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The Latin Crime Crisis: The Rise of Private Security Companies Amid Latin America's Crime Wave

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Criminal violence in Latin America continues to rise despite social and economic progress. To overcome this, governments, corporations, and wealthy individuals invested in private security, causing the Private Military and Security Enterprise (PMSC) industry to flourish. Today, there are more than 16,000 PMSCs employing 2.4 million people, surpassing the number of police in many countries. Private security creates social disparities, where protection is more accessible to the rich while the poor remain vulnerable. In addition, weak regulations lead to corruption, abuse of power, and human rights violations, especially in the extractive industry sector. This selective security exacerbates insecurity and prolongs the cycle of violence. Without strong policy reforms, the private security industry risks further reducing the state's role in protecting citizens, deepening inequality, and accelerating the proliferation of weapons in the region.

SECURITY FOR SALE

Criminal violence in Latin America has reached very severe levels, despite progress in poverty reduction, education, health, and general living standards. To deal with this problem, many governments, corporations, and wealthy people in Latin America are choosing to invest heavily in private security. Unfortunately, this often comes at the expense of public safety and human rights. Due to this trend, the private security industry in Latin America is growing rapidly, but most of it is still largely unregulated. It also accelerates the deployment of weapons. According to a report from the Inter-American Dialogue last year, there are more than 16,000 Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) in Latin America employing about 2.4 million people. [1]

The number of private security officers in Latin America even exceeds the number of police officers than in any other part of the world. For example, in Brazil, the ratio between private security officers and police officers is four to one, in Guatemala five to one, and in Honduras almost seven private security officers for every police officer. As a result, security is more felt by the wealthier, while the majority of people have to fight on their own to protect themselves. [1]

Field Specific Facts

- According to data from the Brazilian think tank, the Igarapé Institute, about 33% of all homicides in the world occur in Latin America, although this region has only 8% of the world's population. [2]
- As many as 17 of the 20 countries with the highest murder rates are in Latin America. Countries such as Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Venezuela account for a quarter of all intentional homicides in the world each year. [3]
- Of the 50 most dangerous cities in the world, 43 of them are in Latin America. For every 100,000 inhabitants in the region, 21 of them are homicides, while the world average is only seven. [4] ; [5]
- In the last ten years, the murder rate in Latin America has increased by 3.7%, while the population has only increased by 1.1%. This shows that although the population has only increased slightly, the rate of violence and homicide has increased significantly in the region. [6]

Injustice in Security

Violence in Latin America mainly affects youth from poor backgrounds. A study of violence among youth in the region found that young men living in low-income areas had a 1 in 50 chance of being killed before reaching the age of 31. In addition, more than half of the 25 countries with the highest rates of female homicide in the world are in Latin America and the Caribbean. Most of these female victims also come from the poor and young people. Most of these violent cases end without a clear punishment, with a very low sentencing rate. In North America and Europe, about 80% of homicide cases end in a verdict. However, in Latin America, only about 20% of murder cases succeed in bringing the perpetrator to justice and getting a sentence. [7]

Complexity of Industry (PMSC)

People in the region are increasingly distrustful of law enforcement and the criminal justice system due to their inability to deal with crime. As a result, those who can afford it are turning to private security. For example, in Mexico, which is notorious for its high rates of violence and murder, as well as corrupt and ineffective police, the private security industry has grown rapidly by 180% since 2012 and is now worth about \$1.5 billion. However, this private security model also brings new problems, as a report from last year's Inter-American Dialogue explains: [1]

- Every country in Latin America actually has laws for registering and regulating private security companies (PMSCs), but these laws are often poorly enforced.
- Many of the people who work in this sector are former members of the military and police, so there are strong links between private security companies, the government, and the security forces. This fuels corruption, partisan contracts, and political influence.
- The rich and large corporations prefer to pay for personal security rather than pay taxes that should be used for public safety that benefits the entire society. The private security industry also recruits qualified personnel from government security forces, leaving government agencies understaffed and having to train inexperienced people.
- The industry is also a major supplier of weapons to criminal groups. In El Salvador, for example, about 40% of illegal weapons are linked to the country's 500 private security companies.
- In addition to corruption, private security companies are also involved in human rights abuses, especially in the extractive industry sector that dominates many economies in the region.

Selective security, uncertainty and more violence

Rising crime and insecurity in Latin America have brought huge advantages to private security companies (PMSCs). However, this creates a problem that Jenny Pearce of the LSE Latin America Centre calls "selective security, insecurity, and more violence". Selective security means that only some people or territories are protected, while others remain neglected. Uncertainty arises because security is uneven, making most people still feel unsafe. Ironically, this situation can actually exacerbate violence, due to a lack of comprehensive security focus and dependence on the private sector. [8]

What is more worrying is the impact on investment in public safety. Adam Blackwell of the Development Services Group once said that "private security companies have no interest in supporting public safety — they don't profit from it." This means that these companies could benefit more if the situation of insecurity continues, as more and more people will depend on their services. [9]

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