populated Central American country.⁰¹ El Salvador's history is riddled with turmoil and violence, and United States Special Operations Forces have had a steady involvement in that history. 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) has operated in El Salvador for decades, dating back to the country's civil war from 1979 to 1992.^{02,03} The end of the war led to the Farabundo Martí National Liberation, the former guerrilla force, becoming a legitimate political party after reaching an agreement with the Salvadoran government and signing a UN-sponsored peace accord in 1992. The 2009 national El Salvadoran elections resulted in the FMLN winning the presidency. The FMLN remains in power today, and is now partnered with the United States in bringing stability and security to the country.⁰⁴

While U.S. Special Forces are no longer advising Salvadoran forces against communist guerrillas, their advisory roles are equally important in today's struggles. As part of U.S. Special Forces' persistent and continuing involvement in El Salvador, a Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha deployed to the country from June to October 2017 under Counter Narco-Terrorism Training authorities to train and advise counter-narcotics partner forces. Counter Narco-Terrorism missions across Central America typically mirror one another and are designed to combat what many believe to be shared Central American problems. As such, SFODAs generally partner with elite police and military forces in order to combat narcotics trafficking. These types of missions have yielded a variety of results across the region, but to assume this status quo is a good fit for El Salvador is to fail to understand El Salvador's unique problem set.

Upon appraising the situation on the ground, the SFODA quickly realized that drugs are not the immediate threat to the nation, or U.S. interests in El Salvador. The actual threat is much more violent, organized and existent. It is not a drug cartel, but a group of criminals that proliferated from a lowly street gang to one of the most expansive criminal enterprises in the western hemisphere. That criminal organization is Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13.

MS-13, THE ACTUAL THREAT

MS-13 originated in the poverty stricken neighborhoods of East Los Angeles during the 1980s. These neighborhoods were flooded with immigrants from El Salvador; fallout from the increasingly violent civil war.^{05,06} The war-hardened immigrants assimilated into the Mexican Mafia controlled neighborhoods, where they organized and grew in numbers. By the mid-1980s MS-13, with Mexican gang alliances, extended their presence throughout much of the southwest U.S. MS-13 was gaining power and attention from the U.S. Government, and by the end of 1990's the U.S. government began deporting foreign-born residents convicted of crimes. The massive deportation influx was extremely difficult for El Salvador to handle due to the post-civil war frailty of the nation. Thus, El Salvador provided an opportune environment and opportunity for MS-13 to flourish.⁰⁷

With 70,000 members between El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, MS-13 is the largest Transnational Criminal Organizations in 7th SFG(A)'s area of responsibility.⁰⁸ The primary means of income for the gang is extortion, with 80 percent of small to medium businesses in El Salvador paying MS-13 under threat of violence. This accounts for approximately \$9.6 million dollars a year of steady income for the gang.^{05,06}

01

Billboards throughout the city promote a hotline for victims of extortion as part of an anti-extortion campaign started in 2017 in joint effort between the National Civil Police Force and the Regional PSYOP Team.

U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO

U.S. EFFORTS IN EL SALVADOR

Currently, the U.S. Department of Justice and Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs are spearheading U.S. efforts, in conjunction with the State Department, to combat MS-13 in El Salvador. USSOF; however, remain largely focused on combatting the narcotics flow from Colombia to Mexico and the United States. Despite MS-13's power and extortion modus operandi, the U.S. State Department assesses that they do not have the influence to move beyond local drug trafficking and sales. In addition, due to the country's poverty level, Salvadorans do not typically use, produce or distribute narcotics at a rate that compares to other countries in the AOR.⁹

In El Salvador, the priority partner force for the SFODA was a specialized counter-narcotic task force called Grupo Conjunto Cuscatlán, or simply the GCC. Created in 2013, this unit is a mix of Salvadoran army and navy (SOF and conventional forces) and anti-narcotics police. The task organization and chain of command of the unit is somewhat difficult to navigate due to the fact they are a mostly military unit controlled by a police agency. While the military in El Salvador has the authorization to conduct domestic operations, legally an anti-narcotics agent must be present during the time of the arrest of a suspect when it concerns drugs. The strengths and weaknesses of the GCC mirror those of many similar units throughout the AOR. Although the motivation to train and conduct missions is extremely high within the ranks of the GCC, there are few drug-related operations being conducted in the littoral waters and coastal areas that the GCC primarily operate in.

While the isolated ports and fishing villages dispersed along the Pacific Coast, Gulf of Fonseca and Jiquilisco Bay provide narco-traffickers the ability to repackage large bundles to smaller ones for the final movement north, geographically there is not ample coastline to allow for heavy narcotics trafficking in littoral waters. The vast majority of narcotic interdictions happen in blue-water areas off the coast of El Salvador, and out of the reach of the GCC's organic capabilities—unless enabled by specific intelligence or luck to interdict the right vessel moving in or out of a fishing village. Approximately 94 percent of the flow of drugs from South America comes along the Pacific coast of Central America to Mexico and the US, with the vast majority moving through waterways or air routes.⁷ In an attempt to increase the efficiency and success rate of the GCC, the SFODA spent the summer expanding their capability to operate within riverine and littoral waters. This effort was a collaboration of USSOF and GCC leadership, recognizing the need for the GCC to gain relevancy in the country's efforts to combat narco-trafficking. This is a testament to the unit's awareness of the overall situation on the ground, and also telling of their need for a real mission.

SHIFT IN FOCUS

The SFODA and their GCC counterparts worked tirelessly to improve the capabilities of the Salvadoran task force, but the latter rarely received the opportunity to utilize their acquired skills operationally. Small unit tactics, intelligence-operations fusion, littoral maritime

operations, staff functions and mission planning are some of the areas the SFODA trained the GCC on in their robust training program. Relationships were formed, graduations occurred, certificates were presented and the unit's capabilities grew. However, missions to disrupt narcotics trafficking through the country did not occur, at least not at a rate to give credit to the intent and concept behind a CNT mission.

According to USC Title 10 Section 333, CNT missions have legal authorities to train, advise and provide limited equipment to a host/partner nation force. Detachments are armed with subject matter expertise, language skills and the ability to train a foreign force. They are prepared to execute training and provide limited resources to their partner forces. The detachment was successful in providing the training piece — but the advising portion was greatly hampered by the dwindling of funding and absence of real-world missions for the GCC. The U.S. Embassy in El Salvador also noticed the lack of results from the GCC. It became more apparent that the flow of drugs was more prevalent through maritime routes outside of the GCC's brown water operating space, and support was increased for the El Salvadoran Navy's blue-water narcotics interdiction efforts. Meanwhile, outside the protective walls of the U.S. Embassy, MS-13 continued to operate freely.

The brutal tactics MS-13 uses to carry out violence rivals those used by the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations. The targeting of these acts range from civilians, police officers, judges, prosecutors and other government employees. When the gang cannot reach the desired target they often turn their sights on family members; including parents, spouses, cousins and even children.¹⁰ El Salvador has taken much action in an effort to combat MS-13 and other dangerous TCOs.

THE MAIN EFFORT AGAINST MS-13

Las Fuerzas Especiales de Reacción de El Salvador, or the FES, is an elite anti-gang unit belonging to the police special operations. They are one of the premier fighting forces tasked with hunting down and dismantling violent gangs, and MS-13 is their top priority. With an operational tempo that rivals most USSOF, the FES is the tip of the spear in the fight against MS-13. While they have a wealth of real-world experience, the majority of their personnel lack advanced formal training. This created the potential for an SFODA to increase the capabilities and lethality of the unit at the forefront of the war on MS-13.

Historically, Special Forces detachments have only worked with the FES in a limited capacity, focusing on

THE PRIMARY MEANS OF INCOME FOR THE GANG IS EXTORTION, WITH 80% OF SMALL TO MEDIUM BUSINESSES IN EL SALVADOR PAYING MS-13 UNDER THREAT OF VIOLENCE.

training the leadership and upper tiers of the organization and staff functions. The detachment's involvement with the FES centered on the detachment commander and team sergeant injecting themselves into the FES as often as possible, understanding that the resources of a single SFODA are limited, but also recognizing that the FES were combating the real threat in El Salvador. SFODA leadership attended weekly meetings and operations synchs, provided a specific Special Forces MOS to give specific training when able and attempted to affect change where they could. It was apparent to the detachment that the future focus of Special Forces needed to shift.

HOW SPECIAL FORCES CAN ENHANCE THE FES

With the attention of a full SFODA, and a dedicated program of instruction, the FES will be able to greatly increase their capabilities as a counter-gang unit. The specific training that the FES needs is not any more complex than the type of training similar units receive from SFODAs throughout the region. Mission planning, intelligence-op-



01

erations fusion, staff functions and battle tracking are all fundamental blocks of instruction an SFODA can train and advise the FES leadership. They will also be able to enhance the FES teams on the tactical level. Small unit tactics in urban and rural environments, advanced marksmanship, tactical movement and combat lifesaving are areas that SFODAs specialize in training partner forces on. Furthermore, the SFODA would be able to leverage the Salvadoran Special Forces to train and work with the FES; providing advanced training and specialized infiltration platforms not normally available to the FES.

A shift in focus like this for an SFODA would not be difficult to execute in El Salvador. Not only is a detachment designed to think critically, evaluate the situation on the ground and adjust accordingly, but the operational USSOF architecture on the ground in El Salvador is designed to support counter TCO operations. The mission of both Civil Affairs and Military Information Support Teams would greatly enhance the effects of an SFODA's counter-gang partner force. Furthermore, the issue of shifting focus to a predominantly counter-gang mission



02



03

would still fall under the current authorities granted to Special Forces teams operating in El Salvador.

Section 333 of Title 10, "permits the Defense Department to provide counter-narcotics assistance and training for foreign security forces, including foreign police forces. Furthermore, this section also allows the Department of Defense to provide the same amount of support to build partner nation capacity to combat counter-transnational organized crime operations. This includes the authorities to train and advise with limited equipping."¹¹ In the instance of USSOF in El Salvador, it is not necessarily an issue of authorities—it is an issue of deliberate repurpose and refocus, with concurrence at all levels.

MS-13 IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The threat of MS-13 is not relegated only to Central America. There is a growing number of MS-13 members in the United States today. The FBI assesses that the MS-13 threat is present in 42 states, including the District of Columbia.¹² The crimes committed in the United States are conducted in the same brutal manner as those carried out in El Salvador. In early 2017, 13 members of the gang committed seven murders in New York — including two teenage girls.¹³



04



05

01 A Special Forces Weapons Sergeant conducts a layout with the FES before a major training operation in Comalapa, El Salvador.

02 Two Special Forces Medical Sergeants observe a FES agent moving a casualty to safety during a medical training scenario lane in El Salvador.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS COURTESY OF 7TH SFG(A)

03 Items seized during an operation targeted gang members and associates involved in transnational criminal activity, including drug trafficking, weapons smuggling, human smuggling and sex trafficking, murder and racketeering.

04 MS-13 tattoos cover the chest of an individual arrested in the U.S. for gang activity.

05 U.S. Special Agents prepare to enter the residence of a target during an operation aimed at transnational criminal gangs and others associated with transnational criminal activity. Throughout the five-week operation more than one thousand individuals were arrested across the U.S.

U.S. IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT PHOTOS

In addition to crimes being committed on the streets, the prison system is also suffering from a rise in brutal attacks carried out by MS-13, or by other gangs that are extorted and coerced to carry out these crimes.¹⁴ The measures taken to defeat MS-13 in El Salvador may very well serve to disrupt the atrocities they also carry out in the United States.

THE WAY AHEAD

Moving forward, it is crucial that all parties involved in the protection of U.S. interests and helping improve the country of El Salvador recognize that the actual threat in the country is MS-13; from the force provider to the theater command, and from the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador to the Special Forces team on the ground. The country of El Salvador has communicated how real and grave the threat of MS-13 is, and it now falls on the United States to get in step with the right Salvadoran partner of choice. The U.S. and El Salvador have a complicated history of shared bloodshed and hardship. 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) Soldiers advised and assisted Salvadoran forces during their civil war and, Salvadoran Special Forces fought alongside U.S. and Coalition Forces abroad in Afghanistan.¹⁵ Our Salvadoran partners have stood by the U.S. in our hour of need, and we should be prepared to shift to assist them in theirs. We will best achieve this by tailoring our efforts and resources to what it is our Salvadoran partners need, ensuring our combined lines of effort are nested and prioritized accordingly.

The instability of El Salvador affects the security of the United States. This instability allows for the freedom of movement for illicit activity dangerously close to the southern approach of the United States. MS-13 is a major cause of instability within both El Salvador as well as the United States; presenting a greater threat than drug flow. Special Forces teams deliberately training and advising Salvadoran forces to combat MS-13 will help bring stability to the country, thus protecting U.S. interests both at home and abroad. **SW**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Capt. Andrew Mayville is a Special Forces Soldier assigned to 7th Special Force Group (Airborne), and is supporting operations in El Salvador with the U.S. Special Operations Command-South.

NOTES 01. "Population Of El Salvador 2017 | Population World". 2018. *Populationworld.Com*. 02. Manwaring, Max G. and Court Prisk. 1988. "El Salvador At War: An Oral History". 03. Smyth, Frank. 1987. "Secret Warriors: U.S. Advisers Have Taken Up Arms In El Salvador - Franksmyth.Com". 04. "Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front | Political Party, El Salvador". 2011. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 05. Brice, Makini. 2017. "More Than 200 Arrested In U.S. Crackdown On MS-13 Gang". *U.S.* 06. Walter, Jan. 2015. "El Salvador In The Grip Of Gangs | DW | 29.08.2015". *DW.COM*. 07. "MS13". 2017. *Insight Crime*. 08. Stone, Hannah. 2012. "US Ranks MS-13 Alongside Zetas In Gang List". *Insight Crime*. 09. Woody, Christopher. 2017. "Here's How Drugs Are Getting Smuggled From South America To The US". *Business Insider*. 10. Dörner, Kiyo. 2017. "MS-13: The Rise Of A Deadly Gang In US Suburbia | DW | 02.09.2017". *DW.COM*. 11. "10 U.S. Code § 333 - Foreign Security Forces: Authority To Build Capacity". 2016. LII / *Legal Information Institute*. 12. "MS-13 Threat Assessment". 2008. *FBI*. 13. Kolb, Joseph. 2017. "Yet Another Brutal MS-13 Attack Shows Need For Crackdown On Uacs". *CIS.Org*. 14. Miller, Michael. 2018. "'Vying For Control': How MS-13 Uses Violence And Extortion In America'S Jails". *Washington Post*. 15. Nawrocki, Joe. 2013. "US, El Salvador Partnership Leads To Mission Success In Afghanistan". *DVIDS*.

EVOLUTION EL SALVADOR

How Psychological Operations teams
continue to make an impact in a dynamic
operational environment

BY CAPTAIN MEG CRUZ

El Salvador is a truly a complex problem. A cursory search of the country in Google reveals headlines describing organized crime, gang dynamics and the Trump administration's growing concerns about Salvadoran immigration in the U.S.⁰¹ Clicking on "images" yields a puzzling mix of breathtaking tropical landscapes and smiling faces juxtaposed with tattooed men in handcuffs.

Contrast is a common theme in the Salvadoran environment. The wealthiest areas of the country are skirted closely by *favela*-style slums, accentuating the country's large income gap. Both foreign and local humanitarian, religious and not-for-profit organizations work year-round to serve the community, while gangs clash with police and each other for territorial control. Unemployment rates are high despite a thriving economy in the capital, San Salvador. The main political parties are often viewed as corrupt and divisive, yet the Salvadoran Government continues to seek a bigger seat at the international economic table.⁰²

Special Operations Forces are charged with navigating these problems while simultaneously developing and supporting Salvadoran security forces as a regional partner. PSYOP is uniquely trained and positioned to do this through the lens of culture, history and human psychology. Central America remains a key piece of terrain in the global security conversation, especially as adversaries to the United States seek to plant influence south of her borders. Over the last two and a half years, Regional PSYOP Teams from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, have deployed to El Salvador, wielding influence as the weapon of choice. This article will describe primary RPT efforts, historical context, operational successes and the future of PSYOP there.

In an environment ripe with bifurcation, RPTs work diligently to strike a balance between meeting multiple commands' objectives, supporting U.S. Embassy efforts and empowering a key security partner in the region. To meet these goals, PSYOP teams must evaluate key aspects of a given operational environment, and identify the attitudes and behaviors in the population that contribute to a particular problem set (in the case of El Salvador, instability, violence and lack of border security). Teams then precisely tailor messaging campaigns alongside partner nation forces to counter these challenges. Although the origins of the Psychological Operations Regiment are often associated with the use of loudspeakers and leaflet dissemination for influence, the current regional repertoire has evolved to include various techniques layered through military and U.S. Embassy



01

channels. Regional PSYOP Team Soldiers in El Salvador engage with local leaders on key issues, conduct surveys and assessments to build an operational picture, collaborate with non-governmental and charitable organizations, nest efforts with Special Forces and Civil Affairs teams and conduct subject-matter expert exchanges with host-nation counterparts. RPTs also play a role in the targeting process by working with other U.S. and partner nation military units, and advise country teams on messaging opportunities and implications.

The beginning of many current Salvadoran security challenges was its civil war (1980-1992), which leaves a distinct mark on cultural narrative today. The communist-influenced guerrilla force, the FMLN (Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation), took up arms against the Salvadoran government after years of repression and social injustice.⁰³ Following the peace accord, many ex-FMLN fighters were integrated into the National Civil Police force.⁰⁴ Both the PNC and Armed Forces of El Salvador currently comprise the entire body that is the national security force effort. However, numerous members of both organizations were involved in the conflict on either side, and still maintain some of their views and grievances. Grudges and distrust between the military and police create challenges for integrated efforts despite many attempts by leaders to dissolve residual tensions.

In addition to supporting interoperability and information exchange, RPTs must circumnavigate force structures traditionally seen in the U.S. and with her other allies to balance efforts in El Salvador. Due to the fallout of the civil



war and subsequent peace accord, the PNC is the only organization with the authority to arrest or detain suspected criminals. Like its Northern Triangle neighbors, El Salvador has experienced more criminal activity than it can manage with the police force alone, thus the augmentation of citizen security by the military. The result is that Salvadoran armed forces are almost exclusively oriented at threats internal to the country. However, they are not granted arrest authorities, and must lean on police counterparts to act on intelligence. Many PNC and AFES units have been merged in an effort to quell this problem, but much work remains to be done for a cohesive security solution. Thus, counter-illicit trafficking and gang proliferation operations must always include police, but can call upon military support.

It is amid this quandary that PSYOP officers and NCOs must find an effective middle ground. Part of the RPTs' successes have been mitigating bifurcation through integrating centers of gravity in Salvadoran networks to meet common goals. In 2016, the RPT identified another long-standing issue since the war: a lack of trust in the police force by the general population. Thus, the "Heroes of El Salvador" campaign was born. The idea was to integrate messaging and police outreach in communities that would enhance trust in the PNC. Greater trust in the police would lead to an increase in legitimacy, citizen participation in the justice process, and greater overall support and respect for the government and its institutions.

The RPT saw opportunity here to bring U.S. and host nation network efforts together. The Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) has

the mission of helping "countries deliver justice and fairness by strengthening their police, courts, and correction systems" to "reduce the amount of crime and illegal drugs reaching U.S. shores."⁰⁵ The RPT quickly teamed up with INL and the PNC to develop a campaign to achieve their shared goals.

In support of this effort, the national police began engaging more in after school programs, soccer tournaments, *charlas* (town-hall style discussions) with local parents regarding their concerns for their children, and *oratorias*, or public speaking competitions that encouraged Salvadoran kids to think deeply about the values involved in public service. As a result, and in spite of tensions toward government entities in recent months resulting from the broader election season, approval ratings of the police increased after "Heroes" launched. This effort has laid the foundation for future prevention efforts in the PNC as they continue to seek opportunities for community cohesiveness. Ongoing efforts will contribute to the shared priority for increased good governance and a capable security partner in CENTAM.

Through subject-matter expert exchanges and collaborative efforts with other ARSOF elements in the country, RPTs have also enabled Salvadoran military organizations. Most Salvadoran Army units have a designated section in charge of both Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations: however, the two are generally treated as the same entity. Lack of funding and training also create a challenge within this department across the military. In conjunction with deployed CA teams, the RPTs have created relationships

01
U.S. Army Psychological Operations team members conduct an interview with a female police officer in Sonsonate, El Salvador. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. MATTHEW FLAHERTY



01

01
A Salvadoran police officer gives a backpack with school supplies to a student in Zacatecoluca, El Salvador. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. DAYMIEN MCMILLIAN

02
A Salvadoran police officer builds a pinata with two students in Sonsonate, El Salvador. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. MATTHEW FLAHERTY



with military leaders that will serve as the foundation for future enabling efforts. These partnerships were achieved through a combination of key-leader engagements, CA projects and PSYOP integration with military units. The outcome has been significant. In many areas of El Salvador, military and police elements are beginning to work together toward their common goals to counter gang recruitment through youth engagement.

As partner nation security efficacy increases, so too does the power to fight transnational criminal organizations. The issue of *maras*, or gangs, remains the most prolific and difficult to address. The Salvadoran gang phenomenon began in the late 1990s with the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, in which the U.S. deported undocumented gang members in Los Angeles, California, to their countries of origin. This was the inception of El Salvador's current gang problem.⁰⁶ The gang empires thrive for many reasons. As a result of decades of income inequality, lack of work opportunities, broken family structures and undergoverned peripheral communities, the gangs provide what greater society cannot. Other institutional challenges further complicate the problem at a strategic level. Although the administration under President Cerén has implemented *Plan El Salvador Seguro*, a security plan designed to address critical levels of violence and criminality in 50 different municipalities,⁰⁷ Salvadoran news media outlets continue to report gang-related homicides on a near daily basis. Additionally, Salvadoran prisons are severely over-populated, thus posing many human rights questions as authorities strategize and select courses of action to attempt to reduce one of the world's highest homicide rates.⁰⁸

The two largest and most influential gangs are *Mara Salvatrucha 13* (MS-13) and *Barrio 18* (18th Street). Tactics, techniques and procedures among all the *maras* are

relatively consistent: most of their financial resources are acquired through illicit means, mainly extortion. Kidnappings for ransom are also common. Eliminating gang enablers is a key piece of combating the gangs themselves until a time in the future when aspects of Salvadoran life that proliferate this culture fizzle out. Thus, PSYOP teams have placed emphasis on eliminating sources of income as part of a long-term plan for success in the country.

With the buy-in of the PNC and INL, the RPTs were able to launch a national anti-extortion campaign in the fall of 2017. The plan was twofold: first, Salvadoran victims of extortion needed to be reminded that this kind of robbery did not have to be a part of their daily lives, or an informal "life tax." They could choose not to pay gangs, and instead seek justice through the PNC's Anti-Extortion Task Force. Second, the Task Force needed more actionable reports in order to illuminate the threat network and begin to dismantle its financial structure. Through the use of billboards and social media products to distribute the call center phone number, the population was getting the message. Phone calls to the line increased around 3,000 percent after one month of dissemination compared to the same date in 2017. Hundreds of actionable calls were received, resulting in hundreds of investigations opened and several arrests.

The future for the mission continues to trend in a positive direction, even in the face of force restructuring challenges. The PSYOP community has recently launched a new format for deploying forces to Latin America as a response to reduced manning. The Alternate Regional Engagement Strategy (or ARES Concept) was recently implemented. It removes the need for a five-man PSYOP team in every country. Instead, it places one officer and a contingent of Soldiers forward deployed to oversee all the CENTAM missions and provide support to the SOC



02



03

Forward command, while a smaller RPT deploys to each subsidiary country. This ARES node provides regional oversight, a connection to reach-back support from Fort Bragg, as well as the capability to flex down to specific locations when needed to supplement a given team. The result is that all elements have been able to achieve mission effects in their respective countries in spite of having the historically smallest teams.

As SOCSOUTH and SOUTHCOM refine efforts to counter transregional threats, Psychological Operations teams in CENTAM must also keep communication open and frequent across borders. Part of enabling security partners means

building the operational picture first, and deployed RPTs understand the importance of prepping the battlefield from all three sides of the Northern Triangle. Although much progress has been made in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras toward identifying and filling gaps that enable illicit trafficking, international agreements, lack of infrastructure and challenging terrain contribute to ongoing problems. El Salvador does not face narcotics movement issues to the same scale as her neighbors in the Triangle. Nonetheless, pressure applied in other countries against criminal organizations could always result in a change in tactics, thereby routing increasingly more illicit product through the country. Persistent RPT presence in the coming years will mean ongoing assessment and consistency of messaging across borders.

Progress in El Salvador since the RPTs arrived has been gradual and incremental, but concrete. Through the new regional engagement strategy, ARES, and long-standing country team and host-nation relationships, future RPTs will continue fomenting security efforts of our partners to the south. Especially with acute focus on transnational threats across U.S. Departments of Defense and State, the need for extended networks and influence in those networks remains crucial. In the case of El Salvador, security partners and country team allies will continue to show their buy-in for a more safe and prosperous country. **SW**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Capt. Meg Cruz is a Detachment Commander in 1st Psychological Operations Battalion (A), 8th Psychological Operations Group (A), Fort Bragg, North Carolina. She served six months as a team leader in El Salvador. She holds a Bachelor's and Master's Degree of Arts in Spanish from Winthrop University.

03

A social media product from the anti-extortion campaign, featuring the call center number. It reads "Extortionists control their victims to intimidate them." U.S. ARMY PHOTO

NOTES **01.** The Department of Homeland Security announced that the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) of Salvadorans in the US would end in January 2018. See Miriam Jordan, "Trump Administration Says That Nearly 200,000 Salvadorans Must Leave," *The New York Times*, 8 January 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/08/us/salvadorans-tps-end.html>. The POTUS's State of the Union Speech in January of 2018 also addressed mounting immigration concerns on the basis of MS-13 presence in the US: see Liz Robbins "Why Was MS-13 Targeted in Trump's Speech?," *The New York Times*, 31 January 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/31/nyregion/ms-13-gang-trump.html>. **02.** Salvadoran politicians are actively seeking to participate in the customs union that Honduras and Guatemala entered into on June 26, 2017, the *Unión Aduanera Guatemala Honduras*. The agreement is intended to increase both nations' GDP by facilitating ease of passage for travelers and goods across borders. See "El Salvador begins negotiations for customs union with Honduras and Guatemala," 16 October 2017, <https://us.invertalia.net/news/el-salvador-begins-negotiations-for-customs-union-with-honduras-and-guatemala-10988>. **03.** William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: the United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill & London, 1998), 36-47. **04.** See Mike Allison, "El Salvador's brutal civil war: What we still don't know," *Al Jazeera News*, 1 March 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/02/2012228123122975116.html>. **05.** Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) homepage article, "Security Through Justice," <https://www.state.gov/j/inl/>. **06.** José Miguel Cruz, Jonathan D. Rosen, Luis Enrique Amaya and Yulia Vorobyeva, "The New Face of Street Gangs: The Gang Phenomenon in El Salvador," Florida International University Report to the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), US Department of State, p.13, https://lacc.fiu.edu/research/the-new-face-of-street-gangs-in-central-america/the-new-face-of-street-gangs_final-report_eng.pdf. **07.** See "Plan El Salvador Seguro, Executive Summary," Presidency of the Republic of El Salvador, p.3, 15 January 2015, www.presidencia.gob.sv/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/El-Salvador-Seguro.pdf. **08.** See Tristan Clavel, "InSight Crime's 2017 Homicide Round-Up," 19 January 2018, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/2017-homicide-round-up/>.