

## FBI confronts new gang threat

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(SAN SALVADOR)A notorious street gang based in El Salvador has rapidly spread into 31 US states and raised enough concern for the Justice Department to create a new high-level task force to battle it. But the head of the task force says the gang has no Al Qaeda connections - despite comments made Monday by El Salvador's president.

"The FBI, in concert with the US intelligence community and government of several Central American republics, has determined that there is no basis in fact to support this allegation of Al Qaeda or even radical Islamic ties to MS13 [a.k.a. Mara Salvatrucha]," says Robert Clifford, director of the new force, who is in El Salvador this week to discuss cooperation with his Central American counterparts.

Last year, Honduran Security Minister Oscar Alvarez raised an alarm when he said that Al Qaeda might be trying to recruit Central American gang members to help terrorists infiltrate the US. On Monday, Salvadoran President Tony Saca echoed this theme, saying he could "not rule out a link between terrorists and Central American gang members." Such assertions are being heard up north as well.

Rep. Solomon Ortiz (D) of Texas said last month: "We know from El Salvadoran law enforcement that Al Qaeda is meeting with violent gang leaders in El Salvador. We have also had reports that Middle Easterners have been sighted on the banks of the Rio Grande."

But Mr. Clifford unequivocally dismisses this theory. "Very unlikely," says the former Middle East security specialist. "To have something as sophisticated as Al Qaeda overtly align and identify itself with a group of misfits is improbable."

So why a task force now, and why its concentration on one gang? After all, MS13 has been operating for years in the US, and is neither the biggest gang in the US nor, statistically speaking, the most violent - a dubious distinction claimed by a rival Salvadoran group, the 18th Street gang.

Clifford explains that in the past two years there has been a rapid expansion of MS13 branches throughout the US. During that time, there have been 18 MS13-related killings in North Carolina, 11 in Northern Virginia, and at least eight in Los Angeles. Members are showing up in places as disparate as Boston and Omaha, Neb.

MS13 sprang up in California in the late 1980s, when Salvadoran refugees, having fled the violent civil war back home, began forming protection groups against existing Hispanic gangs in their new neighborhoods. In time, they turned to such illegal activities as burglaries, auto thefts, drug trafficking, weapons smuggling, extortion, rape, and murder.

By the 1990s, US law enforcement was taking note of the group, and many members were deported to El Salvador, where they set up branches and, in many cases, returned to the US. Today there are 8,000 to 10,000 members of MS13 in 31 states, according to the National Drug Intelligence Center, an arm of the Justice Department. The number rises to 50,000 internationally.

The FBI task force set up to deal with the problem, which will be based in Washington, was quietly created two months ago, says Clifford. He has served 17 years with the FBI, most recently as the legal attache at the US Embassy in Athens and chief of FBI operations for the region stretching from Albania and Bulgaria to Lebanon and Syria.

Less than a year ago, Clifford hadn't heard of MS13. When Chris Swecker, assistant director of criminal investigations at the FBI - who had once worked with Clifford on busting a Hizbullah cell in Charlotte, N.C., - called and offered him the job, the Athens-based attache had "little knowledge" of the Salvadoran gang. But a week later, he was on his way to Washington.

Today, fully up to speed, Clifford is coordinating his operation with several federal agencies: Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Diplomatic Security, the US Marshals Service, the Bureau of Prisons, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and the Drug Enforcement Agency, as well as with the Justice Department and local counterparts.

Local and state authorities, he says, who have been dealing with MS13 for years, have done "an excellent job," and there is "certainly success in getting prosecutions." But, he stresses, the arrogance, level of violence, and dramatic expansion of the gang across the US calls for a more comprehensive and coordinated fight - which the FBI intends to lead. "After 9/11 our focus went to terrorism, but now we are coming back around, and want to address these gangsters not as thugs but as part of a criminal enterprise ... and disrupt and dismantle them as we did the Mafia," he says.

High on the agenda for the new task force is greater information sharing with Mexico and Central America, specifically El Salvador. For example, he says, the US needs to ensure that when MS13 gangsters are deported back to El Salvador authorities here are given a list of charges against the deportee, as well as a list of that person's contacts. Rodrigo Avila, El Salvador's vice minister of security, says that an average 250 criminals a month are deported back to El Salvador, a dozen of which are gang members.

Clifford says there is also discussion of stationing Salvadoran officers in the US to serve as advisers on MS13 and the US providing El Salvador with antigang equipment and training.

Bill Carter, an FBI spokesman, says that Clifford's outfit is a part of the bureau's broad new gang strategy. The larger initiative will include a \$10 million gang-intelligence center, which will be established at FBI headquarters next year and serve as an intelligence repository on all gangs operating in the US, he says.

Clifford, meanwhile, is not the only US official in El Salvador this week talking about gangs. A four-day international gang-enforcement conference, which ends Thursday, is being attended by representatives of the Homeland Security Department and police and sheriff departments from across the US. "It's all about networking," explains Harvey Smith, El Salvador's honorary consul in California, who set up the conference. "The gang members are communicating nicely. Now we have to as well."

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