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SLV38088.E

02 January 2002

El Salvador: Activities of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS) 13 gang; recruitment of members; whether it forcibly recruits members; treatment of persons who refuse to join the gang

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

For information on the Mara Salvatrucha (MS) 13 gang, please see SLV33463.E of 11 January 2000.

No information on the recruitment of members or treatment of persons who refuse to join the gang could be found among the sources consulted.

The following article by an investigator with the District Attorney Office of the Orange County in California posted on the National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations Website provides further information on the MS:

Street gangs form for a variety of reasons. The United States has experienced the growth of many types of street and prison gangs within the last 20 years. During this time period, influxes of legal and illegal refugees into the United States have had a documented effect on the formation of new street gangs.

In the early 1980s, a violent civil war began in El Salvador which would last more than 12 years. Approximately 100,000 people were killed in the war, and more than one million people fled from El Salvador to the U.S. The Salvadorian refugees and immigrants initially settled primarily in southern California and Washington, D.C. Some of the refugees and immigrants had ties with La Mara, a violent street gang from El Salvador. Others had been members of paramilitary groups like the Farabundo Marti National

Liberation Front (FMNL) during the civil war. FMNL was made up of Salvadorian peasants who were trained as guerilla fighters. Many were adept at using explosives, firearms, and booby traps.

Most of the Salvadorian refugees settled in the established Hispanic neighborhoods of the "Rampart" area of Los Angeles. However, Salvadorians were not readily accepted into the Los Angeles Hispanic community, and were frequently targeted by local Hispanic gangs. As a result, in the late 1980s, some refugees and refugee members of La Mara and FMNL formed what is now known as the Mara Salvatrucha (MS) street gang in Los Angeles. Like many other street gangs, MS initially formed for protection, but quickly developed a reputation for being organized and extremely violent. MS membership continues to be fed by refugees from groups like FMNL.

Since its inception in California and Washington, DC, Mara Salvatrucha has expanded into Oregon, Alaska, Texas, Nevada, Utah, Oklahoma, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Maryland, Virginia, Georgia, Florida, Canada, and Mexico. MS is unique in that, unlike traditional U.S. street gangs, it maintains active ties with MS members and factions in El Salvador. Mara Salvatrucha is truly an international gang.

Mara Salvatrucha gang members maintain contact between groups in the United States and El Salvador for several specific reasons. In El Salvador, a hand grenade sells for \$1.00-\$2.00 U.S. currency and an M-16 rifle will sell for approximately \$200.00-\$220.00 U.S. dollars. This communication and alliance provides a mechanism for MS gang members to access military-style munitions and also establishes a network to traffic illegal firearms into the United States.

Although military weapons seem to be readily available to this gang, street intelligence indicates they often have difficulty obtaining handguns, which are not readily available in El Salvador. This creates a demand for small arms by MS members in the U.S. and El Salvador. This demand is so high that MS members will often take handguns as payment for drug transactions. The guns are then sent back to El Salvador, or used in the United States.

MS is also involved in exporting stolen U.S. cars to South America. The cars are often traded for drugs when dealing with cartels. It is estimated that 80% of the cars driven in El Salvador were stolen in the United States. Car theft is a lucrative business for MS.

The Mara Salvatrucha gang is involved in a variety of criminal enterprises. As with members of other gangs, MS members seem willing to commit almost any crime, but MS gang members tend to have a higher level of criminal involvement than other gang

members. MS members have been involved in burglaries, auto thefts, narcotic sales, home invasion robberies, weapons smuggling, car jacking, extortion, murder, rape, witness intimidation, illegal firearm sales, car theft and aggravated assaults. In terms of drug trafficking activities, common drugs sold by MS members include cocaine, marijuana, heroin, and methamphetamine. Mara Salvatrucha gang members have even placed a "tax" on prostitutes and non-gang member drug dealers who are working in MS "turf." Failure to pay up will most likely result in violence.

Originally, only Salvadorians could become members of Mara Salvatrucha. However, MS now includes members from Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. Mara Salvatrucha also has a few African-American members. MS has broken the race barrier for membership, but most new members are still selected because of their ethnic (Central American) background. The majority of MS gang members are between the ages of 11 and 40 years old.

Mara Salvatrucha members identify themselves with tattoos such as the number "13," or *trece* in Spanish. MS gang members will also use the Spanish word *sureno*, meaning "southerner" to identify themselves. Sometimes *sureno* is abbreviated to SUR. These terms make reference to the fact that MS gang members like to claim they are from southern California as opposed to northern California, and are rivals with northern California gangs. Often, this rivalry is taken outside the state of California. Additionally, Mara Salvatrucha gang members have several ongoing rivalries with large southern California gangs, including the 18th Street gang, and in California, commonly attack 18th Street gang members on sight. There are many Hispanic gangs, including MS, which use the number "13," and the terms *sureno* and SUR as identifiers, including street/prison gangs outside of California. Thus, it is important to identify specific tattoos used by the Mara Salvatrucha gang, which include "M" or "MS," in addition to the 13 or SUR identification. Another common tattoo seen is "Salvadorian Pride." There is also a good chance that the member will also have the name of his particular clique tattooed on his/her body. Other tattoos encountered with MS members have included pentagrams and other occult symbols. These can be confusing when found in conjunction with gang tattoos and can cause misconceptions of Satanic involvement by the gang. The most common hand sign used by MS members is the letter M formed by using three fingers and pointing the hand downward. This handsign can resemble the pitchfork sign used by Folk/People Nation gangs from the Midwest, and can be made with the fingers pointing up or down. The symbols used as tattoos are also used in graffiti and personal writings.

In general, Mara Salvatrucha members show no fear of law enforcement. They are not easily intimidated and frequently act defiantly. Mara Salvatrucha gang members have been

responsible for the execution of three federal agents and numerous shootings of law enforcement officers across the country. MS gang members have been known to booby-trap their drug stash houses using antipersonnel grenades on the assumption that these structures will be searched by law enforcement. MS members at one time often bragged of assaulting law enforcement officers as a means of showing their loyalty and commitment to the gang. However, these claims have never been confirmed. Today, assaults on law enforcement officers are not required for membership, but are always an option. Thus, officers dealing with MS members (or any street gang members, for that matter) should always use extreme caution.

Law enforcement and the courts have used two primary methods to deal with criminal activity by MS: arrest/incarceration and deportation. Between April 1994 and August 1995, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) arrested and deported more than 100 MS gang members to El Salvador. Many Mara Salvatrucha gang members are currently in the United States illegally and are concerned about deportation. If a gang member is deported to El Salvador, there is a chance they will be targeted by the Sombra Negra (Black Shadow) death squad. Sombra Negra and similar groups are legendary in Central America. Gangsters and citizens alike believe that the Sombra Negra is made up of rogue cops and military personnel who target unwanted criminals and gang members for vigilante "justice." While the presence of these death squads is officially denied by the governments of Central American countries, many MS members in the U.S. believe these groups exist, and fear that they will be targeted after being deported. Honduran MS gang members have the same fear. Sombra Negra has claimed responsibility for the deaths of several MS gang members in El Salvador. The existence or belief in the existence of these death squads could also be a chief motivation for hardcore MS gang members to come to the United States (2000).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

#### Reference

Valdez, Al, Orange County District Attorney's Office. 2000. "A South American Report." <[http://www.nagia.org/mara\\_salvatrucha.htm](http://www.nagia.org/mara_salvatrucha.htm)> [Accessed 20 dec. 2001]

#### Additional Sources Consulted

Two sources did not respond to information requests.

Central America Report [Guatemala City]. 2000-2001

IRB Databases

World News Connection (WNC)

**Internet site including:**

Amnesty International

The Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN) - Human Rights Update

Centro de paz

County of Orange, California

*El Diario de Hoy*

Equipo Nizkor

Human Rights Watch

Radio Netherlands

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