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**National Security**

# Guatemala's Security Challenges and the Government Response: An Update

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In January 2026, in a coordinated action, prisoners affiliated with the gang Barrio 18 took over three prisons in Guatemala. These included the maximum security facility *Renovacion I, Fraijanes II, and the Centro Preventivo* of Zone 18. In the process, they took 46 security personnel in the facilities hostage.

Within hours after the government reestablished control of the prisons, persons affiliated with the gang in multiple marginal neighborhoods in Guatemala City, mostly in the Villanueva area, launched a coordinated attack on Guatemala's National Civil Police (PNC), killing nine of its members, leading Guatemalan President, Bernardo Arevalo to declare a 30-day nationwide State of Emergency on January 19.

The violence followed a prior mass escape of over 20 Barrio 18 members from the Fraijanes II prison in October 2025, in an incident which highlighted the longstanding problem of overcrowding, inadequate control, and corruption across Guatemala's prison system. Indeed, within days of the escape, evidence of criminal collusion at the highest levels of government precipitated the flight from the law of Interior Minister Francisco Jimenez, and separately, by vice-Minister Claudia Palencia.

The series of events from October through January has reinforced perceptions among many in Guatemala, that President Arevalo and his government is seriously deficient in its management of public policy, especially security affairs. Such perceptions are the complement to a narrative better known to those following Guatemalan affairs in the United States, that President Arevalo and his left-leaning political movement Semilla, has long been the victim of a coordinated campaign by corrupt and entrenched political elites in the country, to block or remove him from power, and if not possible, to sabotage his agenda which threatens those elites. The present work, based on interviews during February 2025 with over 25 senior Guatemalans in the security, government, academic and other sectors, seeks to present a balanced and analytical assessment of the challenges facing Guatemala in security matters, and the response of the Arevalo government in addressing them.

# Guatemala's Security Challenges

Guatemala faces a serious challenge from reinforcing dynamics of narcotrafficking and street gangs engaged in systemic extortion and other crime and violence. The revenues flowing through Guatemala from illicit activities have deepened the corruption and weakness of long compromised public institutions, while gangs have hijacked the overcrowded prisons meant to contain them through bribery and intimidation, and turned them into command centers for planning and executing their criminal projects.

Guatemala has long been on one of the principal routes for the shipment of cocaine from Colombia and elsewhere in South America to the United States. Various groups have used relatively sparsely populated areas of the country, particularly the jungle covered Peten region as a waypoint for transporting drugs into the United States. In a similar fashion, different smuggling groups have long used and fought over transit corridors through the more mountainous southern part of the country to move drugs and other illicit substances. Narco boats and submarines carrying drugs have long transited the extensive waters of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that extends 200 miles from Guatemala's Pacific coast, and beyond. Maintaining control of those waters against the transit of drugs and other contraband has long been complicated by a shallow, uneven coastline, with an abundance of silt, continually moved by currents in a manner that complicates establishing and maintaining ports with usable channel depths, other than the country's principal port facility at Quetzal.

Highlighting the enormous and expanding challenge of Guatemala's position as a drug transit country, in 2024, with help from the United States, its authorities seized a record 18.2 metric tons of cocaine. These seizures were a dramatic 264%

increase from the 5 metric tons seized in 2023. The significant expansion likely reflects a combination of both heightened enforcement efforts and expanded cocaine shipments through the country's territory, airspace and waters.

Despite evidence from the aforementioned interceptions, that the volume of drugs transiting the country has increased significantly, the number of flights by suspected drug flights passing through the country's remote Peten region has dropped notably. Indeed, in 2025, the government did not register a single landing by a suspected narco aircraft. Some consulted for this work suggested that the discrepancy owes to the changing pattern of drug movement through the region with a shift from transit by aircraft and narco boats, to greater use of commercial means such as container shipping. This alleged shift is accelerated, according to some consulted for this work, by a combination of greater deterrent capability by the Guatemalan military (a questionable assertion), and expanded intervention by the United States against narco boats via its military presence in the Caribbean and its demonstrated willingness, since September 2025, to use lethal force against suspected narcotraffickers.

Others consulted for this work suspect that a certain volume of flights through the Peten continue to occur but are unreported. The reality likely represents a combination of shifting transit patterns, deterrence from U.S. actions, and a lack of reporting of transits due to corruption.

Beyond transshipment from other countries such as Colombia and Venezuela, limited amounts of coca are grown locally and transformed into cocaine in Guatemala itself. Key regions for this local production, according to those consulted for this work, include the remote mountainous areas of Alto Verapaz, Izabal and Peten.

In addition to the local growing of coca and production of cocaine, groups in the remote mountainous regions of San Marcos and Huehuetenango continue to grow poppies and transform them into heroine, or intermediate heroine products, for transshipment to markets in the U.S. and Europe through Mexico.

In recent years, Guatemala has also become a transit point for the importation of synthetic drugs and precursor chemicals to produce them. Precursors for some synthetic drugs are allegedly “cooked” in crude laboratories in Guatemala, for export directly to markets in Europe.

In the case of Fentanyl for the U.S. market, the drug is reportedly imported into Guatemala from China and other destinations in Asia, where it is mixed with other drugs to increase their potency and addictive qualities. Precursors for fentanyl are also reportedly imported into Guatemala and later smuggled across the land border into Mexico for transformation into fentanyl there in laboratories in states such as Sinaloa, because, according to those interviewed, it is safer for the criminals to do so, rather than to import them directly into Mexico where authorities have greater capability to patrol the country’s coast and supervise its ports.

For more than a decade, authorities have battled the country’s major smuggling groups, known as “ transportistas,” including the Lorenzanas, Mendozas, Leones and Lopez-Ortiz families, arresting their key leaders, but in the process fragmenting them, without disabling their criminal functions. Once more isolated groups in difficult to access provinces such as San Marcos and Huehuetenango, including the “ Huistas” in the later region, have formed alliances with Mexican and other external narcotrafficking groups, to dominate routes. In March 2025 Guatemalan authorities arrested Huista leader Aler

Baldomero (alias "Chichara") and in May, extradited him to the United States. Additionally, its has put out a \$10 million reward for the Huista's second-in-command, Eugenio Dario Molina Lopez (alias "Molina").

Complicating the narco-trafficking challenge, by late 2024, the government of Mexico, to Guatemala's north, had expanded its presence in Southern Mexican states bordering Guatemala including Chapas to combat criminal groups there such as the powerful Jalisco Nuevo Generacion (CJNG) cartel. Those actions displaced both Mexican refugees, and criminals into Guatemala, including a Guatemalan Mexican group affiliated with CJNG. In a series of clashes in which local police from Chapas, Mexico, the "Pakales" pursuing narcos which had attacked them in Mexico, back into Guatemala, clashing with the Guatemalan Army. Although the first incursion occurred in January 2025, there were other incidents, with the most recent at the time of this writing, by the Sinaloa cartel into Huehuetenango, in December 2025.

With respect to gangs, Barrio-18 (B-18) dominates a number of marginal neighborhoods in the periphery of Guatemala City, with a concentration in Zone 18, from where its name originates, and the "El Gallito" neighborhood (Zone 3) among others. Its rival Mara Salvatrucha, with origins in neighboring El Salvador, is relatively smaller, but reportedly has made inroads in various parts of the city.

In September 2025, the U.S. designated B-18 a terrorist group. A month later, Guatemalan authorities followed the U.S. lead, increasing criminal penalties among members of the group and providing some additional authorities in the country to combat them.

In addition to these internationally operating violent street gangs, the criminal organization “ Cara Dura,” with origins in Guatemala City’s elite Zone 10, has come to dominate illicit activities tied to drug consumption, bars and prostitution in virtually all of the greater Guatemala City area. The June 2025 assassination of Francisco Dominguez Higuero, one of the two brothers running the group, allegedly was tied to a spike in violence in various neighborhoods of the capital, as other groups attempted to capitalize on the perceived vulnerability of Cara Dura to encroach on its territory and illicit business.

B-18 has been the principal group to dominate Guatemala’s prisons, long recognized for their corruption and overcrowding. It was members of B-18 involved in the October 2025 prison escape, and in the previously noted coordinated takeover of the *Renovacion I*, *Fraijanes II*, and the *Zone 18 Centro Preventivo* prison facilities, as well as the subsequent reprisals against police officers, principally in Villanueva, after authorities re-took those facilities.

A key factor in the prison incents has been overcrowding, in combination with longstanding systemic corruption. Guatemala’s 25 prisons hold over 25,000 persons, more than 300% of the capacity of 6,812 for which they are designed. According to those consulted for this work, the country’s prison system has been compromised by corruption at all levels, with multiple prison directors having been fired and some criminally charged in recent years. With prison leadership compromised, corruption has run rampant at lower levels, creating a system in which the prisoners arguably not only control the conditions in the interior, but also have access to relatively unrestricted communication with the outside through visits, cellphones, and even satellite phones, enabling them to plan operations and conduct extortions from the facilities, including coordinating

regarding the families of the prison guards outside the facility, allowing them to make threats against them, thus reinforcing their control inside the prisons.

*The Sastoon River Border Dispute.* In international affairs, Guatemala has a longstanding dispute with its neighbor to the East, Belize, regarding its border along the Sastoon River. The matter is currently before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) per referendums conducted by Guatemala in April 2018 to seek resolution of the dispute through that path. Although the armed forces of both countries have a cooperative relationship that has allowed them to avoid major conflict, the dispute has periodically given rise to military incidents, most recently in September 2025.

Guatemalan security officials consulted for this work expressed confidence that the dispute could continue to be managed peacefully, yet also were concerned that, despite what they saw as a deliberate posture of restraint by the Guatemalan Armed Forces, there was a minor but serious chance that an incident could escalate into a major clash before the lengthy process of adjudication by the ICJ is completed.

*Natural Disasters.* Beyond security challenges based in threats from state and non-state criminal actors, Guatemala's geographic position makes it uniquely vulnerable to natural disasters. Water temperatures and weather patterns corresponding to the nation's location in the northwest of the Caribbean basin makes it particularly vulnerable to hurricanes, tropical storms, and associated flooding. Guatemala was devastated by Hurricane Mitch, which hit the country as a Category 5 storm in 1998. Recent hurricanes also include Hurricanes Eta and Iota which hit Guatemala as a Category 4 storm in November 2020, and Hurricane Erick, which hit the country in June 2025.

As a compliment to hurricanes and tropical storms, Guatemala's location on the Pacific Rim, along tectonic fault lines in the area known as the "ring of fire" make the country vulnerable to regular earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Guatemala's Fuego volcano erupted in March 2025, obligating the evacuation of approximately 1,000 people. With respect to earthquakes, in July 2025, the country was hit by more than 150 tremors measuring up to 5.0 on the richter scale, causing damage in multiple areas. The author's visit in February 2026 corresponded with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1976 earthquake which devastated substantial parts of the country.

In the wake of such serious and frequent natural disaster risks, Guatemala's military, other state agencies, and its disaster response organization CONRED are regularly charged with emergency response missions from prevention, to evacuation, to rescue and other responses, to recovery.

## **The Guatemalan Government Response**

The Arevalo government has been widely criticized for the perceived inadequacy of its anticipation of, preparation for, and response to the previously noted security challenges, as well as its weaknesses in public administration more broadly, although it has pursued a number of important initiatives in the security domain, and against corruption. This section analyzes the government's initiatives and work in the security domain, including select details its accomplishments, and some of its deficiencies.

In macro terms, the Arevalo government has been impaired in its work against criminality, corruption and other public security challenges by its ongoing struggle against a range of

opponents, represented most visibly in Guatemala's Public Ministry, including the country's Attorney General Consuelo Porras.

The Public Ministry has not only pursued criminal investigations against President Arevalo, members of his Semilla ("Seed") party and other allies, but also has allegedly been slow in acting on potential criminal cases and other references brought by the Guatemalan Civil Police (PNC), the country's Financial Intelligence Unit (IVE), and other institutions within the executive for combatting crime. Those aligned with the Public Ministry consulted for this work, for their part, argue that many of the criminal referrals brought by the Arevalo government are not actionable, due to a lack of necessary details or other defects, reflecting poor management by those representing the executive.

At the highest level, numerous people consulted for this work perceived the government to be impaired in the leadership and coordination of its response on security matters at the strategic level. Guatemala's National Security Council is established by the Constitution, bringing together the Ministries of Defense, Interior, Foreign Relations, and others. It is coordinated by a Technical Secretary, currently retired General Ismael Cifuentes Bustamante.

Although the Council is required to meet monthly by law, under the current government, multiple senior persons consulted for this work argue that such meetings are treated by the ministers and others involved as more of an obligation. They thus argue that there is thus not adequate preparation to use such meetings as an opportunity to elevate critical issues in a manner that synergies can be recognized, so that the President can decide and act on them, effectively implementing a coordinated response across agencies.

Reinforcing the problem, because each Ministry regards itself as relatively autonomous and its budget is not at risk through such meetings, the power of the Technical Secretary to coordinate on behalf of the President, is greatly reduced.

An additional impediment to the effectiveness of the work of the Council, according to others interviewed, is the absence of formal or de facto representation of key business and social leaders there. This, several of those interviewed argue, reinforces the isolation of the President from society and his lack of acceptance of negative feedback as he navigates current security challenges.

Reinforcing problems of Guatemala's National Security Council its intelligence system is gravely fragmented. There is a separate Military Intelligence Directorate (DIM), Police intelligence Directorate (DIP), and a Civilian Intelligence Organization (DIGICI). Due to institutional processes and concerns over corruption in counterpart agencies, none of these regularly share important information with each other in a timely fashion.

By law, there is a Strategic State Intelligence Organization with a cabinet-level Intelligence Secretary, currently Otto Argueta after the July 2025 resignation of its previous head, Christian Sandoval. In principle, the Secretary is the integrator for intelligence from the other organizations. According to the overwhelming consensus of those consulted for this work, however, the organization does not substantially receive intelligence from those other organizations, possibly because of a lack of leadership in asking or obliging the regular sharing of that intelligence. Rather, with a small staff and limited resources, the organization reportedly obtains its own high-level intelligence, mostly from public sources.

Intelligence in Guatemala is also compartmentalized at the operational level, with several persons interviewed for this work lamenting that the country lacks a standing intelligence fusion center to facilitate the exchange of information between both different intelligence organizations and ministries.

With respect to official policies guiding government coordination, in November 2024, the Arevalo Administration published its quadrennial national security plan. Each year, per established processes, it also publishes the annual “ National Agenda of Risks and Threats” (ANRA). Both arguably reflect the President’s career academic focus on citizen security and development issues, rather than traditional security matters or the particular challenges of narcotrafficking groups and gang violence immediately challenging the country.

*State of Emergency.* In response to the killing of police, as noted previously, on January 19, 2026, the Arevalo government declared a State of Emergency (SOE). The SOE was nationwide although, as noted previously, the incidents that prompted it had been almost entirely concentrated in a limited number of marginal districts in the Capitol, mostly in the Villanueva neighborhood. The action permits the expanded use of the military in a broadened set of roles, including in the prisons and in certain law enforcement operations, as well as facilitating streamlined acquisitions in support of the response without the usual bureaucratic processes, although an accounting of such purchases within 30 days of the action would have been required.

Although the prior Administration of Alejandro Giammetti had implemented 10 states of emergency, each in more geographically limited parts of the country, the fact that this was the Arevalo government’s first SOE, according to those consulted, reflects the left-oriented academic President’s more

cautious stance toward the use of the military in internal matters in general. Indeed, as of the present writing, the SOE was not expected to be extended, or if extended, only for a brief time.

Under the SOE, although Guatemalan law, in principle, allows the military to expand their authority in a range of ways, including the deployment of soldiers and the imposition of curfews, its actual application has been very limited. As of the time of this writing, it has concentrated on military deployment in support of the police in a relatively limited number of neighborhoods, temporary interventions by the military in four of the country's 25 prisons, and special Armed Forces operations in select other parts of the country, including San Marcos and Peten, that arguable could have been done without the SOE. There have arguably been almost no deployment of the military in the street in most parts of the Capital, and no major additional procurements, although in principle, the SOE could have been used to facilitate the accelerated construction of new prisons, the purchase of vehicles, or a range of other activities.

According to those consulted for this work, the State of Emergency is not expected to be renewed when it expires in February 2026, or if it is renewed, it is only expected to be renewed once.

As a compliment to the State of Emergency, also in January 2026, the Arevalo government-initiated Operation Sentinel, increasing military support to police in public security missions in select parts of the country, beginning in Escuintla, with subsequent operations planned in Peten, Huehuetenango and Esquipulas. This was something long permitted in the country and practiced regularly during prior Administrations, albeit with special restrictions regarding what the government could do.

*Border Response.* In response to the previously note incidents on the northern border, the Arevalo government launched the operation “ Ring of Fire.” The later included the deployment of Guatemalan special forces (“Kabiles”) to the norther border, as well as the deployment of airborne forces there by parachute, the first time such an operation had been done since the 1990s, when a similar airborne deployment was conducted to the same region.

The Guatemalan government also continues to coordinate with its Mexican counterparts on border security, including with both the Mexican Nay and Mexican Army, including simultaneous coordinated patrols along the border itself. The incents have reportedly led to the reactivation of a binational coordination mechanism, the High-Level Guatemala-Mexico Security Group (GANSEG).

*Ministry of Defense.* In institutional terms, since coming to office, the Arevalo government has modestly increased the country’s relatively low military budget, and by contrast to other Administrations, has thus far not diverted the increased spending for other uses.

Within the organization, the current Minister of Defense, General Henry Saenz Ramos, is well respected and with almost three years in service as Minister, has provided a useful level of continuity and experience. Some consulted for this work note that he is past the traditional retirement age of 33 years for those in his military class (“Promotion”), and that he has violated the tradition within Guatemalan governments that the Defense Minister changes every year so that others can have their “turn.” Still, those consulted for this work emphasized that his continuity is not breaking any legal requirements, while

Saenz' continuity and experience is bringing benefits to a government facing serious challenges, as well as somewhat impaired in its public administration.

In terms of capabilities to address the security challenges mentioned in previous sections, the Guatemalan military continues to struggle with a legacy of many years of underfunding and corruption. The Ministry and associated defense institutions loosely use an adapted form of a planning system called SIPLAGDE, first introduced approximately a decade ago by US advisors, and under consideration for adoption by other Guatemalan Ministries.

The Guatemalan Navy and Air Force have reportedly done a particularly good job in implementing a rational system of acquisition planning and purchases. The much larger Guatemalan Army has also reportedly made significant progress in rational planning and procurement through SIPLAGDE, but still struggles with a decentralized system involving multiple procurement centers. It is also periodically prejudiced by opportunistic, uncoordinated purchases of equipment from countries and defense vendors having special access to senior Guatemalan military officials, creating institutional compatibility, supportability, and training challenges.

Guatemala's premier special forces focused on counternarcotics operations and groups include the Naval Special Forces (FEN), the Special Interaction and Rescue Battalion (BEIR), and the Air Defense Unit (UDA), incorporating police special forces.

In early 2025, following a visit to Guatemala by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, the Arevalo government committed to form a new organization focused on organized crime and border control, the Strategic Command Against Transnational

Threats (CECAT). The entity will reportedly command forces maintained by and loaned from the FEN, BEIR, and UDA. The leadership of the entity was formally assigned in January 2026, although according to senior person consulted for this work, details of specific organizational and support relationships, command and control, joint training and other issues, are still being worked out. Similarly, no concrete plans or budget allocations for new equipment or capabilities for the unit could be identified by those consulted for the present investigation. Indeed, several of those consulted expressed doubts whether CECAT is unit that will bring new capabilities, rather than a symbolic gesture to demonstrate collaboration with Washington on issues of drug and migrant flows important to the current US government.

To exercise control of its waters in the Pacific Ocean, with an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that extends 200 miles from Guatemala's coast, the country relies on a modest fleet of Boston Whaler Ocean going boats, acquired over the past decade with assistance from the United States. With these and other vessels, the FEN, as the special forces of the Guatemalan Navy, conducts intercepts and other operations in the often-rough waters in the Pacific. Prior to acquiring the Boston Whalers, the FEN had to use even smaller, shorter range speedboats, which had to operate in often perilous conditions at the limit of their range, far from the coast.

The endurance and capabilities of the Boston Whalers, and the other vessels that the FEN continues to use, is supplemented by a single, Corvette-sized Naval Coastal Patrol Vessel (NCPV), the Huanapu, which takes a position some distance offshore during sustained operations, and acts as a "mothership" at which the smaller vessels can drop off prisoners, refuel, and obtain other logistics support. Prior to having the NCPV, donated by the United States in 2024, the Guatemalan Navy

operated a different “mothership,” the Quetzal, which acquired from the Colombian Naval Shipbuilder COTECMAR, and which has been repurposed for humanitarian and disaster response operations in the calmer waters of the Caribbean.

Currently, the Guatemalan Navy is working with the U.S. to acquire a second “mothership-style boat,” a 110-foot former U.S. Coast Guard Cutter.

The Boston Whalers, and other vessels are principally projected from Guatemala’s main commercial and military port on the Pacific, Quetzal, near the country’s southern border with El Salvador. Because of the quantity of narcoboats that seek to land near Guatemala’s northern Pacific coastal frontier with Mexico, among other illicit activities that occur regularly in that area, Guatemala has established a small, but strategic military dock there, at Ocos.

With respect to Quetzal, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is currently in the process of expanding the port’s capabilities for both commercial and other uses.

To control the rivers on both the Atlantic and Pacific sides of Guatemala, including those which constitute the southern portion of Guatemala’s border with Mexico, the Guatemalan Navy operates flat-bottomed Metal Shark and Zodiac boats which the U.S. also helped them to obtain. Control of inland rivers in Guatemala’s interior, which are often not navigable in certain parts because of insufficient depth or coverage by foliage, is an ongoing challenge.

To exercise control of the sparsely populated, remote Peten region, subject to incursions by narco aircraft, the Guatemalan Armed Forces maintains an aging system of Indra radars purchased more than a decade ago from the Spanish.

According to those consulted for this work, the radars are considered subpar for the military purposes for which they are being used. Much of their coverage is passive, rendering them ineffective in some circumstances if the targets turn off their transponders. The radars also experience periodic “outages,” believed tied to corruption and collusion with those conducting the narco flights.

Even when Guatemala’s Indra radars detect a suspicious air track, its military does not have any interceptor aircraft to directly respond. Prior attempts to purchase Super Tucano interceptors from Brazil, and Pampa IIIa jet interceptors from Argentina for this purpose were both abandoned. The Guatemalan aircraft does have Bell 412 helicopters, based far from the Peten in Guatemala City, and generally considered too slow and distant for an effective response to narco transits in the Peten.

Although the Armed Forces did not formally register landings in the Peten by narco aircraft in 2025, they did reportedly continue their work in disabling identified narco landing strips, reportedly destroying seven during the year. According to those consulted however, despite such efforts to disable a limited number of landing strips, the topography of Peten allows small aircraft to takeoff or land in an extremely large number of locations throughout the area.

Beyond capabilities focused on detection and interdiction of air flights, a key land-based military resource for control of the Peten, has been its jungle brigade. According to those consulted for this work, however, the unit continues have serious mobility and communications limitations, including a lack of all-terrain vehicles such as those available to comparable units in wealthier countries. The Brigade also reportedly lacks endogenous watercraft to navigate the

region's shallow rivers, helicopters, or secure communications. These shortcomings arguably complicate the ingress of forces, their support, and their extraction if they encounter problems. Those consulted for this work spoke of troops marching 12 hours through the jungle to operational objectives or using unsecure cellphones with social media apps such as WhatsApp and Signal to conduct sensitive tactical communications.

As a compliment to the jungle brigade in Peten, the Guatemalan Army also has a Mountain Brigade for the complex, hilly terrain of San Marcos and Huehuetenango. As with the Jungle Brigade, however, the equipment of the Mountain Brigade is limited in comparison to that available to similar brigades in wealthier countries, reducing its mobility and effectiveness in controlling the areas for which it is responsible.

With respect to air assets, the Guatemalan military has a range of capabilities, mostly focused on transportation. This includes four Cessna-208s, two relatively new DeHavilland Twin Otter fixed wing transports, one operational Beech King Air aircraft, several smaller Pilatus fixed wing aircraft, and three older BT-67 fixed wing transports which are reportedly inoperative.

With respect to helicopters, as previously noted, the Guatemalan military has four mid-sized Bell-412EPX helicopters, and one long-range drone, the "Vigilante." They have some smaller commercial drones as well, used for tactical situational awareness missions.

*Ministry of the Interior.* Guatemala's Interior Ministry has administrative control over both the national civic police (PNC) and the prison system. In recent years, successive Guatemalan Administrations have expanded the PNC, now numbering over 42,000, the largest force in Central America. Still, the PNC reportedly suffers from endemic corruption which impairs its

functioning, stemming from its constant contact with criminal elements in the population. It also is impaired by a range of administrative inefficiencies and a lack of resources for equipment which would empower its personnel. One analysis by a senior official consulted for this work estimated that because of a top-heavy structure, bureaucratic issues and a lack of accountability, at any given time, less than 3,000 of Guatemala's 40,000 PNC personnel might be on the streets.

*Prison Response.* In recognition of the endemic problem of prison overcrowding, corruption and poor control which had allowed the criminals to control, plan and conduct operations from Guatemala's prisons, the Arevalo government announced the construction of new maximum security prison. The facility is to be designed, and its construction managed by the military, although as of the time of this writing, the budget for the facility had not yet been allocated. Although a plan for addressing deficiencies in the prison system was presented following the escape of Barrio-18 members in October 2025, those consulted for this work were also not aware of any significant efforts to reform the administration of the system itself, change the training of penitentiary system personnel, improve control of communications and materials allowed into the prison, or address other problems beyond increasing the number of prison beds contributing to the overcrowding dimension of the problem.

*Financial Intelligence.* For identifying and combatting money laundering, Guatemala's Special Verification Intendency (IVE) is considered a relatively professional and capable institution. Its work in receiving and processing reports from the financial institutions that it supervises, and reporting suspicious transactions to the Public Ministry is considered credible by

those consulted for this work. Indeed, in 2025, it passed evidence of 2,500 possible cases of money laundering and other irregularities to the Public Ministry.

Despite the relatively high level of regard for the work of the IVE, Guatemala is considered a relatively permissive place to launder money, with the reporting requirements of banking laws, like others, selectively overlooked. Part of the problem is reportedly that the IVE depends on the Public Ministry to act on the suspicious transactions that it reports, and the political feud between the Administration and Public Ministry has reportedly complicated that collaboration.

Although there is a new money-laundering law that has been introduced by the Arevalo government, it is reportedly currently stuck in preliminary processes in the Guatemalan Congress.

*Disaster Response.* As noted in the previous section, Guatemala's disaster response agency CONRED is a critical part of the country's integrated response to the many natural disasters affecting the country, from hurricanes, tropical storms and flooding to volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. CONRED is charged with leading Guatemala's "whole-of-government" effort in prevention and preparation, evacuation, rescue, response, and recovery, among other activities.

Like the IVE, CONRED is considered a serious and respected organization, with presence across the nation at the local, Departmental, and national level. Nonetheless, persons consulted for this work identified a number of impediments to the effectiveness with which it performs its mission. It's budget and in-house capabilities are relatively modest for the broad range of activities it is responsible for performing. It also arguably lacks legal authorities in some areas for carrying out

its missions. For example, it has the duty to determine structures that are at risk of collapse in a future earthquake, putting its occupants lives at risk, yet it lacks authority to oblige those occupants to leave such an unsafe structure.

Those consulted for this work suggested that CONRED currently suffers from an administratively heavy structure and orientation that is more academic than operational. Key leadership positions, according to some, are occupied by persons who lack the operational and strategic experience to effectively coordinate across multiple ministries and levels of government under the conditions of uncertainty and time pressure of a major crisis.

The filling of many CONRED positions through one-year work contracts, rather than permanent staff, reportedly further undercuts institutional memory and coordination. During prior years, many of the positions were filled by former military officers, bringing their knowledge in coordinating across a large organization in a crisis to the organization.

CONRED currently, owing in part to the political orientation of the current government, has hired more people with academic or social work, rather than military or logistical experience.

In practice, while the Guatemalan military still provides the logistics backstop to CONRED in responding to crisis, the current posture is concerning in light of the natural disasters Guatemala regularly faces, according to multiple persons consulted for this work.

## **Conclusion**

The events of January 2026 highlighted the serious and mutually reinforcing security challenges faced by Guatemala, involving narcotrafficking, gangs, its prison system, tensions

with neighbors, and natural disasters.

The Arevalo government has been a cooperative partner with the current U.S. Administration, as well as its predecessor, in security affairs from drugs and migration, and in other areas. Guatemala's Armed Forces and other institutions are doing an admirable job with limited resources and deep-rooted impediments to respond to these challenges, while simultaneously reforming themselves and expanding their capabilities.

Guatemala's geographic proximity and economic integration with the U.S. means that the health of the country in security affairs directly affects U.S. security and economic well-being. It thus continues to be strongly in the interest of the United States to work in close partnership with the country during the current, as well as future Administrations, whatever their political or social orientation may be, to ensure that it succeeds in addressing those challenges and contributing to the stability, good governance and prosperity of the hemisphere that both nations share.

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