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HEADLINE: Murders Soar in El Salvador Since Devastating War's End; Some
Jobless Ex-Combatants Turn to Life of Crime

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BODY:

Five years after a long civil war, the ready availability of military-style firearms and the scourge of gangs and organized crime have driven El Salvador's murder rate up to a level that places this small Central American country atop the list of Latin America's most violent societies.

Figures from the attorney general and human rights ombudsman, as well as recent findings by two independent experts, show the level of homicides in El Salvador has risen to a level that places it among the most violent countries in Latin America. The homicide rate in El Salvador is now the highest in the region, exceeding that of Colombia, which was considered the deadliest in the region because of violence attributed to drug cartels, leftist guerrillas, right-wing paramilitary groups and general lawlessness.

One of the experts, Jose Miguel Cruz, a psychologist at Central American University, has concluded that, based on statistics covering the last three years, El Salvador has the highest homicide rate in Latin America. The other specialist, Juan Luis Londono, a former economist at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, has determined on the basis of 1995 figures that El Salvador and neighboring Guatemala share the distinction as the homicide leaders of the region, although he said the records in Guatemala are less definitive.

For people like Blanca Estela, 48, who sells candy and drinks in central San Salvador, the homicide numbers are all too real. Four years ago, two of her cousins were fatally shot after being robbed on the streets of the capital.

Since then, Estela, who recently was robbed of her jewelry, has felt profoundly vulnerable. "I feel so insecure," she said. "There has to be more vigilance because people can no longer do a simple thing like walk on the streets."

During El Salvador's 12-year conflict between the U.S.-backed government and Marxist-led guerrillas, an estimated 70,000 people were killed. During the early years of the war, the average annual number of violent deaths

peaked at roughly 3,000, then dropped to about 5,000 toward the end.

Since the signing of the Chapultepec peace accords in 1992, the United States has provided El Salvador with more than \$ 665 million in aid as part of an international effort to rebuild the country and establish civil order. But according to statistics from the attorney general's office that were compiled by Cruz, 7,673 people were murdered in El Salvador in 1994, the first year for which reliable law enforcement data was available, or 138.2 people per 100,000.

In 1995, that number jumped to 7,877, or 138.9 people per 100,000. Last year, however, total homicides declined to 6,792, or a rate of 117.4 per 100,000, but there was an increase in the number of people wounded in crimes.

"The violence here right now is more chaotic because you don't know who is going to exercise the violence . . . while in the war we knew who exercised" it, said Carlos Guillermo Ramos, an academic adviser at a project called Youth and Violence.

Today, El Salvador's murder rate remains much higher than Colombia's, which stands at 85 people per 100,000. South Africa's homicide rate has been recorded at 140 per 100,000 inhabitants, making it the world's deadliest country in the view of most experts. (According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports for 1993, the U.S. murder rate stood at 9.5 per 100,000; in the District of Colombia that year, it was 78.5 per 100,000.)

While acknowledging that there is a serious violence problem here, Salvadoran officials and business leaders, as well as some experts on violence, have played down the studies, contending that there are probably more dangerous countries in the region, but that reporting and record keeping may be inadequate in those nations. Officials here, however, also acknowledged that they have not conducted any studies to support this position.

President Armando Calderon Sol recently said "it is an excess" to say El Salvador has the highest violence rate in the region. "There are testimonies of other countries that are more violent," he said. "That El Salvador is a violent country, yes, because it is coming out of a . . . war of many years among brothers, and since then there has existed a culture of violence."

Although some former combatants have found legitimate ways of making a living, others who were unable to find employment opted to pursue a life of crime.

Weapons have fallen into the hands of gangs, which some estimates say have as many as 12,000 members, a number that is larger than the approximately 10,000 guerrillas who fought in the civil war.

The crime wave also reflects the inadequacy of the judicial system, which still allows many criminals to work with impunity, although the situation has improved over the years. Furthermore, growing pains continue for the fledgling 15,000-member national police force, which observers say remains outnumbered and outgunned by criminals, even though it has made strides in cracking down on lawlessness. Last year, 71 police officers

were killed in the line of duty, and 40 have died this year.

Since the signing of the peace accords, the United States has invested more than \$ 30 million in building and training the new police force, which recently has made inroads in combating gangs, dismantling 80 in the last 18 months. The number of robberies, thefts and rapes has declined.

But, said police chief Rodrigo Avila, "felons have become more violent. Now they walk onto a bus with a gun or hand grenade and if you don't give them your wallet, they will kill you." The police plans to expand its ranks to 20,000 officers over the next two years.

GRAPHIC: Photo, alexander renderos for The Washington Post, A policeman displays a handgun and other weapons turned in by combatants at the end of the war.

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