

Skyrocketing Crime Rates and Imperial Wars

By [Prof. James Petras](#)

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Imperial interventions in civil wars have a devastating effect on countries that last for decades and affect the entire economy and society. One indicator of the long-term consequences of imperial military intervention is the tremendous increase of violent crime, the multiplication of gangs, homicides and general insecurity in Central America. Violence increased far beyond what existed prior to imperial wars in such countries as Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia. In the period prior to imperial intervention in Central America, during times of revolutionary ferment, high levels of social organization via inclusive social movements, channeled discontent into political and social channels.

Revolutionary movements organized armed resistance against specific targets; repressive police, military and death squad militias. Imperial intervention included military advisers and counter-insurgency strategies which uprooted peasants via scorched earth policies and destroyed communities. Assaults on urban barrios led to the break-up of family and neighborhood networks. The social bonds which integrate people into a moral and social community were ruptured: the goal of imperial planners is to decimate any independent popular civil-society organization as a political threat to its illegitimate collaborator regime.

In El Salvador, the US provided over \$300 million a year in arms and training for almost a decade. The Pentagon through its advisory missions, in collaboration with local landlords and generals, financed and forcibly recruited thousands of peasants into death squad 'civilian militias' to assassinate local movement activists and terrorize farm workers' movements and trade union organizations. Under imperial military pressure the leaders of the major Central American guerrilla organizations signed on to a peace agreement.

The "peace accords" retained the US collaborator regimes in power and the promised social reforms were never implemented. As a result, the homicide rate skyrocketed. The discharged guerrilla militants and unemployed right wing militia members, armed and trained, and with no future, became the bases for gangs, drug and people traffickers, kidnappers and extortionists. The number of people who were annually killed in violent crime (1991-2011) exceeded the number who died each year during the revolutionary struggle (1979-1990). Having successfully blocked the prospects of positive socio-economic transformations in wealth, land ownership, the judicial system and allocation of public investments, the US pushed for neo-liberal 'free trade agreements' which further decimated small farmers and retail commerce. Mass outmigration and crime became the 'roads out of poverty' in the aftermath of imperial intervention. Violent crime became so pervasive that the business elites of the US and Central America were hesitant to invest and profit from the low wages and the unemployed who crowded the labor market. The cost of hiring private security armies to protect upscale neighborhoods, business operations, country clubs, and exclusive restaurant and leisure centers became prohibitive.

Faced with the “unfavorable climate for business” created by the very same pro-business Pentagon intervention, after two decades of murder and mayhem, the World Bank intervened. The World Development Report (WDR) for 2010 (published in 2011) focuses on the theme of “conflict, security and development”. The Report proposed a series of measures to lessen what it calls “mass violence”. The Report was taken up and elaborated in the Financial Times (4/27/11 p. 9) by Martin Wolf in an article titled “Remove the scourge of conflict”. The Report and Wolf provide time series data between 1999-2009 showing the vertical growth of “criminal violence after civil wars”; time series data show that countries with high poverty rates based on the (percent of population with income below \$1.25 per day) have experienced greater violence than those with low poverty rate; time series data show that greater ‘violence’ reduced real GDP growth.

Both the WB Report and the Financial Times fail to identify the true nature of the ‘violent conflict’, the principle source of violence and the foreign and domestic elite economic policies which deepen and prolong ‘violence’.

In the case of Central America, particularly El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras, the WB and Financial Times resort to vacuous generalization to avoid discussing the massive military role of US imperialism in promoting large scale, long term violence in the countries. Instead the FT strikes a phony philosophical note “man is a violent animal” (Alas). In fact imperialist rulers are violent animals; especially with regard to poor countries attempting to free themselves of US backed oligarchies. To their discredit the WB and FT obfuscate the data by claiming that the deaths were a product of “civil wars”.

Throughout the 1970’s and 1980’s the US and Israel provided arms, advisers, technical capacity to the murderous Guatemalan regime which slaughtered over 300,000; mostly Indians and wiped off the map over 420 villages. During the US decade long proxy war against the progressive Sandinista revolutionary movement via the Somoza dictatorship (1969-78) and the decade long Contra terror war against the Sandinista government (1979-89), over 50,000 people were killed, hundreds of thousands maimed and displaced and productive farms, factories, infrastructure, clinics and schools and co-operatives were targeted by US counter-insurgency advisers.

As mentioned earlier, El Salvador’s social movements and their supporters throughout civil society were targeted by US backed military and paramilitary groups forcing hundreds of thousands to flee to urban squatter settlements or across borders and overseas. Similar outcomes occurred during the US counter-insurgency campaign in Honduras and invasions of Grenada and Panama in the 1980’s.

Imperial backed invasions, counter-insurgency campaigns and the subsequent imposition of corrupt oligarchs led to the total disarticulation of local social networks and the bankruptcy of small scale farms because of the importation of subsidized US foodstuffs. These led to the presence of a deadly combination: thousands of automatic rifles, tens of thousands of unemployed displaced rural youth living in urban slums and an economy geared to enriching elite importers, exporters and US bankers and creditors. The WB Report in all of 301 pages and numerous tables does not contain a single phrase about the nature, consequences and the profound and lasting impact of imperial intervention on the out of control homicide rates in Central America or elsewhere. Instead we are told it’s all about a “civil war”.

The mendacious cover-up proceeds to the current decade. The WB Report and the FT sound

an optimistic note claiming that annual battle deaths have “fallen to 42,000 in the 2000’s”. First, calling the US-NATO invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan a “civil war” is a travesty to common knowledge; and then falsifying the over 1 million Iraqi deaths into a few thousand, flies in the face of independent surveys published in the prestigious British medical journal the Lancet.

What is striking about the imperialist interventions and most relevant to the growth of violent crime, is the fact that the subsequent client rulers, are themselves deeply enmeshed in international criminal networks. Drug dealing and large scale theft of billions in aid funds and public revenues is the hallmark of Central American clients who are most intimately tied to Washington. The same is true in Iraq and Afghanistan: tribal clans and ethnic gangs who pledged allegiance to the US occupiers run billion dollar heroin enterprises. They murder civil society activists and undermine the bases of community based organizations.

Policy Proposals

Based on a diagnosis that ignores the imperial causes of social breakdown and the subsequent spiraling violent crime rate, the WB Report and the FT propose “lessons” for a “successful transition to ending high rates of violence”.

Since their diagnosis of the historical roots of crime is deeply flawed, the prescriptions fail to come to terms with the political and economic transformations necessary to reduce spiraling homicide rates.

The WB Report proposes (1) “inclusive coalitions” for change, (2) impact programs that produce quick results and impress people, (3) reforms of the security and justice institutions, (4) a pragmatic perspective of several decades to bring about change. In other words the WB Report recognizes that its policies, allies and agencies are so embedded in the current system that its “reform proposals” are at best designed to co-opt local leaders in coalitions, to pursue incremental changes, which will not reverse homicide rates for several decades.

The WB Report proposes to create bottom-up “links” between the neo-liberal state and civic society: an impossible task when “the state” is the principle agency undermining employment via its free market policies. Their proposal to act against corruption and to reform the police and judicial system overlooks the fact that the past and present closest political and judicial collaborators of US counter-insurgency and dominance are precisely those corrupt officials willing to repress popular movements and provide military bases. The WB Report calls for greater intervention by “external institutions” (like itself and US AID) to “deliver support”, when it was precisely external intervention which short circuited changes fought for by “bottom up” grass roots movements.

The point of departure for a reduction of violent crime is precisely to reduce or eliminate external intervention by the US: the need to eliminate military aid and training programs which block and repress social movements and organize coups; to eliminate WB programs promoting agro-export elites and to promote agrarian reforms led by and for co-operatives and family farmers; to end free trade and the saturation of local market with subsidized US food exports to allow peasants to produce for local markets with subsidized US food exports, to allow peasants to produce for local markets. Above all there is a need for the US and WB to pay \$ multi-million dollar compensation for the destruction caused by the counter-insurgency war and neo-liberal policies, as a way of creating alternative employment for

young people tempted by the drug gangs. Because of the long term destruction resulting from imperialist wars, the process of decriminalizing society will require a profound revolution in institutions and culture, one which will by necessity need to root out the current crop of generals, oligarchs and World Bank trained economists who perpetuate the conditions which spawn crime.

Those changes will require supporting social movements independent of the state; immediate positive impacts to attract popular support will result from movements engaged in direct action – like occupying large rural estates. Police and security reforms can only be instituted as part of a process of regime changes in which ties to repressive overseas experts are replaced by links to community councils. Crime will be reduced in direct relation to greater independence from the regional policemen and with greater freedom to pursue an alternative economy based on social solidarity.

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