

El Salvador asks for criminal past of US deportees

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SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador, Feb 22 (Reuters) - El Salvador wants the U.S. government to provide criminal records for the thousands of Salvadoreans it deports every year, some of whom are blamed for an epidemic of gang violence back home.

Much of Central America has been swept by murders and robberies committed by street bandits known as "maras," whose ranks are made up largely of migrants who lived for years in Los Angeles and adopted its urban gang culture.

"We've asked for an exchange of effective information so we can have greater and better records on people who have been deported," Rodrigo Avila, El Salvador's vice minister of security, told reporters on Tuesday.

He said the U.S. government deported about 250 Salvadoreans a month, 10 percent of whom had a criminal record. Five percent were members of street gangs, he said.

Governments in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala have launched crackdowns against the gangs, which have their origin in the civil wars that rocked the region during the 1980s and led millions of people to seek refuge in the United States.

The United States intensified its deportation of convicted criminals in the 1990s. Many of them were sent back to an unfamiliar country they had left as young children, and were unable to speak or read even basic Spanish.

The maras have responded to the crackdown by dumping the heads of victims in city streets and stepping up other criminal activity. Gangs were blamed for an attack by gunmen on a city bus in Honduras last December that killed 28 people.