



**Forum:** Disarmament and International Security Committee (GA1)

**Topic:** Measures to maintain stability in the Northern triangle

**Student Officer:** Philip Voultsos

**Position:** Co-Chair

## **PERSONAL INTRODUCTION**

Dear Delegates,

My name is Philip Voultsos and I am a second year IGCSE student at Byron College. For this year's SCMUN, I have the utmost honour of serving as a Co-Chair of the Disarmament and International Security Committee. This will be my fourth SCMUN, my 2nd time chairing and my 18th overall conference.

Firstly, congratulations on your choice to join GA1. It is one of my favourite committees, being a perfect middle ground between regular committees and specialised committees, particularly the Security Council, and I hope that following this conference, many of you end up reaching the same conclusion.

This study guide is in regards to the second topic of the GA1 committee of this conference, "Measures to maintain stability in the Northern triangle" and should hopefully give you a brief and concise outlook on the issue, as well as pointing you in the right direction for the rest of your own research (which, trust me, you really should do!).

If you have any questions about the topic, committee or conference in general please do not hesitate to contact me or the Main Chair via email at [voultsosp@protonmail.com](mailto:voultsosp@protonmail.com) and [christy.gnoth@gmail.com](mailto:christy.gnoth@gmail.com). I am sincerely looking forward to meeting you all this February.

Philip Voultsos



## TOPIC INTRODUCTION

The Northern Triangle of Central America, which comprises of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras<sup>1</sup>, faces multiple interlinked challenges that threaten their regional stability and drive unprecedented migration, particularly towards the North. Multiple decades of civil conflict, systematic corruption, gang violence, economic inequality and climate vulnerability have created a humanitarian crisis affecting millions.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1:** Map of the Northern Triangle.<sup>3</sup>

Despite numerous international and regional relief efforts, such as the Alliance for Prosperity, violence and insecurity persist at alarming levels, with the Northern Triangle countries historically ranking among the most dangerous in the world for their citizens.<sup>4</sup>

The region's instability mainly stems from deeply rooted structural problems within their respective governments. Civil wars in Guatemala (1960 – 1996)<sup>5</sup> and El Salvador

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<sup>1</sup> Roy, Diana. "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 13 July 2023, [www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle).

<sup>2</sup> Roy, Diana. "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 13 July 2023, [www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle).

<sup>3</sup> Roy, Diana. "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 13 July 2023, [www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle).

<sup>4</sup> (Figure 1) Roy, Diana. "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 13 July 2023, [www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle).

<sup>5</sup> Guatemala « World Without Genocide - Making It Our Legacy. [www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/guatemala](https://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/guatemala).



(1979 – 1992)<sup>6</sup>, in conjunction with Honduras serving as a staging ground for the United States backed Contra operation in the 1980s<sup>7</sup>, left these countries with widespread and normalised violence, proliferated weapons and ineffectual institutions that were unable to prevent the spread of transnational crime organisations. Many failed post-conflict reconstruction efforts left these structural inequalities intact, creating conditions for organised crime to emerge in the 2000s.<sup>8</sup> Today, due to these conditions, powerful transnational gangs such as MS-13 and Barrio 18 are able to control vast territories, while engaging in extortion and drug trafficking.<sup>9</sup> They also commit violent acts that force hundreds of thousands to flee their homes annually.<sup>10</sup>

Economic vulnerability further compounds these security challenges, especially considering that the Northern Triangle is one of the poorest regions in the Western Hemisphere, with over 60% of Hondurans and Guatemalans living below their national poverty lines.<sup>11</sup> These countries are also incredibly susceptible to the effects of climate change – Honduras is frequently ranked among the nations most affected by climate change after experiencing devastating hurricanes including Hurricane Mitch in 1998<sup>12</sup> and back-to-back Hurricanes Eta and Iota in 2020<sup>13</sup> – causing, at times, hundreds of thousands to become displaced. These effects are especially important for agricultural communities in the Central American Dry Corridor, which experience recurring droughts that can destroy livelihoods and increasingly drive migration.

Corruption and impunity in the Northern Triangle further undermine efforts for stability. Despite innovative international anti-corruption mechanisms like Guatemala's

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<sup>6</sup> Green, Amelia Hoover, and Patrick Ball. "Civilian Killings and Disappearances During Civil War in El Salvador (1980–1992)." *Demographic Research*, vol. 41, Oct. 2019, pp. 781–814, doi:10.4054/demres.2019.41.27.

<sup>7</sup> "Walking Close to the Edge of the Law" — Honduras and the Contras. [www.adst.org/2015/07/walking-close-to-the-edge-of-the-law-honduras-and-the-contras](http://www.adst.org/2015/07/walking-close-to-the-edge-of-the-law-honduras-and-the-contras).

<sup>8</sup> Rodgers, Dennis, et al. Gangs of Central America: Causes, Costs, and Interventions. Small Arms Survey, 2009, [www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-OP23-Gangs-Central-America.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-OP23-Gangs-Central-America.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Global Financial Integrity. "Extortion in the Northern Triangle of Central America: Following the Money." 22 Dec. 2022, [www.gfintegrity.org/report/extortion-in-the-northern-triangle](http://www.gfintegrity.org/report/extortion-in-the-northern-triangle).

<sup>10</sup> "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 13 July 2023, [www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle](http://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle).

<sup>11</sup> "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 13 July 2023, [www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle](http://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle).

<sup>12</sup> Hurricane Reconstruction Program. NOAA Central Library, [www.library.oarcloud.noaa.gov/files/published/d1075\\_JKNOTE\\_HurricaneReconstruction.pdf](http://www.library.oarcloud.noaa.gov/files/published/d1075_JKNOTE_HurricaneReconstruction.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Dickason, R. Myles, et al. "Disasters in the Northern Triangle: A Descriptive Analysis Using the EM-DAT Database 1902-2022." *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, vol. 38, no. 5, Sept. 2023, pp. 668–76, doi:10.1017/s1049023x23006374.



International Commission against Impunity (CICIG) and Honduras' Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity (MACCIH), which operated from 2007 – 2019<sup>14</sup> and 2016 – 2020<sup>15</sup> respectively; both ended up being politically terminated for investigating high-ranking officials and powerful political figures within the reigning administrations in the respective nations – and before either organisation had completed their mandates. This is all the more alarming considering that impunity rates exceed 90% for most crimes in the Northern Triangle region,<sup>16</sup> eroding public trust in state institutions as well as the rule of law. The region's overall challenges require comprehensive and coordinated responses addressing security, governance, economic development, climate adaptation and migration management.

Overall, the challenges that the Northern Triangle face transcend borders and require unprecedented international cooperation. The migration flows from and through Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador affect not only neighbouring countries but all countries in the Americas. Their shared climate disasters, gang violence and economic issues create displacement that reaches all the way to North America. This instability is a prime example of how regional instability can spiral into having global ramifications, that require cross-border collaboration across multiple fronts.<sup>17</sup>

## **DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS**

### **Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA)**

The NTCA is "made up of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala".<sup>18</sup> This term is central to the topic as it defines the three countries whose stability is the focus of this study guide.

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<sup>14</sup> Hudson, Andrew, and Alexandra W. Taylor. "The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala: A New Model for International Criminal Justice Mechanisms." *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2010, pp. 53-74.

<sup>15</sup> *Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH)*. [www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih](http://www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih).

<sup>16</sup> Hernandez-Roy, Christopher, et al. "Tough on the Weak, Lenient on the Powerful." 13 Aug. 2025, [www.csis.org/analysis/tough-weak-lenient-powerful](http://www.csis.org/analysis/tough-weak-lenient-powerful).

<sup>17</sup> Roy, Diana. "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 13 July 2023, [www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle](http://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle).

<sup>18</sup> Roy, Diana. "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 13 July 2023, [www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle](http://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle).



### **Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)**

MS-13 is “an international criminal gang that originated in Los Angeles, California, in the 1980s, it was set up to protect Salvadoran immigrants from other gangs in the Los Angeles area”.<sup>19</sup> Understanding this gang is crucial as its activities significantly affect the security landscape of the Northern Triangle.

### **Femicide**

Femicide is “the killing of a woman or girl because of her gender”.<sup>20</sup> This is a key issue within the Northern Triangle’s broader human right and security challenges.

### **Alliance for Prosperity Plan (A4P)**

The A4P is “a five-year initiative that intends to reduce Central Americans’ incentives to migrate”. It was launched by the three Northern Triangle countries with support from “the United States and the Inter-American Development Bank”.<sup>21</sup> It represents a coordinated effort impacting the region's stability.

### **Extortion**

Extortion is “The obtaining of property from another, with his consent, induced by wrongful use of actual or threatened force, violence, or fear”.<sup>22</sup> This illegal activity is a significant driver of insecurity and economic destabilisation within the Northern Triangle.

### **Central American Dry Corridor (CADC)**

The CADC is "A tropical dry forest region on the Pacific Coast of Central America. This area, which extends from southern Mexico to Panama, is extremely vulnerable to climate change due to much of the population living in rural areas and in poverty, and

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<sup>19</sup> Bunker, Robert J., and John P. Sullivan. "The Rapid Evolution of the MS-13 in El Salvador and Honduras." *Small Wars Journal*, 2017, [www.wjpcenter.org/publications/the-rapid-evolution-of-the-ms13-in-el-salvador-and-honduras](http://www.wjpcenter.org/publications/the-rapid-evolution-of-the-ms13-in-el-salvador-and-honduras).

<sup>20</sup> “Femicide.” *European Institute for Gender Equality*, [www.eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1128](http://www.eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1128).

<sup>21</sup> “Alliance for Prosperity Plan in the Northern Triangle: Not a Likely Final Solution for the Central American Migration Crisis.” *COHA*, 21 Nov. 2019, [www.coha.org/alliance-for-prosperity-plan-in-the-northern-triangle-not-a-likely-final-solution-for-the-central-american-migration-crisis](http://www.coha.org/alliance-for-prosperity-plan-in-the-northern-triangle-not-a-likely-final-solution-for-the-central-american-migration-crisis).

<sup>22</sup> US Legal, Inc. *Elements of Extortion – Extortion*. [www.extortion.uslegal.com/elements-of-extortion](http://www.extortion.uslegal.com/elements-of-extortion).



thus dependent on grain crops for their livelihood".<sup>23</sup> The vulnerability of this region contributes to the migration and economic pressures affecting stability in the Northern Triangle.

## Remittances

Money transfers sent by migrants to their families in their countries of origin. In the Northern Triangle, remittances constitute 12-21% of GDP and represent crucial income for millions of households. These financial flows have significant economic and social implications impacting regional stability.<sup>24</sup>

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Historical Context and Civil War Legacy

The Northern Triangle region's contemporary challenges stem from the decades of civil war that it had to endure. Guatemala had a 36 year long civil war between 1960 and 1996, which resulted in over 200 000 deaths<sup>25</sup> as well as widespread genocide of indigenous communities. The conflict between the government and leftist rebel groups like the MR-13<sup>26</sup> not only gutted institutions, but normalised violence and proliferated weapons throughout the nation. This militarisation of the general population was a primary cause for the establishment of criminal networks that proceeded to grow from a political insurgency to a sophisticated organised crime network during the post-conflict period.

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<sup>23</sup> *Central America Drought, 2023 - Forensic Analysis*. UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 16 Sept. 2024, [www.undrr.org/publication/central-america-drought-2023-forensic-analysis](https://www.undrr.org/publication/central-america-drought-2023-forensic-analysis).

<sup>24</sup> Ratha, Dilip, et al. *Remittances and Vulnerability in Developing Countries*. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper, July 2014, [www.openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/19413](https://www.openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/19413).

<sup>25</sup> *Guatemala « World Without Genocide - Making It Our Legacy*. [www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/guatemala](https://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/guatemala).

<sup>26</sup> *Guatemalan Civil War 1960-96 Case Studies*. U.S. Department of Defense, 3 Mar. 2024, [www.media.defense.gov/2024/Mar/03/2003407182/-1/-1/0/DOD-CI-STUDY-GUATEMALA.PDF](https://www.media.defense.gov/2024/Mar/03/2003407182/-1/-1/0/DOD-CI-STUDY-GUATEMALA.PDF).



El Salvador similarly had a 13 year long civil war, which claimed over 75 000 lives.<sup>27</sup> The United States backed Government battled the FMLN rebel movement.<sup>28</sup> This conflict however has been characterised by the extreme brutality that was frequently seen from either side of war, with “death squads” and massacres of the civilian population. The legacy of this conflict created a militarised society with weakened government institutions that were unable to monopolise legitimate force.

Honduras, while avoiding a full-scale civil war, served as a critical United States staging ground for the Contra operations against Nicaragua’s Sandinista administration throughout the 1980s.<sup>29</sup> This caused lasting militarisation of Honduran territory and society, causing both governance and security infrastructure issues. Overall, this post-conflict reconstruction failure across the Northern Triangle left many structural inequalities intact and created idealistic conditions for organised crime organisations to emerge throughout the 2000s.<sup>30</sup> The distinct lack of comprehensive justice mechanisms, coupled with limited economic reintegration for ex-combatants and weak state capacity fostered violence and enabled criminal groups to exploit institutional vacuums across all three states.

## **Governance and Corruption**

State authority across the Northern Triangle was largely jeopardised by the weak institutional capacity and pervasive corruption that ran rampant in the post-conflict era. Guatemala’s governance issues are particularly severe compared to the other two states, with Transparency International ranking it 142nd globally for corruption perception in 2023<sup>31</sup>, indicating widespread corruption of institutions. The judicial system remains vulnerable to political pressure and organised crime infiltration – limiting the system’s ability to prosecute high-level corruption and organised crime figures effectively. Guatemala's security forces have also been implicated in extrajudicial

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<sup>27</sup> Green, Elisabeth Jean. "Civilian Killings and Disappearances During Civil War in El Salvador (1980-1992): A Data-Driven Reassessment." *Demographic Research*, vol. 41, 2019, pp. 781-814, doi:10.4054/DemRes.2019.41.27.

<sup>28</sup> Britannica Editors. “Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 10 Nov. 2009, [www.britannica.com/topic/Farabundo-Marti-National-Liberation-Front](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Farabundo-Marti-National-Liberation-Front).

<sup>29</sup> “Walking Close to the Edge of the Law” — Honduras and the Contras. [www.adst.org/2015/07/walking-close-to-the-edge-of-the-law-honduras-and-the-contras](http://www.adst.org/2015/07/walking-close-to-the-edge-of-the-law-honduras-and-the-contras).

<sup>30</sup> Rodgers, Dennis, et al. *Gangs of Central America: Causes, Costs, and Interventions*. Small Arms Survey, 2009, [www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-OP23-Gangs-Central-America.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-OP23-Gangs-Central-America.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> World Bank Indicators. [www.tradingeconomics.com/guatemala/corruption-rank-wb-data.html](http://www.tradingeconomics.com/guatemala/corruption-rank-wb-data.html).



killings and systematic corruption, further reducing the validity of the justice system, and criminal organisations effectively control significant portions of state authority in remote regions of the country.

Honduras faces comparable governance deficits to Guatemala, with persistent corruption in both civilian and military branches of the government, limiting legitimate state capacity. Honduras ranked 158th on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index<sup>32</sup>, reflecting widespread systematic corruption, similarly to Guatemala. Rampant military involvement in drug trafficking and human smuggling, combined with police complicity in criminal organisations' operations, has effectively created a parallel criminal governance structure that undermines the formal state institutions. A weak taxation system and limited fiscal capacity provide insufficient resources for institutional reform, leaving security and judicial sectors chronically underfunded and vulnerable – essentially letting the formal government remain in the status quo.

El Salvador's governance crisis intensified during the pre-Bukele period, when state institutions reached an enormous level of criminal organisation infiltration. However, in recent times President Bukele's state of emergency measures, which have been implemented since 2022,<sup>33</sup> have raised significant concerns regarding democratic governance, judicial independence and human rights protections. The concentration of executive power, coupled with mass detention operations and limited judicial oversight run the risks of authoritarian governance despite the short-term security gains. The Salvadoran government's approach demonstrated the tension between security effectiveness and democratic accountability – which may yield long-term implications for institutional legitimacy in the nation.

Overall corruption in security institutions such as the police, military and border control agencies allow for drug trafficking, human smuggling and criminal organisation operations that span across the Northern Triangle region. While judicial systems lack resources for comprehensive corruption investigations, and subsequent prosecutions; political pressure on judges restrains accountability for high-level officials and organised crime figures across all three countries, causing impunity for serious crimes and

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<sup>32</sup> World Bank Indicators. [www.tradingeconomics.com/honduras/corruption-rank-wb-data.html](http://www.tradingeconomics.com/honduras/corruption-rank-wb-data.html).

<sup>33</sup> EBSCO. [www.research.ebsco.com/c/8wy29g/viewer/html/32oavx5fbn](http://www.research.ebsco.com/c/8wy29g/viewer/html/32oavx5fbn).





undermining the rule of law, while further fostering violence and criminal organisation expansion. The complete absence of effective anti-corruption mechanisms and independent oversight allows organised crime to coexist with formal state structures. This hybrid governance structure where criminal and state authority overlap fundamentally destabilises institutional legitimacy and citizen trust in the formal government.

## Economic Structure and Vulnerabilities

The Northern Triangle is characterised by the extreme poverty and economic inequality that fundamentally undermines potential for development. Honduras has the lowest GDP per capita in the region at \$2,574 as of 2023<sup>34</sup>, with over 64% of the population living in poverty as of 2022.<sup>35</sup> Over 26% of the GDP is derived from remittances<sup>36</sup>, an extremely high figure that makes Honduras vulnerable to changes in other countries migration policies, sparking migration, as well as to external economic shocks. These factors severely limit policy autonomy and domestic economic growth, particularly consumption-driven growth.

Guatemala has the highest economic inequality in the region, with a Gini coefficient of 0.56 as of 2022.<sup>37</sup> While also being the largest economy in the Northern Triangle, its wealth distribution remains highly unequal, as wealth remains concentrated among a small group of individuals. This concentration of economic resources directly perpetuates political instability, while limiting development opportunities for the majority of the population and causing resentment which subsequently fuels social instability and migration pressures.

El Salvador switched its currency to the US Dollar in 2001, losing its monetary policy autonomy.<sup>38</sup> The structural dependence of the economy on remittances, with over 24%

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<sup>34</sup> "World Bank Open Data." *World Bank Open Data*, [www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=HN](http://www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=HN).

<sup>35</sup> "Honduras | World Food Programme." *UN World Food Programme (WFP)*, 27 Mar. 2025, [www.wfp.org/countries/honduras](http://www.wfp.org/countries/honduras).

<sup>36</sup> "World bank Open Data." *World Bank Open Data*, [www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=HN](http://www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=HN).

<sup>37</sup> "Guatemala Gini Inequality Index - Data, Chart | TheGlobalEconomy.com." *TheGlobalEconomy.com*, [www.theglobaleconomy.com/guatemala/gini\\_inequality\\_index](http://www.theglobaleconomy.com/guatemala/gini_inequality_index).

<sup>38</sup> Andrew, Swiston. "Chapter 7: Official Dollarization in El Salvador as an Alternative Monetary Framework." *IMF eLibrary*, doi:10.5089/9781616353780.071.ch007.



of the GDP consisting of remittances,<sup>39</sup> limits policy flexibility further and exposes the economy to external economic shocks and migration pressures.

The entire Northern Triangle faces a 60% – 70% labour informality,<sup>40</sup> causing very constricted tax revenue, which is aided by weak state capacity and heavy remittance dependence by all three governments. All these factors cause a high vulnerability to external economic shocks. While the Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) – which entered into force in 2006 for Guatemala and El Salvador, and in 2009 for Honduras – increased trade integration with the United States,<sup>41</sup> it failed to reduce both migration pressures and poverty levels across the Northern Triangle. The regional trade deregulation did not generate sufficient employment opportunities either, with sectors such as manufacturing dominated by low-wage job opportunities that provide incredibly limited ways for workers to escape poverty. This economic stagnation combines with climate vulnerabilities as well as security challenges, and subsequently perpetuates cycles of poverty that drive irregular migration patterns.

## Security Crisis and Gang Violence

The Northern Triangle region has historically experienced some of the highest homicide rates on the globe, mostly as a consequence of transnational gang violence and organised crime. Honduras has recorded 79 homicides per 100 000 people in 2013 though this rate has declined to 31 per 100 000 by 2023,<sup>42</sup> due to the changing gang dynamics and enforcement efforts in the country. However, the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs still maintain over 35 000 members collectively in Honduras,<sup>43</sup> who still control significant land areas and continue to engage in systematic extortion of businesses and communities.

<sup>39</sup> "World Bank Open Data." *World Bank Open Data*, [www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=SV](https://www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=SV).

<sup>40</sup> Runde, Daniel F., and Mark L. Schneider. *A New Social Contract for the Northern Triangle*. 5 Aug. 2025, [www.csis.org/analysis/new-social-contract-northern-triangle](https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-social-contract-northern-triangle).

<sup>41</sup> Britannica Editors. "Central America–Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR)." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15 Dec. 2009, [www.britannica.com/event/Central-America-Dominican-Republic-Free-Trade-Agreement](https://www.britannica.com/event/Central-America-Dominican-Republic-Free-Trade-Agreement).

<sup>42</sup> "World Bank Open Data." *World Bank Open Data*, [www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=HN](https://www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=HN).

<sup>43</sup> Global Financial Integrity. "Extortion in the Northern Triangle of Central America: Following the Money - Global Financial Integrity." *Global Financial Integrity*, 22 Dec. 2022, [www.gfintegrity.org/report/extortion-in-the-northern-triangle](https://www.gfintegrity.org/report/extortion-in-the-northern-triangle).



Comparatively, El Salvador reached an alarming peak of 105 homicides per 100 000 people in 2015<sup>44</sup> – however mass arrests carried out by President Bukele's administration during their state of emergency declaration since 2022<sup>45</sup>, have managed to reduce the homicide rate to historically low levels of just 2 to 4 homicides per 100,000 people.<sup>46</sup> These reductions, however, have been accompanied by significant human rights concerns, particularly due to detention conditions and due process conditions. Guatemala has maintained sustained homicide rates of over 30 per 100 000 as it serves as a main transit route of cocaine to Mexico, and thus has extensive cartel presence in multiple rural areas.<sup>47</sup>

The Northern Triangle hosts over 85,000 gang members across all three countries<sup>48</sup>, who proceed to engage in extortion, drug trafficking, human smuggling and land area control – all and all generating over \$1.1 Billion annually in extortion proceeds alone.<sup>49</sup> Repeated gang violence has created displacement crises, as entire communities abandoned their home due to the absurd extortion demands and security threats. Femicide rates have consistently remained among the highest in the world in the entire region,<sup>50</sup> with gender-based violence perpetrated by not just criminal organisations, but also domestic perpetrators – proving that systemic gender-based violence extends far beyond organised crime.

## Climate Change and Environmental Challenges

Climate vulnerability truly stands out as one of the landmark challenges facing the Northern Triangle. Honduras is located within the hurricane path and within the Dry

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<sup>44</sup> "World Bank Open Data." *World Bank Open Data*, 22 Dec. 2022, [www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=SV](http://www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=SV).

<sup>45</sup> EBSCO. [www.research.ebsco.com/c/8wy29g/viewer/html/32oavx5fhn](http://www.research.ebsco.com/c/8wy29g/viewer/html/32oavx5fhn).

<sup>46</sup> "World Bank Open Data." *World Bank Open Data*, 22 Dec. 2022, [www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=SV](http://www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=SV).

<sup>47</sup> "World Bank Open Data." *World Bank Open Data*, 22 Dec. 2022, [www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=SV](http://www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=SV).

<sup>48</sup> Global Financial Integrity. "Extortion in the Northern Triangle of Central America: Following the Money - Global Financial Integrity." *Global Financial Integrity*, 22 Dec. 2022, [www.gfintegrity.org/report/extortion-in-the-northern-triangle](http://www.gfintegrity.org/report/extortion-in-the-northern-triangle).

<sup>49</sup> Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. "Extortion in Central America - Gender, Micro-trafficking, and Panama." *Global Initiative*, 26 July 2022, [www.globalinitiative.net/analysis/extortion-central-america](http://www.globalinitiative.net/analysis/extortion-central-america).

<sup>50</sup> Usidhr. *Tackling Violence Against Women in the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA)*. [www.usidhr.org/tackling-violence-against-women-in-the-northern-triangle-of-central-america-ntca](http://www.usidhr.org/tackling-violence-against-women-in-the-northern-triangle-of-central-america-ntca).



Corridor,<sup>51</sup> making it incredibly vulnerable to extreme weather events that not only destroy agricultural output, but also key infrastructure. The effects of such events have been seen multiple times before, with Hurricane Mitch in October 1998 killing over 7,000 people in Honduras and 3,800 in Nicaragua<sup>52</sup> – with sudden floods and mudslides setting back development efforts by decades, especially in rural and indigenous communities which are dependent on agricultural output. Even more recently, Hurricanes Eta and Iota struck Central America within two weeks of one another in November 2020, with landfall occurring near the Honduras-Nicaragua border. In Honduras alone, the hurricanes affected over 3 million people and caused billions of dollars in damage to infrastructure,<sup>53</sup> the agricultural industry and personal livelihoods – which subsequently took years to rebuild.

Guatemala faces unique climate threats such as coffee rust disease affecting indigenous agricultural communities<sup>54</sup> and regional volcanic activity that creates periodic crises. El Salvador however, being the smallest and most densely populated country in the Northern Triangle, faces very severe sea level rise and tsunami threats on its Pacific coastline.<sup>55</sup> The rest of the country is devastated by drought, limiting agricultural production and raising migration rates to over 70% during times of drought.<sup>56</sup> All of these factors mean that the over 11 million people living in the Dry Corridor consistently face food insecurity and the threat of livelihood collapse, and climate change projections indicate an increasing severity and frequency of extreme weather events,<sup>57</sup> all of which drive migration pressures and destabilise communities further. The compounding effects of climate vulnerability, weak state capacity for disaster

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<sup>51</sup> *Central America Drought, 2023 - Forensic Analysis*. UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 16 Sept. 2024, [www.undrr.org/publication/central-america-drought-2023-forensic-analysis](https://www.undrr.org/publication/central-america-drought-2023-forensic-analysis).

<sup>52</sup> *Hurricane Reconstruction Program*. NOAA Central Library, [www.library.noaa.gov/files/published/d1075\\_JKNOTE\\_HurricaneReconstruction.pdf](https://www.library.noaa.gov/files/published/d1075_JKNOTE_HurricaneReconstruction.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> Dickason, R. Myles, et al. "Disasters in the Northern Triangle: A Descriptive Analysis Using the EM-DAT Database 1902-2022." *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, vol. 38, no. 5, Sept. 2023, pp. 668–76, doi:10.1017/s1049023x23006374.

<sup>54</sup> Larsen, Elizabeth. *The Growing Crisis in Guatemala: Why Coffee Rust Is a Pressing Public Health Issue* / Office of Undergraduate Research. 26 June 2014, [www.undergradresearch.northwestern.edu/blog/2014/06/26/the-growing-crisis-in-guatemala-why-coffee-rust](https://www.undergradresearch.northwestern.edu/blog/2014/06/26/the-growing-crisis-in-guatemala-why-coffee-rust).

<sup>55</sup> Mendez, Maria. "Climate Change Is Causing a Migration Crisis in Central America." *Earth.Org*, 28 Sept. 2021, [www.earth.org/climate-change-is-causing-a-migration-crisis-in-central-america](https://www.earth.org/climate-change-is-causing-a-migration-crisis-in-central-america).

<sup>56</sup> "Central America drought, 2023 - Forensic analysis." *UNDRR*, 17 Sept. 2024, [www.undrr.org/resource/central-america-drought-2023-forensic-analysis](https://www.undrr.org/resource/central-america-drought-2023-forensic-analysis).

<sup>57</sup> Mendez, Maria. "Climate Change Is Causing a Migration Crisis in Central America." *Earth.Org*, 28 Sept. 2021, [www.earth.org/climate-change-is-causing-a-migration-crisis-in-central-america](https://www.earth.org/climate-change-is-causing-a-migration-crisis-in-central-america).



response and limited economic resilience mean that environmental shocks will continue driving not only internal displacement, but also transnational migration.

## TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date of the Event	Event
May 15th, 1960	An armed insurgency against the United States backed military government begins, otherwise known as the Guatemalan Civil War. <sup>58</sup>
October 15th, 1979	A military coup that overthrew President Carlos Humberto Romer, triggering armed conflict between government forces and the FMLN begins, otherwise known as the Salvadoran Civil War. <sup>59</sup>
1980s	Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS-13 was formed in Los Angeles by Salvadoran refugees fleeing civil war violence and began spreading across North and Central America. <sup>60</sup>
1981 – 1990	Honduras serves as the base of Operations for the United States Contra insurgency operations against

<sup>58</sup> Guatemala « World Without Genocide - Making It Our Legacy. [www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/guatemala](http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/guatemala).

<sup>59</sup> Green, Elisabeth Jean. "Civilian Killings and Disappearances During Civil War in El Salvador (1980-1992): A Data-Driven Reassessment." *Demographic Research*, vol. 41, 2019, pp. 781-814, doi:10.4054/DemRes.2019.41.27.

<sup>60</sup> Bunker, Robert J., and John P. Sullivan. "The Rapid Evolution of the MS-13 in El Salvador and Honduras." *Small Wars Journal*, 2017, [www.wipcenter.org/publications/the-rapid-evolution-of-the-ms13-in-el-salvador-and-honduras](http://www.wipcenter.org/publications/the-rapid-evolution-of-the-ms13-in-el-salvador-and-honduras).



	Nicaragua's Sandinista government. <sup>61</sup>
January 16th, 1992	Formal end of El Salvador's civil war, otherwise known as the Chapultepec Peace Accords. <sup>62</sup>
December 29th, 1996	Formal End of Guatemala's civil war, otherwise known as the Guatemalan Peace Accords. <sup>63</sup>
October 22nd – November 5th, 1998	Hurricane Mitch kills over 10 800 people while causing flooding and mudslides that set back development efforts across Central America. <sup>64</sup>
August 5th, 2004	A free trade agreement between the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the United States is signed, otherwise known as CAFTA-DR. <sup>65</sup>
December 2006	A UN backed commission to investigate and prosecute organised crime infiltration of state institutions in Guatemala is created, otherwise known

<sup>61</sup> "Walking Close to the Edge of the Law" — Honduras and the Contras. [www.adst.org/2015/07/walking-close-to-the-edge-of-the-law-honduras-and-the-contras](http://www.adst.org/2015/07/walking-close-to-the-edge-of-the-law-honduras-and-the-contras).

<sup>62</sup> Green, Elisabeth Jean. "Civilian Killings and Disappearances During Civil War in El Salvador (1980-1992): A Data-Driven Reassessment." *Demographic Research*, vol. 41, 2019, pp. 781-814, doi:10.4054/DemRes.2019.41.27.

<sup>63</sup> Guatemala « World Without Genocide - Making It Our Legacy. [www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/guatemala](http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/guatemala).

<sup>64</sup> Hurricane Reconstruction Program. NOAA Central Library, [www.library.noaa.gov/files/published/d1075\\_JKNOTE\\_HurricaneReconstruction.pdf](http://www.library.noaa.gov/files/published/d1075_JKNOTE_HurricaneReconstruction.pdf).

<sup>65</sup> Britannica Editors. "Central America–Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR)." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15 Dec. 2009, [www.britannica.com/event/Central-America-Dominican-Republic-Free-Trade-Agreement](http://www.britannica.com/event/Central-America-Dominican-Republic-Free-Trade-Agreement).



	as CICIG. <sup>66</sup>
2008	CARSI launched: An initiative established by the Bush Administration to provide security assistance, equipment, training and technical support to Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama, otherwise known as CARSI. <sup>67</sup>
2012 – 2014	A gang truce between MS-13, Barrio 18 and the Salvadoran government is put into effect. <sup>68</sup>
2014	A development initiative for the Northern Triangle addressing root causes of migration is announced, otherwise known as the Alliance for Prosperity. <sup>69</sup>
2016	An organisation with the mandate to dismantle the networks that enabled corruption and impunity in Honduras is established, otherwise known as MACCIH. <sup>70</sup>
2019	The CICIG mandate is terminated by the Guatemalan government after an

<sup>66</sup> Hudson, Andrew, and Alexandra W. Taylor. "The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala: A New Model for International Criminal Justice Mechanisms." *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2010, pp. 53-74.

<sup>67</sup> *Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress*. Congressional Research Service, [www.congress.gov/crs-product/R41731](http://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R41731).

<sup>68</sup> Katz, Charles M., et al. "Gang Truce for Violence Prevention, El Salvador." *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, vol. 94, no. 9, 2016, pp. 660-666, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5034636/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5034636/).

<sup>69</sup> "Alliance for Prosperity Plan in the Northern Triangle: Not a Likely Final Solution for the Central American Migration Crisis." *COHA*, 21 Nov. 2019, [www.coha.org/alliance-for-prosperity-plan-in-the-northern-triangle-not-a-likely-final-solution-for-the-central-american-migration-crisis](http://www.coha.org/alliance-for-prosperity-plan-in-the-northern-triangle-not-a-likely-final-solution-for-the-central-american-migration-crisis).

<sup>70</sup> *Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH)*. [www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih](http://www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih).



	investigation of high-level corruption. <sup>71</sup>
2020	The MACCIH mandate is terminated by the Honduran government after political pressure and government corruption investigations. <sup>72</sup>
November 3rd – 20th, 2020	Hurricanes Eta and Iota strike Central America within two weeks of one another, affecting over 3 million people and causing infrastructure damage that took years to repair. <sup>73</sup>
March 27 <sup>th</sup> , 2022	President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador declares a state of emergency after a spike in homicides – resulting in mass arrests and the suspension of constitutional rights. <sup>74</sup>

## MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

### Guatemala

Guatemala, with a population of 17 million people,<sup>75</sup> is the largest Northern Triangle country, with the highest inequality in the region and serves as the primary migration source to the United States from Central America. Guatemala had terminated the

<sup>71</sup> Hudson, Andrew, and Alexandra W. Taylor. "The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala: A New Model for International Criminal Justice Mechanisms." *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2010, pp. 53-74.

<sup>72</sup> *Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH)*. [www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih](http://www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih).

<sup>73</sup> Dickason, R. Myles, et al. "Disasters in the Northern Triangle: A Descriptive Analysis Using the EM-DAT Database 1902-2022." *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, vol. 38, no. 5, Sept. 2023, pp. 668–76, doi:10.1017/s1049023x23006374.

<sup>74</sup> EBSCO. [www.research.ebsco.com/c/8wy29g/viewer/html/32oavx5fhn](http://www.research.ebsco.com/c/8wy29g/viewer/html/32oavx5fhn).

<sup>75</sup> *Refugee Health Statistics - MN Dept. Of Health*. [www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/stats](http://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/stats).





International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) in 2019 due to investigations that implicated reigning President Jimmy Morales and other high-level government figures in corruption and drug trafficking network connections.<sup>76</sup> The termination demonstrated the sitting government's resistance to international anti-corruption oversight as well as the political cost of investigating elite corruption.

Guatemala maintains diplomatic ties with Taiwan (Republic of China) rather than China (People's Republic of China), a choice which creates tension with other Central American nations which are aligned differently.<sup>77</sup> Its indigenous majority, comprising over 50% of the population, face systemic discrimination, limited economic opportunities as well as targeted violence.<sup>78</sup> The country serves a vital transit route for cocaine into Mexico, and thus has an extensive cartel presence which controls vast amounts of rural land, and commits violence, extortion and forced displacement.<sup>79</sup>

Guatemala has pursued multiple institutional reforms that aimed at maintaining stability, mainly through the creation of CICIG in 2007.<sup>80</sup> During its 12 year long mandate<sup>81</sup>, the organisation dismantled over 70 criminal organisations, including major drug trafficking organisations with government connections,<sup>82</sup> while contributing to reducing Guatemala's homicide rate from 44 to 28 per 100 000 people.<sup>83</sup> However, the termination of CICIG in 2019, following investigations into reigning President Jimmy Morales, demonstrated the limitations that such mechanisms face against political

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<sup>76</sup> Hudson, Andrew, and Alexandra W. Taylor. "The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala: A New Model for International Criminal Justice Mechanisms." *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2010, pp. 53-74.

<sup>77</sup> Reuters. "Guatemala president reaffirms support for 'brothers' in Taiwan." *Reuters*, 5 June 2025, [www.reuters.com/world/china/guatemala-president-reaffirms-support-brothers-taiwan-2025-06-05](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/guatemala-president-reaffirms-support-brothers-taiwan-2025-06-05).

<sup>78</sup> Barban, Michael. "Indigenous Rights in Guatemala." *Pionero Philanthropy*, 28 July 2025, [www.pionerophilanthropy.org/2021/10/indigenous-rights-in-guatemala](https://www.pionerophilanthropy.org/2021/10/indigenous-rights-in-guatemala).

<sup>79</sup> Gutiérrez-Romero, Roxana. "Drug trafficking fuels violence leading to mass emigration: The case of Guatemala." *Economic Modelling*, vol. 131, Dec. 2023, p. 106595, doi:10.1016/j.econmod.2023.106595.

<sup>80</sup> Hudson, Andrew, and Alexandra W. Taylor. "The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala: A New Model for International Criminal Justice Mechanisms." *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2010, pp. 53-74.

<sup>81</sup> Hudson, Andrew, and Alexandra W. Taylor. "The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala: A New Model for International Criminal Justice Mechanisms." *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2010, pp. 53-74.

<sup>82</sup> Hudson, Andrew, and Alexandra W. Taylor. "The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala: A New Model for International Criminal Justice Mechanisms." *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2010, pp. 53-74.

<sup>83</sup> Hudson, Andrew, and Alexandra W. Taylor. "The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala: A New Model for International Criminal Justice Mechanisms." *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2010, pp. 53-74.



resistance. The government's subsequent lack of support for further international oversight, combined with its weak domestic judicial capacity and pervasive corruption within its security institutions, has severely undermined stability efforts.

## Honduras

Honduras has historically experienced the highest homicide rates in the Northern Triangle region<sup>84</sup> and while rates have declined from their peak levels, they still remain dangerously high. Honduras terminated the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) in 2020, due to corruption investigations that implicated many powerful political figures and government officials, connecting them to drug trafficking and money laundering operations.<sup>85</sup> This event draws similar conclusions to Guatemala's CICIG which ended a year earlier.

The 2009 coup d'état (a sudden and illegal takeover of a government<sup>86</sup>) that removed President Manuel Zelaya has created a lasting institution weakness, political polarisation and democratic backsliding that undermines governance institutions and the rule of law in the country.<sup>87</sup> Honduras also has the highest poverty rate in the region at over 64%<sup>88</sup> as well as the highest remittance dependence with over 26% of GDP being made up of remittances.<sup>89</sup> This leaves Honduras vulnerable to external economic shocks and dependent on migrant earnings.

Honduras also attempted to address institutional corruption and impunity through MACCIH, established in 2016 under OAS supervision.<sup>90</sup> Basing itself on Guatemala's

<sup>84</sup> "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 13 July 2023, [www.cfr.org/background/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle](https://www.cfr.org/background/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle).

<sup>85</sup> *Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH)*. [www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih](https://www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih).

<sup>86</sup> Britannica Editors. "Coups d'état | Definition, Examples, and Facts." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14 Oct. 2025, [www.britannica.com/topic/coup-d-etat](https://www.britannica.com/topic/coup-d-etat).

<sup>87</sup> Cassel, Douglass. "Honduras: Coup d'Etat in Constitutional Clothing?" *American Society of International Law Insights*, vol. 13, no. 9, 14 Oct. 2009, [www.asil.org/insights/volume/13/issue/9/honduras-coup-d-etat-constitutional-clothing-revision](https://www.asil.org/insights/volume/13/issue/9/honduras-coup-d-etat-constitutional-clothing-revision).

<sup>88</sup> "Honduras | World Food Programme." *UN World Food Programme (WFP)*, 27 Mar. 2025, [www.wfp.org/countries/honduras](https://www.wfp.org/countries/honduras).

<sup>89</sup> "World bank Open Data." *World Bank Open Data*, [www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=HN](https://www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=HN).

<sup>90</sup> *Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH)*. [www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih](https://www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih).



CICIG, it managed to indict 133 individuals<sup>91</sup> – including powerful political figures, presidential candidates and government officials connected with drug trafficking and money laundering operations. Its investigations revealed vast criminal infiltration within state institutions and military structures. However, MACCIH faced an identical fate to CICIG, being terminated in 2020 after investigations implicated multiple high-ranking political figures within the reigning government,<sup>92</sup> further highlighting how political pressure can affect anti-corruption organisations. Following this, Honduras has relied on domestic institutions which are severely underfunded and highly susceptible to political interference.

## El Salvador

El Salvador is the smallest nation in the Northern Triangle with just over 6.5 million people and the highest population density in the region.<sup>93</sup> The controversial mass arrest policies enacted by President Bukele during the state of emergency since March 2022<sup>94</sup>, have drastically reduced violence; although serious human rights concerns have been raised, such as arbitrary detention without due process, poor prison condition and lack of transparency regarding charges and legal proceedings, all the more important considering that over 80,000 people who have been detained.<sup>95</sup>

El Salvador has used the US Dollar as its currency since 2001<sup>96</sup>, creating fiscal constraints and removing monetary policy tools for addressing economic crises. Combined with high remittance dependence (24% of GDP<sup>97</sup>) and the adoption of Bitcoin as legal tender in 2021.<sup>98</sup> The country faces economic uncertainty and international criticism regarding money laundering and regulatory risks. These economic constraints not only limit policy

<sup>91</sup> *Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH)*. [www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih](http://www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih).

<sup>92</sup> *Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH)*. [www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih](http://www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih).

<sup>93</sup> "World Bank Open Data." *World Bank Open Data*, [www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=SV](http://www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=SV).

<sup>94</sup> EBSCO. [www.research.ebsco.com/c/8wy29g/viewer/html/32oavx5fbn](http://www.research.ebsco.com/c/8wy29g/viewer/html/32oavx5fbn).

<sup>95</sup> Escaño, Guillermo Jesús, et al. "Mano Dura V. Uneasy Peace in El Salvador: Effects of Tough-on-Crime and Gang Truce Policies in the Former Murder Capital of the World." *The British Journal of Criminology*, July 2025, doi:10.1093/bjc/azaf057.

<sup>96</sup> Andrew, Swiston. "Chapter 7: Official Dollarization in El Salvador as an Alternative Monetary Framework." *IMF eLibrary*, doi:10.5089/9781616353780.071.ch007.

<sup>97</sup> "World Bank Open Data." *World Bank Open Data*, [www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=SV](http://www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=SV).

<sup>98</sup> *El Salvador: Launching Bitcoin as Legal Tender - Case - Faculty and Research - Harvard Business School*. [www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=62068](http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=62068).



flexibility, but also jeopardise the government's ability to implement comprehensive development initiatives addressing root causes of migration and gang violence.

El Salvador has drastically shifted its stability keeping techniques in recent years, with the government prioritising short-term security gains over long-term stability. Unlike Guatemala and Honduras, El Salvador did not establish an international anti-corruption commission, instead relying on domestic institutions such as the Fiscalía General de la Republica – which were severely underfunded and also were extremely vulnerable to political interference. Between 2012 and 2014, the government introduced a controversial “gang truce” between themselves and the MS-13 and Barrio 18 organizations,<sup>99</sup> with this measure temporarily reducing homicide rates from over 100 per 100 000 people, to under 40 per 100,000 people.<sup>100</sup> However, the truces collapse following factional gang violence and lack of enforcement mechanism demonstrated the limitations of negotiated solutions. Since March 2022, the Bukele administration has implemented extreme mass detention measures under a state of emergency, leading to over 80 000 detainees and the reduction of homicide rates to record low levels of 2 to 4 per 100 000. This approach, however, created widespread human rights concerns such as arbitrary detention without due process, overcrowded prison conditions (as over 35 000 people were held in facilities meant for 10 000) and documented cases of forced confession and mistaken identities.<sup>101</sup> This approach's sustainability still remains uncertain due to the economic impact of the continual mass incarceration as well as the continual radicalization of prisoners held in such facilities.

### United States of America (USA)

Northern Triangle migrants and asylum seekers account for a significant portion of Central American migration to the US, making it the main destination for most migrants from the region. The US provides over \$2.5 billion in development, security and governance assistance to the Northern Triangle through programs like the Alliance for Prosperity (A4P), Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) and Root Causes

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<sup>99</sup> Katz, Charles M., et al. "Gang Truce for Violence Prevention, El Salvador." *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, vol. 94, no. 9, 2016, pp. 660-666, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5034636/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5034636/).

<sup>100</sup> Katz, Charles M., et al. "Gang Truce for Violence Prevention, El Salvador." *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, vol. 94, no. 9, 2016, pp. 660-666, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5034636/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5034636/).

<sup>101</sup> Escaño, Guillermo Jesús, et al. "Mano Dura V. Uneasy Peace in El Salvador: Effects of Tough-on-Crime and Gang Truce Policies in the Former Murder Capital of the World." *The British Journal of Criminology*, July 2025, doi:10.1093/bjc/azaf057.



Strategy.<sup>102</sup> Despite this, the deportation policies of the US significantly affect families and gang structure across the entire Northern Triangle, as many individuals deported from the US bring capital, networks and often gang affiliations that strengthen criminal organisations in Central America.

Furthermore, the US drug demand is the main driving force behind much of the transnational trafficking and organised crime in the Northern Triangle, with most cocaine destined for the US market transiting through Central America, at enormous profit for criminal organisations.<sup>103</sup> The US plays a critical role in influencing regional security cooperation through both military and diplomatic engagement, although contradicting stances on human rights and security priorities often create policy inconsistencies.

## Mexico

Mexico serves as the critical transit country that the majority of Northern Triangle migrants pass through to get to the United States.<sup>104</sup> This means that Mexico's migration and security policies directly affect regional migration flows and security outcomes in the Northern Triangle. Mexican drug cartels have integrated human trafficking operations into their broader criminal organisations, moving beyond the previous model where smuggling operations operated with cartel permission and paid protection fees.<sup>105</sup> This contemporary cartel involvement is far more active and predatory, with gangs directly controlling migration routes. This leads to over 20 000 migrants being kidnapped annually in Mexico by organised crime organisation, who are subsequently subjected to violence, extortion, sexual assault and forced labour.<sup>106</sup> The cartels frequently exploit migrants' reluctance to report crimes to authorities, creating a

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<sup>102</sup> Runde, Daniel F., et al. *An Alliance for Prosperity 2.0*. 25 Sept. 2024, [www.csis.org/analysis/alliance-prosperity-20](https://www.csis.org/analysis/alliance-prosperity-20).

<sup>103</sup> Sinclair, Michael. "The Wicked Problem of Drug Trafficking in the Western Hemisphere." *Brookings*, 15 Jan. 2021, [www.brookings.edu/articles/the-wicked-problem-of-drug-trafficking-in-the-western-hemisphere](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-wicked-problem-of-drug-trafficking-in-the-western-hemisphere).

<sup>104</sup> "Mapping the Migrant Journey | GW Research Magazine | the George Washington University." *GW Research Magazine*, [www.researchmagazine.gwu.edu/mapping-migrant-journey](https://www.researchmagazine.gwu.edu/mapping-migrant-journey).

<sup>105</sup> O'Connor, Anne-Marie. "Mexican cartels move into human trafficking." *The Washington Post*, 20 May 2023, [www.washingtonpost.com/world/americas/mexican-cartels-move-into-human-trafficking/2011/07/22/giQArmPVcl\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/americas/mexican-cartels-move-into-human-trafficking/2011/07/22/giQArmPVcl_story.html).

<sup>106</sup> Green, Emily. "Held for Ransom in Animal Pens, Migrants Face Mass Kidnappings as U.S. and Mexico Ramp up Enforcement." *ProPublica*, 8 Nov. 2024, [www.propublica.org/article/immigration-mexico-us-migrants-mass-kidnappings-cartels-border](https://www.propublica.org/article/immigration-mexico-us-migrants-mass-kidnappings-cartels-border).



climate of systematic victimisation. Mexico's militarised approach to border security and cartel suppression has also increased violence while simultaneously reducing the government's capacity to combat organised crime, as military personnel lack training in criminal investigation and often engage in human rights violations.

The Yucatan Fund, which was created by the Mexican government, is administered by the Inter-American Development Bank, and provides donations, financing and technical assistance for infrastructure projects in Central America and the Caribbean, offering an alternative funding mechanism for countries.<sup>107</sup> The US and Mexico cooperate on security issues, organised through frameworks like the Merida Initiative, which focus on addressing border security enforcement, inhibition of drug flow, and cartel suppression.<sup>108</sup> However, policy inconsistencies and disagreements over human rights approaches create tensions in their bilateral coordination.

### Organisation of American States (OAS)

The Organisation of American States was established in 1948 and is a multilateral regional body of 34 member states.<sup>109</sup> It is dedicated to promoting democracy, human rights, economic and social development, and regional security cooperation across the Americas.<sup>110</sup> The OAS essentially functions as a forum for dialogue and coordination among American nations on mutual issues. In the Northern Triangle, the OAS plays a crucial role in supporting anti-corruption initiatives, monitoring democratic governance and coordinating security efforts across all three nations. The organisation created both CICIG<sup>111</sup> and MACCIH<sup>112</sup> as independent missions operating with mandates to investigate corruption and organised crime infiltration of state institutions. The OAS also provides electoral observation and oversight, ensuring democratic processes and providing technical assistance to strengthen judicial systems and institutional capacity in all

<sup>107</sup> *Flagship Initiative: Yucatan Fund.*  
[www.portales.sre.gob.mx/globalmx/index.php/en/international-cooperation/mexican-cooperation-beyond-the-eu/3-flagship-initiative-yucatan-fund](http://www.portales.sre.gob.mx/globalmx/index.php/en/international-cooperation/mexican-cooperation-beyond-the-eu/3-flagship-initiative-yucatan-fund).

<sup>108</sup> "Evolution of U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation." *Congress.gov | Library of Congress*, [www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10578](http://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10578).

<sup>109</sup> OAS. [www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/northern-central-america-2023.pdf](http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/northern-central-america-2023.pdf).

<sup>110</sup> OAS. [www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/northern-central-america-2023.pdf](http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/northern-central-america-2023.pdf).

<sup>111</sup> Hudson, Andrew, and Alexandra W. Taylor. "The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala: A New Model for International Criminal Justice Mechanisms." *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2010, pp. 53-74.

<sup>112</sup> *Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH).* [www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih](http://www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih).



Northern Triangle countries. However, the termination of CICIG and MACCIH demonstrates the limitations that OAS-backed anti-corruption missions can face.

### Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)

The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) is the primary development financing institution for the American Continent and serves as the largest source of developmental capital for Central America and the Caribbean.<sup>113</sup> The IDB administers and finances the A4P initiative for the Northern Triangle, providing both loans and grants to support institutional, economic and social development projects across all three countries. The bank has pledged up to \$750 million in funding to finance infrastructure investments in energy, transportation, water systems and tourism across the region.<sup>114</sup> The IDB also provides funding conditional on governance, attaching development benchmarks and institutional reform requirements to loans, which incentives governments but may also create tensions with governments prioritising short-term political interests.<sup>115</sup> Additionally, the IDB supports local government financial management, service delivery improvements, administrative capacity strengthening as well as climate adaptation and education and public sector reforms, all designed to create legitimate economic opportunities. While the IDB stands as a critical financier for the Northern Triangle, implementation challenges, absorption capacity constraints and political obstacles to reform limit the achievement of sustained improvements.

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<sup>113</sup> "Inter-American Development Bank." *Inter-American Development Bank*, [www.iadb.org/en](http://www.iadb.org/en).

<sup>114</sup> "IDB Group Pledges \$750 Million for Key Infrastructure Projects in the Northern Triangle - El Salvador." *ReliefWeb*, 15 June 2017, [www.reliefweb.int/report/el-salvador/idb-group-pledges-750-million-key-infrastructure-projects-northern-triangle](http://www.reliefweb.int/report/el-salvador/idb-group-pledges-750-million-key-infrastructure-projects-northern-triangle).

<sup>115</sup> "Conditional Credit Line for Investment Projects." *IDB*, [www.iadb.org/en/how-we-can-work-together/public-sector/financing-offerings/conditional-credit-line-investment-projects](http://www.iadb.org/en/how-we-can-work-together/public-sector/financing-offerings/conditional-credit-line-investment-projects).





## RELEVANT UN TREATIES CONVENTIONS AND RESOLUTIONS

### UN Security Council Resolution 637 (1989)

UN Security Council Resolution 637 provided critical support for peace processes in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua during their respective civil wars, with the resolution establishing frameworks for UN observation and verification of peace agreements and ceasefire compliance. The resolution's enforcement through the late 1980s and early 1990s was key in monitoring the Central American peace processes, particularly the Esquipulas peace initiatives. While the resolution's effectiveness varied, it established precedent for international involvement in verifying peace agreements – although implementation challenges and limited enforcement mechanisms limited comprehensive compliance monitoring in conflict zones.<sup>116</sup>

### UN Security Council Resolution 644 (1989)

UN Security Council Resolution 644 established the United Nations Observer group in Central America (ONUCA) for regional peacekeeping operations throughout Central America. ONUCA's mandate included verifying peace agreements and monitoring military compliance across the region during the post-Cold War peace process. ONUCA operated from 1989 through the mid-1990s, providing observation and verification services in Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador while facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties and building confidence in peace implementation. ONUCA's work contributed immensely in the successful transition from civil war to peace across the Northern Triangle and wider Central America, although the organisation's work was hampered by resource constraints and limited enforcement ability.<sup>117</sup>

### United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC, 2000)

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<sup>116</sup> *The United Nations and the Establishment of a New Model of State-building: ONUCA and ONUSAL in Central America*. Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law, 2003, [www.mpil.de/files/pdf1/mpunyb\\_doering\\_7.pdf](http://www.mpil.de/files/pdf1/mpunyb_doering_7.pdf).

<sup>117</sup> "United Nations Observer Group in Central America (ONUCA)." *Government of Canada*, 15 Aug. 2019, [www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/military-history/history-heritage/past-operations/central-america/sultan.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/military-history/history-heritage/past-operations/central-america/sultan.html).





The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC), is an international legal framework regarding human trafficking, money laundering and corruption linked to organised crime. The convention provides extradition frameworks, mutual legal assistance agreements as well as joint investigation mechanisms, this allows for harmonised laws across all signatory states. Additionally, it allows for increased international cooperation against criminal organisations as well as providing a legal basis for the seizure of assets in transnational cases. However, a lack of institutional resources in the Northern Triangle hinders implementation, which is aided by the ineffectiveness of the judicial system and law enforcement.<sup>118</sup>

### United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC, 2003)

The United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), lays down international standards for the prevention of corruption and serves as the legal basis for anti-corruption organisations such as CICIG and MACCIH, as the convention obliges signatory states to establish specialised courts and anti-corruption agencies – however implementation has varied significantly across signatory states.<sup>119</sup>

### International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), established civil and fundamental rights guarantees including due process, freedom from arbitrary detention and freedom of expression. All three Northern Triangle countries are signatory states, though implementation has been lacklustre across all three as ICCPR monitoring bodies have issued multiple recommendations regarding detention practises in El Salvador and gang violence in Guatemala and Honduras.<sup>120</sup>

### 1951 Refugee Convention

The 1951 Refugee Convention established protection for individuals escaping persecution and violence - and the convention applies to all individuals fleeing

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<sup>118</sup> Standing, André. "Transnational Organized Crime and the Palermo Convention: A Reality Check." *International Peace Institute*, Oct. 2010, [www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/transnational\\_organized\\_crime.pdf](http://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/transnational_organized_crime.pdf).

<sup>119</sup> Rose, Cecily, et al., editors. *The United Nations Convention Against Corruption: A Commentary*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

<sup>120</sup> Nowak, Manfred. *U.N. Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: CCPR Commentary*. 2nd ed., N.P. Engel Publisher, 2005.



gender-based violence, gang violence and persecution from all Northern Triangle countries. The convention also established the nonrefoulement principle, preventing the return of individuals to territories in which they would face threats – although implementation remains contested as a variety of states globally attempt to restrict asylum access.<sup>121</sup>

### **Inter-American Convention on Human Rights**

The Inter-American Convention on Human Rights is a judicially enforceable human rights treaty that all three Northern Triangle countries are signatories of through the OAS. The convention establishes human rights guarantees while creating accountability mechanisms through the Inter-American Court and Commission on Human Rights, which has issued ruling on gang violence, femicide and general state responsibility for extrajudicial killings.<sup>122</sup>

### **Belem do Para Convention (Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women) (1994)**

The Belem do Para Convention is a gender-based violence prevention framework that all three Northern Triangle countries are signatories to. It establishes laws to prevent, investigate and punish violence against girls and women, recognising gender-based violence as a human rights violation and obliging signatory states to establish mechanisms to prevent said violence. However, enforcement remains limited in the Northern Triangle due to resource constraints and institutional weakness.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> UNHCR - The UN Refugee Agency. "The 1951 Refugee Convention | UNHCR." *UNHCR*, [www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/1951-refugee-convention](http://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/1951-refugee-convention).

<sup>122</sup> *American Convention on Human Rights: "Pact of San José, Costa Rica."* United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 1144, 1969, [www.treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201144/volume-1144-I-17955-English.pdf](http://www.treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201144/volume-1144-I-17955-English.pdf).

<sup>123</sup> OAS : MESECVI : Belém do Pará Convention. [www.oas.org/en/mesecvi/convention.asp](http://www.oas.org/en/mesecvi/convention.asp).



## PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

### “Mano Dura” Policies

El Salvador implemented “Mano Dura” policies starting in 2003 with President Francisco Flores, which subsequently became “Super Mano Dura” policies between 2003 and 2009 under President Antonio Saca.<sup>124</sup> These policies were based on zero-tolerance law enforcement approaches, which mainly targeted gang members through mass arrests and incarceration. Initially, these policies succeeded in reducing some types of crime, but they ended up yielding extremely limited long-term results. Violence returned after 2009 as criminal organisations adapted to imprisonment by creating leadership structures in prisons and the expansion of their operations resumed.<sup>125</sup> Honduras used similar approaches with their military police, which led to multiple human rights violations, extrajudicial killings and civilian deaths– and all with minimal results. Guatemala, however, declared states of siege that entailed military involvement in policing, which also failed to yield sustainable security improvements but instead created opportunities for military abuse and corruption. These hard-handed approaches generally did not succeed in reducing violence in the long-term, yet often made human rights violations worse while simultaneously undermining the rule of law.<sup>126</sup>

### Gang Negotiation Attempts

El Salvador had implemented a gang truce from 2012 till 2014, which achieved temporary success in reducing homicides from over 100 per 100 000 to below 40 per 100 000,<sup>127</sup> However the truce collapsed amid controversy regarding government

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<sup>124</sup> Escaño, Guillermo Jesús, et al. "Mano Dura V. Uneasy Peace in El Salvador: Effects of Tough-on-Crime and Gang Truce Policies in the Former Murder Capital of the World." *The British Journal of Criminology*, July 2025, doi:10.1093/bjc/azaf057.

<sup>125</sup> Escaño, Guillermo Jesús, et al. "Mano Dura V. Uneasy Peace in El Salvador: Effects of Tough-on-Crime and Gang Truce Policies in the Former Murder Capital of the World." *The British Journal of Criminology*, July 2025, doi:10.1093/bjc/azaf057.

<sup>126</sup> Hernandez-Roy, Christopher, et al. "Tough on the Weak, Lenient on the Powerful." 13 Aug. 2025, [www.csis.org/analysis/tough-weak-lenient-powerful](http://www.csis.org/analysis/tough-weak-lenient-powerful).

<sup>127</sup> Katz, Charles M., et al. "Gang Truce for Violence Prevention, El Salvador." *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, vol. 94, no. 9, 2016, pp. 660-666, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5034636/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5034636/).



negotiations with criminal organisations.<sup>128</sup> The truce mainly operated through intermediaries and represented a significant attempt to negotiate criminal violence reduction, but the truce lacked enforcement mechanisms which led rival gang factions within MS-13 and Barrio 18 to ignore the truce in order to gain territory and resources.<sup>129</sup> Honduras made limited negotiation attempts, with limited success; and Guatemala pursued minimal direct negotiations, instead relying on enforcement techniques. Criminal negotiation attempts showed that without well thought out enforcement mechanisms and without addressing the underlying socioeconomic issues that keep the organisations alive.<sup>130</sup>

### Community Policing and Prevention initiatives

Honduras has previously implemented community policing approaches, the Policia Nacional's violence prevention units being one of the most important. These units were designed to build relationships between the police force and communities, while identifying how gang recruitment dynamics functioned at local levels. Guatemala has also experimented with community violence prevention programs, primarily in high-crime areas, complete with gang intervention and youth opportunity programs that yielded mixed results depending on the implementation quality and sustain funding of the programs.<sup>131</sup> El Salvador also established the Servicios Especializados de Vigilancia (SEV) communities policing model, however, implementation remains inconsistent and its funding limited, reducing effectiveness substantially.<sup>132</sup> Community-based prevention programs have shown substantial promise in reducing recruitment into criminal organisations while building trust between law enforcement

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<sup>128</sup> Rodgers, Dennis, et al. *Gangs of Central America: Causes, Costs, and Interventions*. [www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-OP23-Gangs-Central-America.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-OP23-Gangs-Central-America.pdf). Accessed 10 Nov. 2025.

<sup>129</sup> Global Initiative. "Lethal Negotiations: Political Dialogue Between Gangs and Authorities in El Salvador." *Global Initiative*, 26 July 2022, [www.globalinitiative.net/analysis/gangs-pandillas-elsalvador](http://www.globalinitiative.net/analysis/gangs-pandillas-elsalvador).

<sup>130</sup> Rodgers, Dennis, et al. *Gangs of Central America: Causes, Costs, and Interventions*. [www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-OP23-Gangs-Central-America.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-OP23-Gangs-Central-America.pdf). Accessed 10 Nov. 2025.

<sup>131</sup> Rodgers, Dennis, et al. *Gangs of Central America: Causes, Costs, and Interventions*. [www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-OP23-Gangs-Central-America.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-OP23-Gangs-Central-America.pdf). Accessed 10 Nov. 2025.

<sup>132</sup> Rodgers, Dennis, et al. *Gangs of Central America: Causes, Costs, and Interventions*. [www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-OP23-Gangs-Central-America.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-OP23-Gangs-Central-America.pdf). Accessed 10 Nov. 2025.



and communities – but success depends heavily on consistent funding, political support and how well programs are sustained over long-term periods.<sup>133</sup>

### El Salvador's Current Emergency Approach (2022 – Present)

El Salvador has recently implemented mass arrests, particularly under President Nayib Bukele. Since March 2022, over 80,000 suspected gang members have been detained under a state of emergency and a suspension of due process protections. This approach has reduced homicide rates to historically low levels, ranging from 2-4 per 100,000,<sup>134</sup> but it raises severe human rights concerns including arbitrary detention without due process, overcrowded prison conditions (with over 35,000 people crammed in prisons designed for just 10,000)<sup>135</sup> and lack of transparency regarding charges and legal proceedings against detainees.<sup>136</sup> International human rights organisations have documented multiple cases of mistaken identities, forced confession and violation of fundamental rights under emergency measures. The sustainability of this approach still remains unconfirmed and uncertain, as maintaining such high levels of incarceration is economically unsustainable and massive prison overcrowding leads to inmate radicalisation.<sup>137</sup>

### Alliance for Prosperity Initiative

The Alliance for Prosperity Initiative (A4P), launched 2014, secured over \$12.3 billion in funding for the Northern Triangle from the United States, Inter-American Development Bank and other donors.<sup>138</sup> The funds were intended to address security, economic development, governance reform and border infrastructure through coordinated

<sup>133</sup> Roy, Diana. "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 13 July 2023, [www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle).

<sup>134</sup> Escaño, Guillermo Jesús, et al. "Mano Dura V. Uneasy Peace in El Salvador: Effects of Tough-on-Crime and Gang Truce Policies in the Former Murder Capital of the World." *The British Journal of Criminology*, July 2025, doi:10.1093/bjc/azaf057.

<sup>135</sup> "El Salvador: One Year into State of Emergency, Authorities Commit Systematic Human Rights Violations." Amnesty International, 16 Apr. 2023, [www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/04/el-salvador-one-year-state-of-emergency-human-rights-violations/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/04/el-salvador-one-year-state-of-emergency-human-rights-violations/).

<sup>136</sup> "El Salvador's State of Exception and U.S. Interests." Congressional Research Service, 19 Feb. 2025, [www.crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12487](https://www.crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12487).

<sup>137</sup> Escaño, Guillermo Jesús, et al. "Mano Dura V. Uneasy Peace in El Salvador: Effects of Tough-on-Crime and Gang Truce Policies in the Former Murder Capital of the World." *The British Journal of Criminology*, July 2025, doi:10.1093/bjc/azaf057.

<sup>138</sup> Runde, Daniel F., et al. An Alliance for Prosperity 2.0. 25 Sept. 2024, [www.csis.org/analysis/alliance-prosperity-20](https://www.csis.org/analysis/alliance-prosperity-20).



regional initiatives. The initiative aimed to stimulate economic growth, improve security through additional support to law enforcement, strengthen government institutions including anti-corruption mechanisms and improve border infrastructure so as to not hinder legitimate commerce while restricting criminal movement. The initiative's success has significantly varied throughout each country, with security initiatives being more successful than economic ones. Some community-based security initiatives managed to consistently reduce violence, particularly in areas where consistent funding and local commitment was present for long-term periods. However, economic initiatives face limited absorption capacity and low small business integration into larger regional trade networks, but the most significant setback was the challenge to create employment opportunities that could compete with criminal organisation recruitment. The A4P is a real demonstration of the potential and the limitations of large-scale coordinated development assistance programs – especially considering the great variety in institutional capacity, political will and sustained funding commitments across the Northern Triangle.<sup>139</sup>

### SICA Regional Integration Initiatives

The Central American Integration System (SICA) has attempted regional coordination on security, migration and economic development, although efforts have been influenced by institutional weakness, insufficient funding and a lack of sustained political will across all member states. SICA established the Secretaria de Integración Social Centroamericana (SISCA), which focuses on social integration and violence prevention, although it has repeatedly struggled with implementation commitment from member states.<sup>140</sup> Regional initiatives are forced to face governments pursuing contradictory national policies at times, with disagreements being clear on migration enforcement, economic policy as well as security approaches, making coordinated regional solutions difficult to achieve.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Runde, Daniel F., et al. *An Alliance for Prosperity 2.0*. 25 Sept. 2024, [www.csis.org/analysis/alliance-prosperity-20](http://www.csis.org/analysis/alliance-prosperity-20).

<sup>140</sup> Runde, Daniel F., et al. *A New Social Contract for the Northern Triangle*. 5 Aug. 2025, [www.csis.org/analysis/new-social-contract-northern-triangle](http://www.csis.org/analysis/new-social-contract-northern-triangle).

<sup>141</sup> Runde, Daniel F., and Mark L. Schneider. *A New Social Contract for the Northern Triangle*. 5 Aug. 2025, [www.csis.org/analysis/new-social-contract-northern-triangle](http://www.csis.org/analysis/new-social-contract-northern-triangle).



## International Anti-Corruption Mechanisms

### Guatemala's CICIG

As the most successful anti-corruption mechanism in the region, CICIG operated for 12 years and dismantled over 70 criminal structures including powerful drug trafficking organisations, many of which had government connections.<sup>142</sup> The commission helped reduce Guatemala's homicide rate from 44 to below 28 per 100 000.<sup>143</sup> It achieved this through investigations and prosecutions that removed key criminal leaders and disrupted criminal operations. CICIG's success came largely through cooperation with judges and prosecutors; however, it was brought to an end due to political pressure over the investigation of political elites.<sup>144</sup>

### Honduras' MACCIH

MACCIH was based on CICIG's model, managing to indict 133 individuals including powerful political figures and government officials connected to drug trafficking and money laundering.<sup>145</sup> The commission also indicted a sitting presidential candidate and organised crime figures with military backgrounds.<sup>146</sup> MACCIH ultimately faced the same fate as its model, CICIG, being terminated after a major investigation into powerful political figures.<sup>147</sup>

### El Salvador's Anti-Corruption Efforts

El Salvador has no similar international anticorruption commission like CICIG or MACCIH,<sup>148</sup> instead relying on national institutions such as the Fiscalía General de la

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<sup>142</sup> Hudson, Andrew, and Alexandra W. Taylor. "The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala: A New Model for International Criminal Justice Mechanisms." *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2010, pp. 53-74.

<sup>143</sup> Hudson, Andrew, and Alexandra W. Taylor. "The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala: A New Model for International Criminal Justice Mechanisms." *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2010, pp. 53-74.

<sup>144</sup> Hudson, Andrew, and Alexandra W. Taylor. "The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala: A New Model for International Criminal Justice Mechanisms." *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2010, pp. 53-74.

<sup>145</sup> *Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH)*. [www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih](http://www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih).

<sup>146</sup> *Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH)*. [www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih](http://www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih).

<sup>147</sup> *Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH)*. [www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih](http://www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/maccih).

<sup>148</sup> *El Salvador: Anti-Corruption Laws, Authorities and Compliance* | Anti-Corruption Portal. [www.antikor.world/en/main/country/El\\_Salvador](http://www.antikor.world/en/main/country/El_Salvador).



Republic (FGR), despite facing limited capacity, international isolation and restricted independence from political pressure.<sup>149</sup> The nation's anti-corruption prosecutions have mainly targeted mid-level officials rather than high-level corruption networks, while the judicial sector's international reform funding has declined as the US and other donors have reduced assistance due to democratic concerns.<sup>150</sup>

## US Security Assistance Programs

### Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI)

The Central America Regional Security Initiative was established by the US government as part of broader efforts to assist Central American countries with security challenges.<sup>151</sup> CARSI mainly provides assistance to law enforcement through equipment and training – better equipment law enforcement to combat drug trafficking.<sup>152</sup> The US has also used CARSI to support counter-narcotics operations, gang investigations and border security improvements across the Northern Triangle and broader Central America.<sup>153</sup> Despite this, CARSI's effectiveness remains questionable – especially considering the frequency of cartel violence and human trafficking – and raises the argument that security driven countermeasures need to address the core issues driving criminal organisation prevalence.

### US Strategy for Central America

The US provided over \$2.5 billion in comprehensive assistance, mainly addressing security, governance and prosperity across Central America,<sup>154</sup> mostly through agencies

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<sup>149</sup> *El Salvador: Anti-Corruption Laws, Authorities and Compliance* | Anti-Corruption Portal. [www.anticor.world/en/main/country/El\\_Salvador](http://www.anticor.world/en/main/country/El_Salvador).

<sup>150</sup> *El Salvador: Anti-Corruption Laws, Authorities and Compliance* | Anti-Corruption Portal. [www.anticor.world/en/main/country/El\\_Salvador](http://www.anticor.world/en/main/country/El_Salvador).

<sup>151</sup> "Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress." *Congress.gov* | Library of Congress, [www.congress.gov/crs-product/R41731](http://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R41731).

<sup>152</sup> "Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress." *Congress.gov* | Library of Congress, [www.congress.gov/crs-product/R41731](http://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R41731).

<sup>153</sup> "Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress." *Congress.gov* | Library of Congress, [www.congress.gov/crs-product/R41731](http://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R41731).

<sup>154</sup> "U.S. Strategy for Central America - United States Department of State." *United States Department of State*, 1 Dec. 2020, [www.2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-strategy-for-central-america](http://www.2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-strategy-for-central-america).





like USAID, the State Department and the Department of Defence.<sup>155</sup> The strategy attempted to address root causes of migration and insecurity through development and governance initiatives, and security assistance, in the hopes of creating a more comprehensive approach than just enforcement-focused methods.<sup>156</sup>

### Root Causes Strategy

The Biden administration launched the Root Causes Strategy initiative in 2021, providing over \$4 billion to target root causes of migration from all three Northern Triangle countries.<sup>157</sup> The initiative provided development assistance, governance reform, anti-corruption plans and economic opportunity creation strategies.<sup>158</sup> This program represented a shift towards development-oriented approaches after decades of emphasis on security and enforcement-oriented strategies. This approach recognised how long-term stability can only be achieved by addressing the underlying economic desperation and lack of opportunity that create migration pressures.

### Economic Development Efforts

#### CAFTA-DR Trade Agreement

The Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) was a free trade agreement that applied to all three Northern Triangle countries.<sup>159</sup> It was implemented between 2006 and 2009, which achieved increased trade volumes but mixed developmental results.<sup>160</sup> CAFTA-DR succeeded in increased trade between the US and Central America but mainly benefited large exporters, thus failing to produce

<sup>155</sup> "U.S. Strategy for Central America - United States Department of State." *United States Department of State*, 1 Dec. 2020, [www.2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-strategy-for-central-america](https://www.2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-strategy-for-central-america).

<sup>156</sup> "U.S. Strategy for Central America - United States Department of State." *United States Department of State*, 1 Dec. 2020, [www.2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-strategy-for-central-america](https://www.2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-strategy-for-central-america).

<sup>157</sup> U.S. STRATEGY FOR ADDRESSING THE ROOT CAUSES OF MIGRATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA. National Security Council, July 2021, [www.bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Root-Causes-Strategy.pdf](https://www.bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Root-Causes-Strategy.pdf). Accessed 11 Nov. 2025.

<sup>158</sup> U.S. STRATEGY FOR ADDRESSING THE ROOT CAUSES OF MIGRATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA. National Security Council, July 2021, [www.bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Root-Causes-Strategy.pdf](https://www.bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Root-Causes-Strategy.pdf). Accessed 11 Nov. 2025.

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<sup>160</sup> Britannica Editors. "Central America–Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR)." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15 Dec. 2009, [www.britannica.com/event/Central-America-Dominican-Republic-Free-Trade-Agreement](https://www.britannica.com/event/Central-America-Dominican-Republic-Free-Trade-Agreement).



broad employment opportunities and reduce migration pressures.<sup>161</sup> The agreement's implementation revealed structural limitations in generating inclusive development when accompanied by weak institutional capacity, limited small business integration and persistent inequality that meant most trade benefited exclusively large and established businesses rather than benefiting workers or small businesses.<sup>162</sup>

### Remittance Programs

The recognition of remittances critical role in all Northern Triangle economies, accounting for between 12% and 21% of GDP<sup>163</sup>, has led to multiple attempts to formalise remittance flows, reduce transfer costs and connect remittances to development initiatives – all of which, however, produced very limited economic transformation, as remittances are rarely used for investment, instead being used for general consumption.<sup>164</sup> This leads to remittances having a very minor capacity to generate sustainable development and employment opportunities.

### Climate Adaptation Initiatives

While all three Northern Triangle countries have implemented a variety of climate adaptation approaches such as drought-resistant crop promotion, disaster preparedness and watershed management,<sup>165</sup> these efforts remain insufficient in scale to address the magnitude of climate vulnerability.<sup>166</sup> Climate adaptation funding remains inadequate for facing extreme weather events which are occurring all the more often, as well as being inadequate for climate challenges in general.<sup>167</sup>

<sup>161</sup> Britannica Editors. "Central America–Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR)." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15 Dec. 2009, [www.britannica.com/event/Central-America-Dominican-Republic-Free-Trade-Agreement](http://www.britannica.com/event/Central-America-Dominican-Republic-Free-Trade-Agreement).

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<sup>163</sup> *Open Knowledge Repository*. [www.openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/9c545338-fd41-5f56-81af-fa374b1c4a26](http://www.openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/9c545338-fd41-5f56-81af-fa374b1c4a26).

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## POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

### Strengthening Regional Rule of Law and Anti-corruption Mechanisms

One of the most important coordinated efforts that is feasible for the Northern Triangle is the strengthening of independent judicial systems in order to reduce the widespread impunity that allows organized crime and corruption to run rampant across the region. Region-specific approaches have to be designed through international anti-corruption mechanisms like CICIG, with increased political protection against a premature closure. Merit-based selection systems for judges have to replace the current appointment system which is highly vulnerable to political interference, and guarantees of independence must be secured through the establishment of tenure security and open promotion criteria. Digital transparency platforms for government operations and procurement will also enhance accountability by establishing real-time disclosure obligations and public access to contracts and budgets. Additionally, regional cooperation protocols for cross-border corruption network investigations should be expanded and enhanced through coordination of investigative teams, common databases of suspects and suspect assets, as well as mutual legal assistance arrangements.

### Integrated Violence Prevention and Economic Opportunity Creation

In order to address instability, both violence and economic desperation must be first addressed, as they frequently push individuals towards criminal activity and migration. Community-based violence prevention programs throughout the Northern Triangle, particularly community policing models, education-based gang prevention, youth outreach and trauma support services can reduce recruitment into criminal groups while concurrently building trust between law enforcement and communities. Parallel to these initiatives, large-scale investments into youth employment programs, particularly targeting high gang recruitment regions, should be created in order to provide vocational training, entrepreneurship support and pathways to legal employment for vulnerable populations. Such programs that link remittances to productive community investment, expanded vocation education toward labour market demand and promote public-private sector partnership have the possibility to yield



sustainable economic development, infrastructure connectivity projects and reduce barriers to trade, that all have the possibility to generate immense economic opportunities. Reforms to business regulation, by cutting administrative barriers to enterprise creation, can foster small business growth and employment opportunity growth across the Northern Triangle.

### **Building Regional Climate and Disaster Resilience**

The Northern Triangle is frequently destabilised by climate vulnerability and periodic natural disasters that destroy infrastructure, cause population displacement and undermine development gains. A regional climate resilience strategy can be implemented by investments in disaster risk reduction infrastructure, such as early warning systems, evacuation planning and resilient construction standards. Furthermore, agricultural adaptation through the expansion of drought-resistant crops and climate-adopted technique training for farmers is essential for the millions of people living in the Dry Corridor, who continually suffer crop failures and food insecurity. Green development projects can create rural job opportunities through industries like renewable energy, reforestation programs and sustainable agriculture while addressing both climate and economic needs in rural regions.



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