Beat: News

President of El Salvador Waging War on Gangs

Imposing Legislation on Messages

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USPA NEWS - Waging a campaign against gangs responsible for El Salvador having one of the world's highest murder rates, Congress in the Central American republic passed a bill on Tuesday criminalizing the publication of gang messages, including by news outlets.

Last month, President Nayib Bukele invoked emergency powers to suspend some constitutional rights to crackdown on gangs engaged in drug trafficking and extortion, and ramped up jail sentences for members of criminal organizations. "When the Germans wanted to eradicate Nazism, they outlawed Nazi symbols. No one said anything," Bukele wrote on Twitter after Congress pass the bill on Tuesday. "That's what we'll do with the gangs."

The bill, which will become law once Bukele signs it, would set prison sentences of up to 15 years for anyone found guilty of relaying gang messages. The new legislation also targets anyone who leaves gang graffiti "or any form of visual expression" related to Mara Salvatrucha, its rival Barrio 18 or other smaller groups. The bill did not detail the type of messages that will be covered. But journalists in El Salvador often source their stories to photographs and videos that show graphic violence, including messages left by alleged gang members, or even interviews, graffiti and audios shared via social media platforms.

El Salvador registered 87 murders in three days last month allegedly committed by gang members. One Saturday alone, the country registered 62 murders, the highest number in a century, security and human rights experts said. In 2017, the last year covered by a United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime report on homicides, showed El Salvador had the highest murder rate in the world, with nearly 62 murders per 100,000 people. Salvadoran authorities have arrested 6,312 alleged gang members in the past 10 days. But human rights organizations have warned of police abuse and arbitrary detention of suspects without access to legal counsel.

Opposition parties and crime reporters in the nation spoke out against the move. "There's a clear violation of the freedom of the press and liberty of information. This isn't about the outlets, it's about a constitutional right and international laws that our country follows," said Rene Portillo, an opposition lawmaker.

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