



Interface of Churches and Organised Crime in Latin America

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Interface of Churches and Organised Crime in Latin America

Structural violence – in its diverse forms – has become one of the main concerns for Latin American citizens and their governments. Its effects are clearly visible in a number of Latin American countries (mainly Mexico, the Northern Triangle of Central America and Colombia), corrupting government institutions and distorting the overall functioning of society by creating a culture of fear and impunity. In other countries (Costa Rica, Panama, Andes, Southern Cone), organized crime is less visible but still present.

“Organised crime” is an umbrella term that includes a broad range of illegal and criminal activities and organisations. In Latin America, organised crime groups – ranging from youth gangs to paramilitary organisations – operate in transnational networks, consisting of professionally organized chains of violence and terror. These organisations are generally not ideological¹ but driven by drug trafficking and to a lesser extent dedicated to other forms of criminal activity such as arms trafficking, human trafficking, extortions, hired killings, kidnappings etc.

Faced with the growing influence of organised crime in society, churches should not remain silent. The Gospel teaches the pursuit of public justice and the transformation of society through the love of Christ as leading principles for the social involvement of Jesus’ disciples. This world view radically contradicts the logics and dynamics of organised crime.

Yet, the actual response and attitude of church leaders and their members to organised crime has scarcely been investigated. At this moment there are no comprehensive studies on the relationship between organised crime in Latin America and the churches. It is not clear to what extent the churches actually constitute a threat to organised crime.

The objective of this report is to contribute to the understanding of **the influence of (the constellation of) organised crime groups on the functioning of the churches**. Specifically, this report will seek to give answers to the following questions:

1. In which countries in Latin America is organised crime remarkably present? Specify also specific regions within the countries.
2. What is known in literature about tensions or conflicts between churches (leaders, members) and organised crime groups?
3. Are pastors or church members afraid to address issues related to practices of organised crime groups and their allies in society or in public?
4. Are pastors or church members afraid to address issues related to practices of organised crime groups and their allies within their churches?

¹ It is broadly accepted that the Colombian paramilitary organisation FARC has abandoned its ideological Marxist and Communist roots and has evolved into a criminal organisation driven by drug trafficking.

In order to respond to these questions, this report will firstly give a general description of the context of organised crime in Latin America **(I., research question 1)**. Subsequently, an analysis will be made of the relationship between churches and their members, and organised crime groups **(II., research questions 3-4)**, followed by a descriptive survey of the available literature on the topic **(III., research question 2)**. Finally, a number of conclusions will be formulated **(IV.)**.

Being a desk research, this report is only an initial effort to broach the complex issue of the relationship between churches and organised crime. Its main sources are literature research, complemented by interviews. The interviews turned out to be the most valuable source of information, since literature on the topic is scarce. There are virtually no analytical reports on the impact of organised crime on churches. The only information that can be found are compilations of testimonies, but no in depth studies of the social, political and cultural dynamics of persecution in areas affected by organised crime.

I. Description of the scope of organised crime in Latin America

Many reports and research on organised crime in Latin America have been published by international organisations. This chapter will serve as an overview of the current situation of organised crime in Latin America and of the challenges faced by civil society as it attempts to deal with this growing problem.

According to a recent Congressional Research Service report, the top security concerns affecting the region are: criminal activity, underlying societal conditions, and structural weaknesses in governance.² The World Bank's recently released World Development report indicates that the biggest obstacle to achieving the security, and thus development, goals is lack of institutional capacity and confidence.³

With increasing levels of corruption and lack of confidence in the State and its institutions, civil society is the logical choice to fill the void, continue the fight against organised crime and solidify public security. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime considers civil society's role in combating organised crime crucial.⁴ Although their resources may be limited in comparison to the State, this does not preclude them from having a larger, more profound and sustainable impact. Since civil society is still on the rise to prominence and power in the region, their role is still ill-defined and research on the topic is scarce at best.

According to InsightCrime.org, the activities most favoured by the various criminal groups, gangs and cartels are: trafficking in narcotics, arms, people, and kidnapping.⁵ These activities

² <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41731.pdf>

³ <http://wdr2011.worldbank.org/fulltext>

⁴ <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2010/October/civil-society-role-crucial-in-combating-transnational-organized-crime-says-unodc-head.html>

⁵ "Criminal Activities." <http://insightcrime.org/criminal-activities> (accessed July 21, 2011).

are extremely lucrative and serve to fill the coffers of these organisations to continue to expand these activities and engage in facilitative actions such as bribes. We will briefly describe each to set the stage **(1.)**, followed by a review of the countries (and specific regions within these countries) in Latin America where organised crime is more present **(2.)**.

I.1 Main activities of organised crime

Drug trafficking

“Drug trafficking remains the single most important activity of organised criminal groups in the Americas. This includes trafficking of marijuana, cocaine, heroin, methamphetamines and other synthetic drugs. Illegal drugs are produced, processed, stored and shipped from the region.”⁶

The region has especially become a hotbed for trafficking due to its rugged terrain in some areas, lack of security capacity and the shutting down of many of the routes to the number one demander of narcotic products, the United States. In addition, it has been uncovered that the organisations are paying their “transporters” less often with cash and more often with other substances, which creates more users, addiction and raises demand. Substances that are commonly trafficked include: cocaine, heroin, methamphetamines and marijuana.

The United States, a major player in regional drug trafficking, acknowledged the problem and declared its intent to quash this practice with the “War on Drugs” initiative begun in 1971 under Richard Nixon. These efforts have met with little success. The region is involved in all aspects of the drug supply chain, from cultivation to transit to consumption.

According to a Congressional Research Service report, *“South America is the sole producer of cocaine for the global market; Mexico and Colombia are the primary sources of opiates in the United States; Mexico and the Caribbean are major foreign sources of cannabis (marijuana) consumed in the United States; and Mexico is the primary source of foreign methamphetamine in the United States.”*⁷

Demand for products is largely what fuels the entire practice. Although there have been some successes in either stifling the demand, eliminating routes and eliminating methods, the perpetrators continue to innovate and evolve their methods. An illustration of the transit routes for the region is shown below.

⁶ “Drug Trafficking.” <http://insightcrime.org/criminal-activities/item/112-drug-trafficking> (accessed July 21, 2011).

⁷ <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41215.pdf>

Graphic 1. Transit routes of drug trafficking in Latin America



Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, World Drug Report, 2010⁸.

Many of the drug trafficking organisations command vast resources of arms and personnel, which allow them to sustain and expand their operations and to present legitimate and prominent threats to public security. These manifest as cartels or drug families. Countries with the most powerful organisations are Mexico and Colombia.

Arms trafficking

The arms trafficking industry criss-crosses the Americas, providing weapons for insurgencies and organised criminals from Buenos Aires (Argentina) to Ciudad Juárez (Mexico). It leaves close to 100,000 dead per year in Latin America and the Caribbean and is a leading cause of instability throughout the region.⁹

According to the North American Congress on Latin America, between 45 and 80 million small arms and light weapons are circulating throughout the Latin American region.¹⁰ Many of these are, and have been, imported from first world countries such as the United States, Russia and European nations. A large infusion of arms took place during the proxy conflicts of the Cold

⁸ National Drug Intelligence Center, 2010 National Drug Threat Assessment, February 2010; Barack Obama, Presidential Determination No. 2009-30, "Memorandum to the Secretary of State: Major Drug Transit or Major Illicit Drug Producing Countries for Fiscal Year 2011," September 16, 2010.

⁹ "Arms Trafficking." <http://insightcrime.org/criminal-activities/arms-trafficking/item/507-arms-trafficking> (accessed July 21, 2011).

¹⁰ http://www.cdi.org/pdfs/Small_Arms_Latin_America.pdf

War, though imports continue to rise as the arms trade continues to be lucrative. In addition, there is an emerging regional arms production industry, with Brazil and Mexico leading. This combined with rampant corruption and the geographical factors in the region, makes for a hotbed of illicit arms trafficking and armed violence.

Prominence of arms trading and arms related crime has increased since the end of the Cold War and the end of many of the civil conflicts in the region, though some of these conflicts have reignited or escalated due to arms availability. Examples of this are El Salvador, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico and Guatemala.

Human trafficking

The United Nations estimates that human trafficking through the Americas represents a \$7 billion per year business for organised criminal groups. They draw this money from the nearly three million people, mostly immigrants from the region moving north to the United States, who relocate every year paying between \$2,000 and \$10,000 per trip.¹¹

Human trafficking is defined by United States law as, “*sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or ... the recruitment, harbouring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labour or services through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.*”¹² According to a Congressional Research Service report, “Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean serve as source, transit, and destination countries for trafficking victims.”¹³

The primary victims in the region are usually women and children. Children may be trafficked for sexual exploitation, forced labour or as soldiers in rebel and terrorist groups. Countries where this is especially prominent are El Salvador, Colombia, Guatemala, Bolivia and Brazil. Women are primarily trafficked for purposes of sexual exploitation rather than labour or soldiering. Major players in this practice are Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. Human trafficking continues to rise in prominence, as it is an extremely lucrative method of funding other criminal initiatives and activities.

Kidnapping

Throughout the region, different types of organised criminal gangs practice kidnapping. Some groups specialise in the activity. From guerrilla groups and paramilitaries to street gangs and

¹¹ “Human Trafficking.” <http://insightcrime.org/criminal-activities/human-trafficking> (accessed July 21, 2011)

¹² *Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA)* (P.L. 106-386).

¹³ <http://www.humantrafficking.org/uploads/publications/RL33200.pdf>

major drug trafficking groups, it has become a common “side-job”, a way to ensure regular extortion payments or gain more revenue through ransoms.¹⁴

Kidnapping is an almost universal crime in the region as it can affect anyone from CEO to street sweeper who is in the wrong place at the wrong time. Even more sophisticated methods have replaced the ambushes that plagued Columbia during the Escobar cartel days. This crime is also one of the most under-reported in the region, making an effective analysis of the problem quite difficult.

Kidnapping in Latin America remains a prominent and serious problem in many of its countries. The popularity of this crime among criminals was first recognized in Colombia and was used in conjunction with operations of drug lords, and other extortion and terrorist groups. With the widespread use among professional drug and crime families, the practice of kidnapping began to spread to ordinary street criminals in the hopes of obtaining the same large rewards, at a relatively low cost. While the crime has been on the decrease in Colombia, other countries such as Venezuela, Brazil and Mexico have recently experienced a sizeable increase in cases. Argentinian reports of kidnappings have remained relatively stable, primarily in and around Buenos Aires. Peru has also struggled to eliminate this crime.

Wealthy individuals are targeted for abduction and quick release upon payment. In one scenario, a victim may be taken from his or her home in an affluent neighbourhood and kept for months until a large ransom can be paid for the victim’s release. In some cases, body parts, especially ears, may be mailed to the abductees’ family to terrorise those to make payment. Although safe release is the bargain made to those who pay ransom, only about 65 per cent are actually released unharmed. Some victims are even murdered, regardless of the ransom.

I.2 Presence of organised crime in Latin America

This brief summary of types of crime is neither complete nor comprehensive. Truly, complete dissertations have been written on aspects of the crimes mentioned above. These are merely being stated to give a glimpse of the current situation in the Latin American region and set the stage for the discussion of the Interface of churches and organised crime. Without repeating the information that is available in the reports of international organisations, this section will provide a brief overview of the main countries (and specific regions within these countries) in Latin America where organised crime is more present.

Colombia

The Colombian context is extremely complicated because of the coexistence of a large number of criminal organisations with conflicting interests. Besides the drug cartels, there are two

¹⁴ “Kidnapping.” <http://insightcrime.org/criminal-activities/item/107-kidnapping> (accessed July 21, 2011)

competing leftist guerrillas: the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) and the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional). Historically created to fight the guerrillas, paramilitary organisations have evolved into criminal organisations themselves. Nowadays, new types of organisations have appeared, derived from these paramilitaries: the so-called “criminal gangs” or “bandas criminales” (BACRIM). All of these organisations (guerrillas, paramilitaries and “bacrim”) all thrive on the same fuel: drug trafficking.

Throughout the country, the influence and the impact of organised crime are visible. Nevertheless, some regions within the country particularly contribute to the development of organised delinquent activities.

- **Llanos Orientales:** In this region made out of six Departments (Arauca, Casanare, Meta, Guaviare, Guainia y Vichada), violence has coexisted for more than 50 years. Most of the guerrillas have developed in this region, most importantly because of the presence of extensive coca cultures and cocaine laboratories. The rural nature of the region with its immense plains and forests is very favourable for guerrillas and drug traffickers and there has never been effective state control. The population has suffered under the presence of these criminal organisations. Because the churches decided not to collaborate with criminal activities, they have suffered extensively from violence, assassination of pastors, displacements of Christians and churches have been closed by force.
- **Antioquia:** The birthplace of the development of drug trade, although not necessarily of its production. The department is home to guerrilla groups, paramilitaries and other criminal organisations. During the 1990s many pastors and believers were killed in this region or displaced to other regions.
- **Sur Occidente:** Two big departments, the Cauca and Valle del Cauca areas, are strategically located close to the Pacific Ocean. The area has become an important transit zone for drug cartels because this vast department is composed of indigenous reserves controlled by guerrillas. In this area those who have suffered most are the indigenous Christian churches. The Valle Department is also strategic because of its ports connecting to the Atlantic Ocean. The area is also home to many drug lords.
- **Costa Norte:** The region that connects with the Atlantic Ocean has been the permanent stage for criminal organisations for a long time. Because of its vastness and its connection with the Atlantic Ocean, this region is propitious for the mobility of criminals and drug trafficking. In this region, the Church has also suffered greatly from the guerrilla groups, paramilitaries and drug cartels.
- **Norte de Santander:** Because of its geographical position, this Department connects guerrillas and drug cartels with neighbouring Venezuela, making this an ideal platform for drug trade.

Mexico

Mexico is a country that is currently undergoing an intense scourge by organised crime. To a certain extent, Mexico is now living through what Colombia underwent during the very cruel 1990s. In recent years, the most important basis of narcotic crime and its connection with drug trafficking has moved from Colombia to Central America and Mexico. Although production is still concentrated in Colombia and in the Andes Region (Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia), other activities of the drug trafficking train have relocated to the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America (Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala) and the Caribbean-Atlantic corridor.

Mexico has also become the major source of heroin, destined for the North American market. The country is geographically suitable for opium cultivation and refining. Another “asset” of Mexico is its 2,000 mile border with the United States. Despite the immense efforts, smuggling of heroin through the border is extremely difficult to control.

The regions that are most affected by organised crime in Mexico are the following:

- **Zona Norte:** The existence of strong drugs cartels has generated chaos and extreme violence in this region close to the United States, a commercial ally of drug trafficking.
- **Zona Sur:** Entry zone of many narcotic crime related products.
- **Guatemalan border:** The border between Mexico and Guatemala is also known to be one of the most dangerous areas of Latin America.

The Northern Triangle of Central America

Besides the drugs mafia, the Northern Triangle of Central America is also the scene of extremely violent youth gangs, called *maras*. These professional gangs, in which 88 per cent of the approximately 73,000 youths participate (Delgado, 2005¹⁵) focus on delinquent activities and are present essentially in the north of Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras).

Among these gangs the *Mara 18*, composed mainly of Mexican immigrants, and the *Mara Salvatrucha*, mainly consisting of immigrants, principally Salvadorian, should be mentioned. Both gangs originated in Los Angeles (California) at the end of the 1980s, which in turn gives them a transnational character. Their activities are being carried out simultaneously in several countries.

The geographical basis of youth gangs is Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras), although they are expanding to Mexico in the North and to southern countries of Central America. Youth gangs also maintain links with gangs in Los Angeles.

¹⁵ Delgado, J. 2005 “La criminalización de la juventud centroamericana: el predominio de las políticas públicas represivas”. *Ponencia presentada en Cartagena de Indias, Colombia.

Although the origin of this phenomenon is subject to debate, it is often linked to the group of Latin Americans that migrated to the United States during the 1980s. The most widespread view is that they emigrated from their countries of origin as children, fleeing with their families from war and poverty, to arrive in cities like Los Angeles or New York where they could not integrate into society because of very difficult living conditions. These excluded youths often encountered other emigrants and the violent activities of already existing gangs. They then started to organise themselves in gangs as well, at first for defence to defend themselves and to function as a peer group (alternative socialisation). Later on these groups transformed into a way of life because of the economic possibilities the delinquent activities offered for survival.

With the increasing harshness of the United States migration legislation in 1996, a lot of these youths were deported back to their countries. They took with them their gang culture, which helped them to go back to a “home” that was unknown and with very scarce opportunities, combined with apathy and distrust from their own compatriots, worried about the constant arrival of deported criminals from the United States. Thanks to maintained links with their countries of origin and the United States, as well as the constant return of deported youngsters to the North American territory, these organisations acquired a transnational character that allowed them to concentrate on new businesses, like drugs dealing and the illegal transportation of undocumented immigrants.

Some of the factors that explain the origin of these gangs are poverty, the lack of social cohesion, racism in several societies and the easy access to arms (in societies marked by past civil war and the social acceptance of violence). All of these factors are present in different ways in the countries of Central America, making the region a fertile territory for the recruitment of *mareros*.

Table 1. Estimation of the number of gangs in Central America

Country	Number of gangs	Total members	Average number of members by gang
Panama	94	1,385	15
Nicaragua	268	4,500	17
Guatemala	434	14,000	32
Honduras	112	36,000	321
Costa Rica	6	2,660	443
El Salvador	4	10,500	2,625
Total	918	69,145	3,453

Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime “Crime and Development in Central America”, 2007, p. 60

The studies indicate that in the region close to 70,000 youths are members of gangs, whereas the newspapers uphold that the total number of *mareros* in Guatemala, Honduras and El

Salvador ranges from 200,000 to 500,000¹⁶. At the same time, it is also true that the *maras* and the gangs are an issue that has been exaggerated, especially in the press.

Moreover, organised crime in Central America is not exclusively related to the activity of these youth gangs, or *maras*. Drug related crime is also extremely present in Central America. Geographically, Central America can be seen as a “hallway” (a transition region) between Colombia and Mexico. For this reason, the Central American countries are in fact a playing field for drug traffickers and experience the same trends regarding drug trafficking as Colombia and Mexico.

The countries south of the Mexican border (Guatemala and Honduras) suffer particularly heavily from structural violence, alongside extreme levels of corruption and weak state presence. “*The northern triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) is probably the most affected region in terms of violence, weakening of the public institutions and infiltration of organized crime in economy, society and the political system*”, says Dirk Kruijt, a scholar specialised in Central American society and politics¹⁷. These countries face strong threats to their internal security and stability.

The Andes

Intensified Colombian law enforcement measures have had significant impact on trafficking operations. Many traffickers sought refuge in other South American countries and in Mexico. In some cases laboratories were relocated, inducing a geographic dispersal of the drug trafficking chain, mainly to Bolivia and Peru.

For this and other reasons, organised crime is not absent from countries such as Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Brazil and Venezuela. In the Andes, criminal organisations have been present for decades, but violence related to organised crime has never reached the levels of present day Mexico or 1990s Colombia. Nevertheless, Peru faces growing violence and levels of insecurity are increasing in Bolivia. As Kruijt (2011) analyses, “*the embryonic structure for the establishment of competitive drug mafias and territorial control over smuggling routes is already present.*”

In most of the Andean countries, coca cultivation is a centuries-old tradition, which makes it socially and politically very difficult for governments to restrain cocaine production. In Bolivia, the social movements related to the *cocaleros* (coca growers union) are in fact the social base of the current government party, the MAS (Movimiento Al Socialismo), which rose to power in 2006. After the MAS gained control of government, the United States sponsored eradication programmes of coca and cocaine production were stopped.

¹⁶ La Nación, 13/01/2005, p. 19A.

¹⁷ Dirk Kruijt, *Organised Crime, Drugs and the Political System in Latin America*, report commissioned by the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, 2011.

Peru and Bolivia are the second and third largest producers of cocaine, after Colombia. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates 30,900 ha are dedicated to coca production in Bolivia (figures of 2010). Bolivia is not only a producer of cocaine, but also a transition country to Brazil, Argentina and Chile. In general, South American countries (and Caribbean countries as well) serve as trans-shipment sites.

The progressive infiltration of mafias in Bolivian political institutions from countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela and even Mexico and Argentina is worrying. These armed criminal gangs are involved in various forms of trafficking: mostly drug trafficking but also human trafficking and arms trafficking. The police and the judicial system are considered to be corrupt and weak.

II. Analysis of the relationship between organised crime and churches

Understanding the influence of organised crime groups on the functioning of churches is a very complex task, since organised crime groups, by nature, distort the functioning of society in general, not only that of churches. Christians committed to truth and justice should be critical about organised crime. Are organised crime groups interested in neutralising the transforming power of the Gospel or not? Do they consider churches as a threat to their activity?

To answer these questions, the main reasons for persecution of Christians by organised crime groups will be presented **(1.)**. Moreover, the mechanisms that are being used by organised crime in this persecution **(2.)**, as well as the responses of churches to organised crime **(3.)** will be analysed.

II.1 Reasons for persecution of Christians by organised crime groups

An illustration of the complexity of the reasons for persecution by organised crime groups is the assassination of Pastor Julio César Ruibal in the Colombian city of Cali in 1995 under unclear circumstances, but within a context of flourishing drug criminality. The question was asked: why was he killed? At least five different arguments were given, each containing a part of the truth. *Christianity Today* stated Pastor Ruibal was killed because he was a martyr of faith. Some said he was killed because he was a foreigner – Ruibal was Bolivian. Others said he was killed because he was a critic of drug trafficking. Still others said he was killed because of the armed conflict. Many people died because of the conflict, so Ruibal was seen as just one more victim. Finally, research pointed out that Ruibal's church had bought a property from a drug trafficker who was in prison, who, once released, killed Ruibal to claim his property back.

Each of these arguments originated from different perceptions of the relation between organised crime and churches; some very "spiritual", others very "down to earth." As the

example of Pastor Ruibal's assassination shows, the relationship between organised crime and churches is often covered with much subjectivity and even ideological (or theological) biases.

A Baptist pastor of Cali and close friend of Ruibal who was interviewed for this research declared: *"This is precisely the problem of the relation between drug related crime and churches. When someone who is not a pastor in Colombia is killed, they say it is because of the conflict. But when someone is killed who is a pastor, he is immediately proclaimed a martyr."*

According to this pastor, the sole presence in conflict areas is a source of danger for any member of the community, regardless whether he is a member of a church and regardless of his political views. This means that the suffering of Christians in conflict areas should not necessarily be interpreted as "persecution" as it can have other causes. It is important to take this warning seriously, because the dynamics of organised crime are more complex than plain persecution of Christians.

In many cases however, organised crime is an important vector of persecution, deliberately targeting Christians. The reasons for this persecution are variable, depending on the identity, needs and strategies of competing organised crime groups.

A Colombian development worker declared in an interview that churches are targeted by organised crime because they do not allow their youth to join their mafias, because they do not participate in the drug trafficking chain. In these cases, persecution is directly related to the refusal of Christians to collaborate with organised crime.

The testimony of a Colombian pastor illustrates this point. In a newspaper he said he was told by the guerrilla group ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional): *"We do not want pastors and those attending their churches to participate in politics. We do not want evangelicals in politics, because you do not support our ideals. We have nothing in common with evangelicals."* This pastor was threatened with murder, should he not follow this instruction.¹⁸

This example highlights how guerrillas frequently threaten pastors when their interests are at stake. The setting is similar in Guatemala. A pastor comments: *"It is very common that gangs have people in the churches that keep a watch on what happens to gang members who want to leave their gangs. The only reason they respect that someone leaving the gang is if they become Christians, but they want to make sure their conversion is genuine. This happens in many Guatemalan communities."*

In general, gangs are afraid that churches will convert their members to Christianity or encourage the local population to put up resistance to the activities of criminal organisations. Because the guerrillas are aware that the Christian message of peace contradicts their military objectives, they warn pastors not to preach to members of their guerrilla group, provide support to political candidates, or get actively involved in politics.

In Mexico, a leader of a large Protestant denomination asserts that criminal organisations and drug cartels have targeted Christians because they view churches as revenue centres

¹⁸ "Leftist Guerillas Threaten, Kill Christians", www.compassdirect.org/english/country/colombia/2549.

(extortions) and because churches support programmes for the rehabilitation of drug addicts and alcoholics.¹⁹

Similarly, the assassination of a pastor's wife in Santander, Colombia, in March this year was not directly linked to her Christian faith. However, the fact she was leading the government-sponsored "Women in Action" programme in the area, in the context of the "Families in Action" programmes, was enough a reason for guerrillas to murder her²⁰.

Also, in other cases Christians are overtly persecuted by organised crime groups because of their faith. For example, a Colombian pastor of the Bolivar region was threatened and forcibly displaced by guerrillas in January this year because of the fact he interceded for threatened church leaders as a human rights negotiator. According to the guerrillas themselves, this pastor was displaced *"because he is harming people's minds with religious discourses. He cannot go back to be a pastor in that place and he is only authorized to hold meetings in homes with people who are already Christians."*

In the case of the indigenous population, there are also examples of persecution that is motivated by the fact that Evangelical (Protestant) Christians have left their traditional religion. For indigenous leaders, anyone who leaves the indigenous tradition and embraces Christianity loses his rights. For this reason, in the Colombian Cauca, indigenous leaders inflict systematic persecution of Christians, sponsored by guerrilla organisations. Examples of this persecution are poisoning, invasion of personal property, prohibition to get jobs, burning of houses, torture and killings.

Testimonies of indigenous Christians in the Colombian highlands that were approached for this research show how paramilitary groups violently disturb church services and even enter Christian schools, kidnap young children to convert them into child soldiers, and kill some people on the way to spread terror and fear.

In Colombia, the rural Christian indigenous population possibly suffers most persecution by the alliances that exist between "pagan" (non-Christian) indigenous populations and paramilitary groups. These pagan indigenous populations receive material support from paramilitary organisations to persecute indigenous Christians. Paramilitary organisations (FARC and others) mislead these indigenous groups, telling them that their Christian brothers are a threat to their culture and traditions. In fact, the FARC uses indigenous populations as an advance army to terrorise the indigenous Christians.

Indigenous territories in Colombia are protected by a national law that gives them autonomy. Because of this autonomy, government security forces (police and military) are not allowed to enter these territories. The indigenous territories are administrated by indigenous organizations, but these are so weak that they are being infiltrated by guerrillas. There is virtually no government presence or enforcement of the rule of law and these territories have

¹⁹ "Suspected Drug Traffickers Kidnap Pastor", www.compassdirect.org/english/country/mexico/article_110797.html

²⁰ "Colombian Pastor's Wife Murdered by Guerrillas", Latin America Development Article, Open Doors News Release, March 14, 2011.

therefore become a safe haven for the guerrillas' drug trafficking activities. This situation in turn constitutes an important source of persecution of Christians²¹.

It is unclear how big the Christian indigenous population in Colombia is, but organisations such as CEDECOL, Voice of Martyrs and Christian Solidarity Worldwide agree on the urgency to respond to persecution of this group. More research is needed.

A member of CEDECOL (Evangelical Alliance of Colombia) explains: *“The guerrilla groups have indoctrinated indigenous organisations for years. In turn, these indigenous organisations indoctrinate the indigenous population. The guerrillas have presented themselves as their saviours and as those who encourage them to claim their indigenous rights. In fact, all this is the excuse for guerrillas to be present in these territories and to use them for their terrorist and drug trafficking projects. In these areas, Christian indigenous churches are the ones that have suffered most.”*

II.2 Mechanisms of persecution by organised crime

How does organised crime operate in relation to churches? When organised crime targets churches – and Christians in general – persecution takes many forms and applies many mechanisms (strands) at the same time.

At a global level, this research reveals two main categories of persecution perpetrated by criminal organisations, distinguishing between direct and indirect forms of persecution. **Direct persecution (a)** concerns evident forms of persecution such as torture or assassination. **Indirect persecution** concerns more subtle, less visible, forms of persecution, through strategies such as the **(b) infiltration of political institutions, (c) infiltration of social and cultural institutions** and **(d) spiritual warfare**. This section will give a brief description of the nature, recurrence and targets of each of these mechanisms.

Direct persecution

As stated earlier, direct persecution refers to the mechanisms of persecution that can be considered to be more noticeable. These “classical” means of persecution include extortion, kidnapping, assassination and other forms of violence against Christians, as described in the first chapter of this research. The use of these means should be seen as part of the strategy of criminal organisations to systematically silence or eliminate critical voices and opponents, whether they are Christians or not.

The presence of paramilitary groups in several areas of Colombia, Mexico, Central America and the Andes can be seen as a cause of direct persecution. As the large number of testimonies shows, paramilitary groups do not hesitate to use violence in order to protect their interests.

²¹ See <http://www.csw.org.uk/colombia> for more information.

Churches are seen as a direct threat to their power, because they tend to ask for loyalty and allegiance from their members, which is not compatible with the totalitarian outlook of these paramilitary groups.

Especially in rural areas, churches are a threat to criminal organisations when they refuse to collaborate with them. This refusal of collaboration can be explicit or implicit. It is explicit when pastors publicly denounce the activities of these mafias. However, this is not very common because of fear of repression of most church leaders, particularly in areas where there is no rule of law. More often, the refusal of collaboration is implicit, for instance by not allowing their members to get enrolled in paramilitary organisations.

A Colombian pastor and leader of a Reformed University that was interviewed explains that churches located in areas that are controlled by narcotic crime have to relate to criminal organisations in one way or another. If they do not take a stand about drug trafficking, they can be accused of collaborating with these groups by government security forces or be accused of being against them and become a target of the guerrillas.

Paramilitary groups see kidnapping not only as a means to fund their activities through the perception of ransoms. Kidnappings and occasional killings are also seen as manifestations of their power, by which they create a culture of fear and terror destined at increasing their influence over society.

Because of this culture of fear, many pastors are afraid of publicly condemning criminal activities, or even warning of the dangers of drug trafficking. Fear is increased because many churches are infiltrated by members of criminal organisations, who act as normal members of these churches without revealing their real identity. These members immediately report every expression of criticism to the leaders of their organisations, who then carry out repressive activities.

“Pastors are afraid, because anyone can enter a church building, including people who have connections with criminal organisations who will know what pastors say about them. In many areas of the country [Colombia] it has happened that a certain person is a member of a criminal group and only goes to church to hear what the pastors say. For this reason, pastors are very careful about what they say in public”, says a Colombian denominational leader.

Another way drug criminals increase their influence over society is by giving huge sums of money away to social projects, in order to buy the loyalty of the local population. This frequently happens in indigenous areas. On some occasions, church buildings are even financed with drugs money as a form of money laundering.

The relationship between churches and organised crime groups is even more complex, since there exist so-called “churches of drug traffickers”, which are congregations whose members are actively involved in criminal activities related to drugs trade. There are also churches that actively collaborate with criminal activities and are financed by offerings that come from the income of drug and arms trade.

A Prophetic Call

This section gives an overview of the most common mechanisms of direct persecution perpetrated by criminal organisations. The list is based on the “violation categories” that are used in the report *A Prophetic Call* (2010) that is produced every two years by the Colombian Mennonite NGO JUSTAPAZ and the Peace Commission of CEDECOL. Although this list concerns the Colombian context, we consider it applicable for the whole Latin American continent:

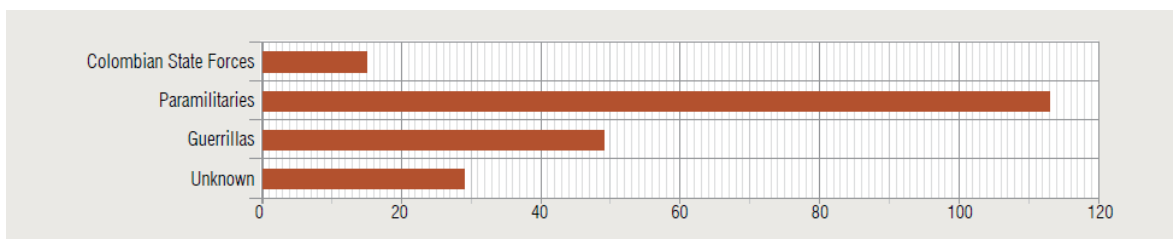
- Arbitrary detention
- Attempted murder
- Collective displacement
- Collective threat
- Disappearance and kidnapping
- Displacement
- Homicide
- Human shield
- Illegal means and methods of warfare
- Injury
- Recruitment and child soldiers
- Religious intolerance
- Sexual violence
- Threat and intimidation
- Torture

A Prophetic Call reviews all reported cases of violence against (Protestant) Christians in Colombia. The report concludes: “In 2009, we registered a rise in the number of violations committed against members of Protestant and evangelical Christian churches that included threats, forced displacement and homicide. These crimes were committed by alleged paramilitaries (103 violations), alleged guerrilla groups (42 violations) and alleged members of the Colombian State Forces (12 violations). During the period analysed, the most frequent violations registered were: threats (94), forced displacement (71), homicide (17), injury (7), torture (5), hostage taking and kidnapping (5), forced disappearance (2), arbitrary detention (2), child recruitment (1), attempted murder (1) and human shield (1)”.

What is interesting in the context of this research is that the vast majority of these cases is directly or indirectly related to organised crime (‘Paramilitaries’, ‘Guerrillas’, ‘ELN guerrilla’, ‘FARC guerrilla’ and ‘Combatants’²²), as the following graphs show.

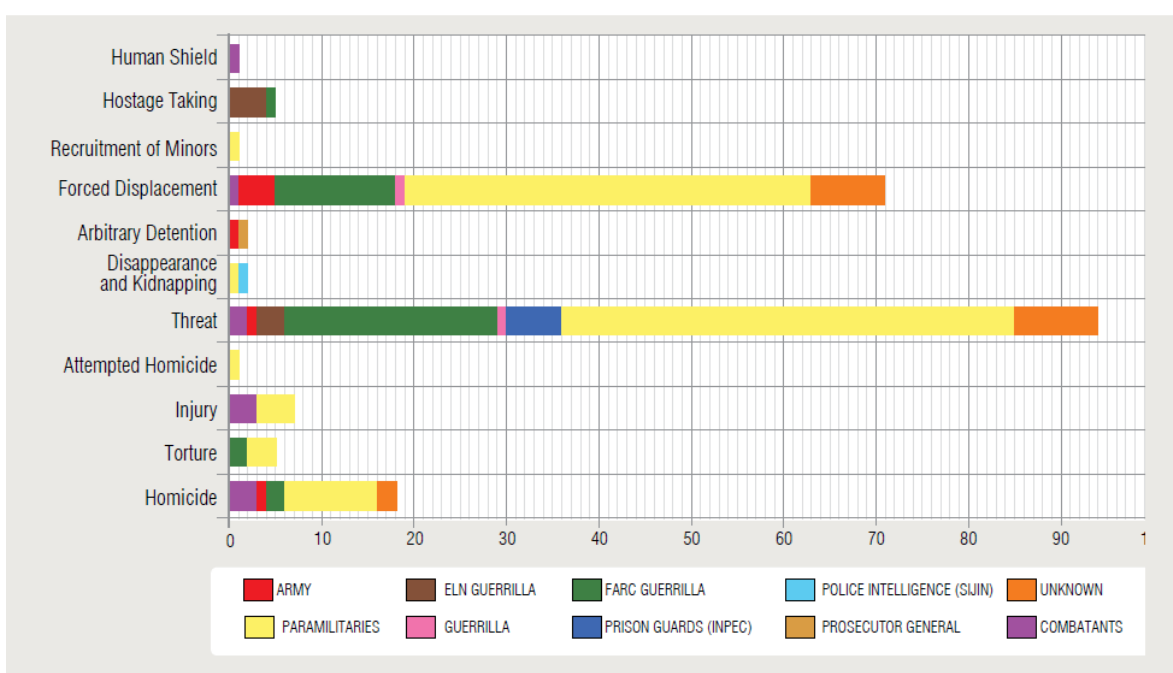
²² The term ‘Combatants’ refers to demobilized militaries that reorganise into guerrillas.

Graphic 2. Violation by alleged perpetrator (2009) (Colombia)



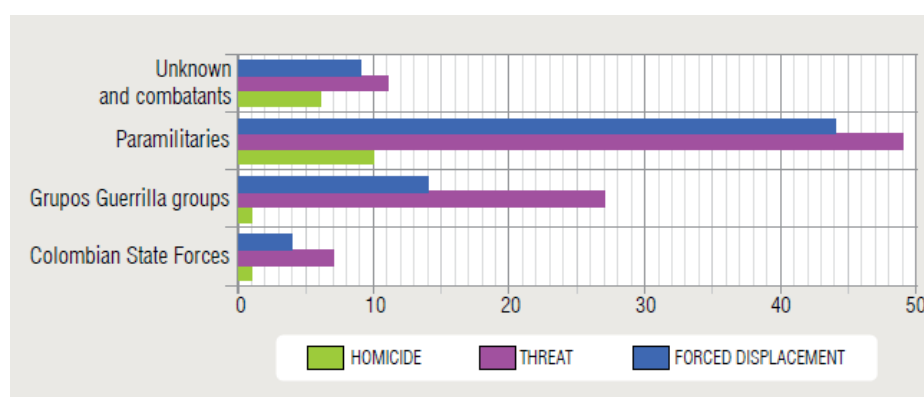
Source: JUSTAPAZ 2010.

Graphic 3. Most frequent violations (2009) (Colombia)



Source: JUSTAPAZ 2010.

Graphic 4. Violations by threat, homicide and forced displacement (2009) (Colombia)



Source: JUSTAPAZ 2010.

Information with this level of detail, as far as this research could investigate, is not available for other countries. The only statistical information that is available is the general data on violence in Latin America, such as the homicide rates by country published annually by the World Health Organisation. However, this statistical information does not serve the purpose of this research, since the homicides that are related to organised crime and that target churches are not referenced.

This does not mean that persecution of Christians, perpetrated by mafia and other criminal organisations is non-existent in other countries in the region. Estimations are that more than 100 Mexican church leaders have been kidnapped in recent years. Others have been victims of extortion (called *vacunas* in the Colombian context), threats and homicide²³.

Similar figures are mentioned for countries like Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Bolivia, Peru and Venezuela. Many stories of pastors who have suffered violations can be found on the internet, but the extent of the violations cannot be quantified.

The interviews that were conducted in the context of this research do however show there is a broadly shared fear of repression amongst church leaders and their members, in many of the mentioned countries. The presence of this fear in churches for criminal organisations, combined with the existence of stories and testimonies about violence against Christians perpetrated by criminal organisations can in fact be seen as an indicator of the existence of a very conflictive relationship between organised crime and churches.

²³ "Suspected Drug Traffickers Kidnap Pastor", www.compassdirect.org/english/country/mexico/article_110797.html

Infiltration of political institutions

The infiltration, penetration and corruption of political institutions by organised crime groups has been documented extensively by many journalistic and scientific research reports. The infiltration of political institutions is an important strategy by criminal organisations to protect and promote their interests.

Drug trafficking involves so much money, that bribery is not a problem for its main players. If bribery does not work, criminal organisations simply eliminate the officials that refuse to collaborate with them. Criminal organisations also seek to take over complete government services, placing their informants and collaborators in political parties, municipal governments, national police services and judicial systems, amongst others (see Kruijt 2011²⁴).

Interviewed pastors from Mexico, Guatemala and Colombia indicate that pastors are afraid to present formal charges and complaints to government institutions because of the following reasons:

- The information that pastors provide to government security services can very easily be filtrated to criminal groups;
- Security mechanisms for those who present denunciations are often deficient.

A Guatemalan pastor explains: *“People talk very little about these issues [organised crime] in churches. The presentation of charges at government authorities is even less frequent because the police is considered as a corrupt organisation by gangs and organised crime. For this reason, there is no confidence to present denunciations.”*

What this does to society is to create a situation of chaos that benefits criminal activity. It also causes the progressive destruction of the rule of law. This context is not favourable for churches, who cannot expect legal security in relation to their legal rights and properties, or respect of fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

In any legal or institutional conflict, churches that are located in areas where justice is not impartial are helpless when confronted with expressions of organised crime. In these situations, the church risks being shattered by the war between drugs criminality and government who fight against each other.

Infiltration of social and cultural institutions

A less documented strategy that is used by criminal organisations is the infiltration of social and cultural institutions. These strategies concern very subtle forms of persecution that are used by criminal organisations in order to promote a general acceptance of their activities in

²⁴ Dirk Kruijt, *Organised Crime, Drugs and the Political System in Latin America*, report commissioned by the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, 2011.

society. To a certain extent, criminal organisations act very similarly to missionary Christians: they desire to win the hearts and minds of the population, trying to cultivate a combination of respect, sympathy and fear for their activities. Through the invasion of cultural institutions (cinema, art, education, etc.) drugs criminals seem to work for the normalization of violence and a social acceptance of drug trafficking.

Soap operas (*telenovelas*) are one of the most popular forms of entertainment in many Latin American countries, reaching huge audiences on prime time on television channels. These *telenovelas*, most of them produced in Colombia and Mexico and exported to the whole continent, portray stories of ordinary people caught up in intrigue and personal drama. In addition to the extremely poor moral values that are communicated through these *telenovelas*, a new entertainment genre has appeared, known as *narconovelas*. The heroes of these *narconovelas* are drug criminals, in which their lives are romanticised.

Narconovelas are immensely popular. Beyond simply documenting the reality of drug trafficking, they contribute to the exaltation of drug trade, robbery and despoilment. By some, *narconovelas* are considered to be “*televised tutorials that teach people how to kill, mug and traffic drugs, it’s the ABC to become a capo, a hired killer or a prostitute*”.

In Mexico, drug traffickers are also glorified through popular music. *Corridos* – popular narrative songs, similar to a ballad – are being transformed in *narcocorridos*. Traditional *corridos* are about oppression, history and daily life for peasants. They were also used to communicate social messages during the Mexican revolution. *Narcocorridos* are songs about the glory of famous drug traffickers, converting them in role models and super heroes, and exalting their actions. This way, cults are built around famous drug traffickers.

Narconovelas and *narcocorridos* are just two examples of how organised crime infiltrates social and cultural institutions – invasion of society. Although its effects are not measurable, it is undeniable that these instruments have a huge influence on popular culture. The social impact of *narconovelas* in particular should not be underestimated, as they have millions of daily spectators throughout the continent.

Although its influence is indirect, it contributes to a general acceptance of narcotic crime, so it is even seen as something normal. This in turn affects the environment churches are part of influencing morality and other values. Similar to the way modern values infiltrate Christianity through their continuous presence in entertainment, organised crime also communicates its values through these means. In addition, *narcocorridos* often tend to imitate churches, through the communication of messages of salvation, substituting the church, and even contributing to the loss of credibility of churches.

Spiritual warfare

This last category is less scientific – there is no hard, objective data –, but it is nevertheless an important issue to take into account when considering the relationship between organised crime and the churches.

From a sociological perspective, one could analyse the relationship between organised crime and churches as an example of conflicting ideologies or world views. Churches have a Christian world view, based on a belief system inspired on the Gospel. In contrast, organised crime groups tend to have an ideology of making as much money as they can, through drug trafficking and other means, at any price (see Kruijt 2011). Whenever these world views enter in conflict, organised crime groups do not hesitate to use violence to protect their interests.

This perspective is valid, yet incomplete. A spiritual dimension should be added to it, in order to get the full picture. It appears from the conducted interviews that organised crime groups are frequently involved in occult practices, which they use to advance their interests. Permanently living in illegality and constantly threatened by government security institutions (military and police), as well as by competing groups, organised crime groups defend themselves by sending spells and curses to their enemies and invoking spirits to defend their causes.

The more these groups are dominated by fear, the more they feel the need to get involved in witchcraft to protect themselves. As an illustration, there are stories in the press of “priests” that give their “blessings” to drug transports and the properties of drug traffickers²⁵.

Organised crime groups, from this spiritual perspective, may therefore see Christians as a threat because they acknowledge the power of prayer and God’s might over the spirits they invoke. Persecution of Christians in these cases is then strictly motivated by spiritual motives, since these criminal groups desire to eliminate Christians and neutralize their prayers.

Taking this spiritual perspective into account, describing the relation between organised crime and churches as a conflict of ideologies is insufficient. The deeper dimension of this relationship is that organised crime and churches are engaged in spiritual warfare. Just as Christians see prayer as a spiritual weapon, organised crime groups (particularly criminal organisations that thrive on drug trafficking) see witchcraft as a spiritual weapon.

The importance of the relationship between drug trafficking and witchcraft should not be surprising, since there is a striking similarity between them. The spiritual force that is invoked through witchcraft by drug traffickers is the same that takes control of people when they are under the influence of narcotics. Drug criminals are also consumers of drugs themselves.

When analysing Latin America, organised crime is more present in those countries where witchcraft such as voodoo has historically been more present. These countries also tend to have the largest indigenous and African population, which in these cases implies a strong presence of pagan religions. Cali, that used to be the centre of Latin American drug criminality, is also an important centre of voodoo and other types of paganism, occultism and spiritualism.

For this reason, it is valid to conclude that drug criminals in particular cultivate hatred against Christians, precisely because they are involved in voodoo and other occult practices. From a scientific point of view, spiritual warfare may not be the decisive explanatory factor of the

²⁵ “Bendecían cocaína y propiedades de narcos en Costa Rica”, <http://www.wradio.com.mx/nota.aspx?id=963507>.

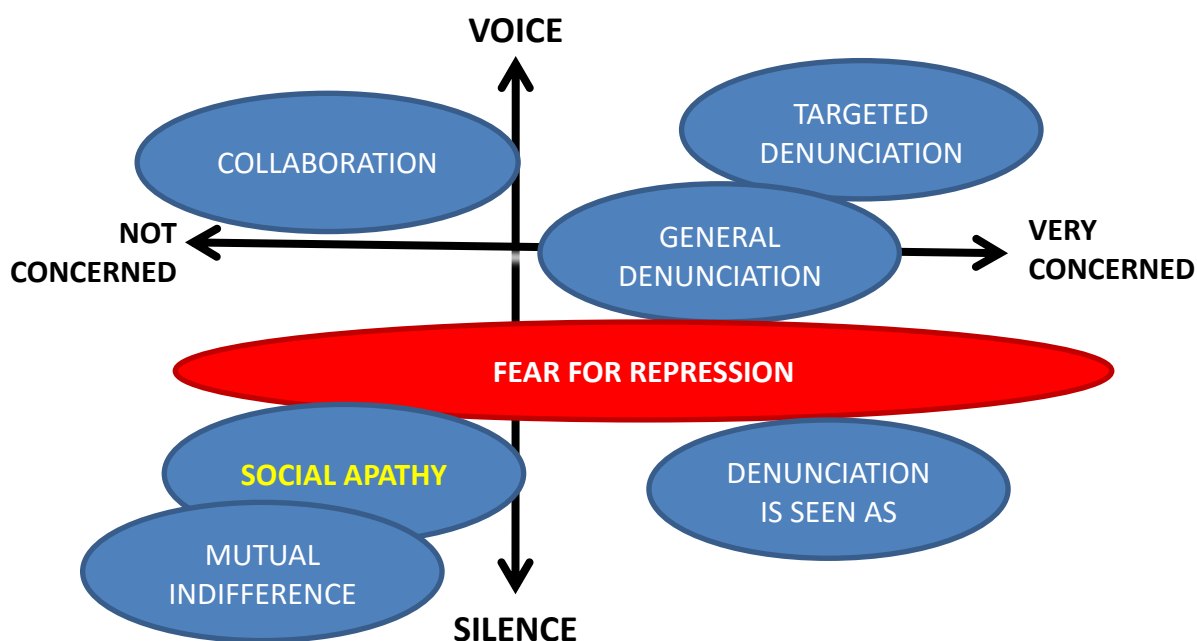
persecution of Christians by criminal organisations. However, spiritual warfare is an element that should be taken into account, especially because it influences the “visible” forms of persecution that were described in the previous sections.

II.3 Responses of the churches to organised crime

In order to understand the relationship between organised crime and churches from an objective point of view, this section will develop a **typology of the possible responses by churches** to the issue.

Faced with organised crime, churches may have two types of reaction that can be identified as “**voice**” and “**silence**.” “Voice” refers to an active response to organised crime by the churches, addressing issues related to organised crime within their congregations, through prayer, and through advocacy and public denunciation. Examples of “voice” are pastors who publicly point out injustice, organise campaigns against drug trafficking and call prayer gatherings for peace.

Graphic 5. Typology of the relation between churches and organised crime



Source: own elaboration.

Two subtypes of denunciation can be distinguished: “**targeted denunciation**” and “**general denunciation**.” This distinction is important, since it indicates an essential difference regarding the scope of the denunciation of organised crime by church leaders and their members. Targeted denunciation specifically points out cases of injustice and even the names of the

people who are responsible for it. General denunciation is less “risky”, because it consists simply of mentioning organised crime in prayers and sermons, without specifically mentioning criminal actors or organisations. The preference for general denunciation of organised crime, as the interviews show, is mostly a consequence of fear of repression.

According to a Colombian Presbyterian pastor, *“generally pastors and church leaders do not denounce the actions of organised crime at a prophesying level, as the Bible does. Some question what these groups produce in reference to individual sin of the people but not as a part of organised crime.”*

The category “silence” corresponds to those churches and Christians who prefer to remain silent regarding the issue of organised crime. There may be several reasons for “silence.” Undoubtedly, **fear of repression** by organised crime groups plays a very big role. There are numerous examples of cases where church leaders or their members are too afraid to speak up against injustice in society because they are afraid of the violent reaction of organised crime groups.

Fear is increased even more when political institutions are infiltrated by criminal organisations and therefore legal security and protection of denunciators is not guaranteed. As a Honduran development worker says: *“Of course they [pastors] are afraid! What can you do when mafia is part of the police, the army, the courts and congress?”*

Fear of reprisals by criminal organisations is indeed a general concern in most Latin American churches. It is not possible to quantify the recurrence of this attitude, but the interviews conducted in the context of this research show that fear of repression is indeed a strong – if not the strongest – explanatory factor of “silence.”

This is even more so in regions that are under the control of armed groups, whether guerrillas, paramilitaries or drug cartels. In these regions, pastors and members of churches generally do not address issues related to organised crime publicly nor within their congregation, because of the immense fear they have. As several informants explained, *“these pastors only talk about these issues then they completely trust you or when they are not present in these regions”*.

In relation to fear, there is another explanation of “silence” that can be mentioned: **a broadly shared sense that denunciation is useless** i.e. the feeling that publicly addressing issues related to organised crime has no impact, although they may be very concerned about organised crime. Whether this is true, many Christians feel that risking their lives for the sake of organised crime is not worth it, since they expect it will not lead to a radical change in society and an effective limitation of organised crime. This attitude is more frequent in contexts *“where evil is so present, that it kills all hope for change”*, as an interviewed Colombian pastor said.

There is yet another factor that explains “silence”, that is rarely mentioned: **indifference**. This factor can be identified as **“social apathy.”** In Latin America, a large number of churches, mainly belonging to Pentecostal denominations, teach a theology with a strong segregation between “spiritual” and “earthly” matters – dualism – which explains an overall lack of interest

in social issues and a very limited involvement of these churches in the pursuit of public justice.

A Guatemalan mega-church pastor explains social apathy: *“I have worked for years in an area where gangs and organised crime have produced enormous pain and harm to the population. What I have seen is that the Church has not taken a clear and unanimous position about what to do. For this reason, the interventions about the negative consequences of organised crime are scarce and isolated. Besides fear, the main reason for this is the doctrine of the majority of the churches that separates the spiritual from the material, concluding that the church should not do anything about the issue because it is ‘material.’ I personally do not share this point of view but it is the view of the majority.”*

According to this view, social and societal involvement, such as any form of activity related to the containment of organised crime, is seen as a loss of time and as useless in a world affected by sin in the anticipation of the new earth and the new heaven. In these cases, it is not so that churches remain silent about drug trafficking for fear of repression, but simply because they do not care!

Of course there are exceptions to this phenomenon and the degree of social apathy may be very variable. Social apathy tends to be stronger in Central America than in South America, where the concept of “integral mission” has more followers. *“Most Pentecostals are not interested in social issues whatsoever, and are not likely to address the issue of organised crime in their congregations”*, says an Ecuadorian pastor.

Church leaders from countries such as Chile or Costa Rica – countries that are less affected by organised crime – say *“Organised crime is not an issue here.”* This is in fact another expression of “social apathy”. There is virtually no interest within churches for the sake of persecuted Christians in neighbouring countries affected by organised crime. This affirmation is not quantifiable, but organised crime and persecution of Christians is not a priority for churches in most of these countries. Indicators hereof are the prayer agendas and the attribution of church offerings.

In practice, social apathy can sometimes mean a situation of **“mutual indifference”**, as if there were an unwritten agreement between churches and organised crime groups; churches do not get involved in discussions about criminality and organised crime groups leave churches in peace.

A Honduran development worker declares it is *“more than dangerous”* for church leaders to address issues related to organised crime in and outside their congregations. Moreover, he says, *“in some cases, local churches consider it is not in their interest to publicly condemn organised crime, because they benefit from offerings by members who are involved in the business.”*

The former analysis allows classifying churches (and Christians in general) in two different categories: those who are **“very concerned about organised crime”** and those who are **“not concerned about organised crime.”** These are not closed categories, but should rather be seen

as the two extremes of a continuum. The higher the level of social apathy of the church, the less concerned it will be about organised crime.

There is a final possible response of churches to organised crime: **collaboration**. Less frequent (and probably less documented), it happens that churches actively collaborate with organised crime groups, giving logistical support and even receiving (financial) benefits from them. This form of collaboration is the active dimension of “mutual indifference.”

Although this report does not reach a conclusion on whether active collaboration between churches and organised crime is frequent, there have been examples in recent years of this. In Brazil, several years ago, a big Pentecostal church was discovered as a hiding place for narcotic-crime related weapons. The church campus even included a helicopter platform to facilitate access to the weapon storing rooms.

During the past Colombian legislature, some senators were prosecuted because of their links with drug trafficking. After their condemnation they were suspended and replaced by their deputies, who were pastors of evangelical churches. This occurred especially in the Partido de Integración Nacional (PIN). Whatever the case may be, it was shocking to the public that evangelical pastors and people related to drug trafficking were members of the same political party.

Another example is the priest Camilo Torres who was an active member of the ELN guerrilla group for years.

The combination of these two categories (“voice” vs. silence” and “not concerned” vs. “very concerned about organised crime”) leads to the following typology of the relation between church and organised crime.

According to this typology, seven different types of “attitudes” or “responses” of churches to organised crime can be identified:

- Targeted denunciation
- General denunciation
- Fear
- Social apathy
- Denunciation is seen as useless
- Mutual indifference
- Collaboration

These different types of response may coexist, at varying intensities, and with different explanations. Fear of repression is almost always an important factor in determining whether a church leader will make use of “voice” or prefers “silence.” It is also decisive in determining whether denunciation will be targeted or general. “Silence” is mostly a function of the degree of fear of repression and less so of the degree of concern for organised crime. Social apathy or mutual indifference is not necessarily a consequence of fear of repression, but it can be. Often it is a mix between fear of repression and a very low degree of concern for the negative consequences of organised crime.

The degree of concern for organised crime is a variable that presents big variations between churches located in areas affected by organised crime and areas that are not.

III. Survey of available literature

The review of literature on the relationship between organised crime and persecution of Christians reveals there is in fact very little information available. The dynamics of organised crime, in its different forms, have been extensively analysed by many scholars, but these analyses rarely include commentaries on its relationship with churches. Generally in this research, churches are considered as a part of a very heterogeneous “civil society”, without receiving specific attention.

Furthermore, studies about the persecution of Christians in Latin America almost never consider “organised crime” as one of its variables. The available sources on this topic are basically testimonies and stories of persecution, available on the websites of newspapers, on web blogs and on the website of some church organisations, without any indication of whether this information is accurate and objective. The few reports on the issue that were found cannot be considered as analyses of the interface of churches and organised crime, but instead are compilations of testimonies and stories with little analytical value.

Almost all the people that were interviewed declared they did not know about any report that broaches the interface of churches and organised crime, other than personal stories and testimonies or historical research about the situation of drug trafficking in Colombia of the 1990s.

For these reasons, this research is innovative, both because of the lack of qualitative information on the relationship and because of the virtual nonexistence of statistical data to document it. Also, there has also never been a desire before to develop a typology of relations between churches and organised crime, nor a profound reflection on its causes, mechanisms and consequences. This exploratory research would therefore have been impossible if it relied exclusively on literature research.

Virtually the only report on the interface of churches and organised crime that was found is *A Prophetic Call. Colombian Protestant Churches Document Their Suffering And Their Hope*, issued by the Mennonite Church (through its NGO JUSTAPAZ) and the Evangelical Council of Colombia (CEDECOL), of which five editions have been published since 2006.

JUSTAPAZ is the only organisation in Colombia, to our knowledge, that systematically classifies and publishes reports of violence against Christians. The information in this report is useful but should nevertheless be handled with care, since its conclusions are at times ideologically biased, in its opposition to the Colombian government.

Also, it is important to mention that the JUSTAPAZ report does not provide an in-depth analysis of the causes and possible solutions for persecution of Christians by criminal

organisations and violence against Christians in general. In fact, the JUSTAPAZ reports are not much more than a listing of cases of violence against Christians.

To our knowledge, at the Latin American level, no such reports are available, when ignoring the large number of testimonies and stories that are communicated on the internet and by international outreach organisations to persecuted Christians.

IV. Conclusions

General conclusions

The two most important types of criminal organisations that operate in Latin America are **(a) drug related criminal organisations** and **(b) youth gangs**. These two types of criminal organisations operate in transnational networks and cultivate relationships between them. organised crime takes different forms but its main avenues are drug trafficking, arms trafficking, people trafficking and kidnapping. Criminal organisations have historically been most present in Colombia, but are now taking control of Mexico. Its presence is also expanding to other regions, particularly to Central America (The Northern Triangle: Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras).

organised crime is a very important – if not the most important – vector of Christian persecution in Latin America, as the quantitative data on Colombia (JUSTAPAZ 2010) and qualitative data on the region (personal interviews) clearly demonstrates.

The cause of the Christian indigenous population of Colombia is underlined here. According to the Evangelical Council in Colombia, persecution is in fact most intense against Christian indigenous groups.

One of the purposes of this report was to give a very general overview of the different reasons that Christians are persecuted by organised crime. It can be said that persecution of Christians especially by criminal organisations is generally motivated by a combination of two elements. The primary reason for persecution is that organised crime sees Christians as a threat when they openly oppose their activities, especially when they get involved in social programmes or in politics.

The second reason, that often inspires the first one, is the view that Christian faith is not compatible with their ideals, and that they fear Christians will influence members of the community or even members of their own organisations to oppose their activities.

Typology of the interface of churches and organised crime

In this research, a typology of the relationship between organised crime and churches was developed to understand the most recurrent responses of churches to criminal organisations. Based on the qualitative interviews that were conducted in the context of this research, the two standards responses to organised crime (“voice” and “silence”) were combined with two general attitudes of churches towards it (“very concerned” and “not concerned” about organised crime). Based on this typology, the following seven different types of “attitudes” or “responses” of churches to organised crime were identified and described:

- Targeted denunciation
- General denunciation
- Fear
- Social apathy
- Denunciation is seen as useless
- Mutual indifference
- Collaboration

This description of the responses of churches to organised crime is of course incomplete. As previously stated, with the available information, it was not possible to quantify the responses of churches to organised crime and therefore more research is needed, including quantitative surveys to measure the scope and recurrence of each one of these categories.

Answers to the relationship between organised crime and churches

Understanding the types of response is useful to the design of adequate answers to the relationship between organised crime and churches. Particularly, it can orientate the development of programmes to equip churches in their response to organised crime, as well as advocacy strategies. In some cases, it is necessary to give support to help these churches overcome their fear of repression and be effective in their denunciation and efforts to fight injustice. In other cases, programmes aimed at the creation of awareness for the sake of persecuted Christians and the dangers of organised crime is required, to overcome expressions of social apathy – lack of interest and concern for the persecuted church – and to encourage them to get actively involved in society.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that, in general, Latin American churches are not equipped for social and political advocacy. This is the opinion of several faith-based NGOs that are active in the region, such as World Vision and Tear. Also, there is a difference between giving material and spiritual support to martyrs and victims of persecution, and the development of strategies to influence social and political institutions.

Comments on the measurement of the impact of organised crime on churches

The measurement of the impact on churches of organised crime is a remaining research challenge, and a confessed weakness of this report. Its results are based on a desk study, but should be confronted with more extensive field research. The applied methodology consisted of a combination of literature research and personal interviews. Because the available literature on the research topic is extremely limited (see III.), this research relied heavily on interviews.

To corroborate the conclusions of this report and measure the occurrence of each one of the persecution mechanisms by organised crime that were identified, more research is needed. This additional research should consist of the application of surveys (questionnaires) on a larger scale combined with media research and a continuous effort of participatory observation (informal contacts with key informants).

It can be said that the more organised crime sees churches as a threat to their activities, the more they will design strategies to counter the influence of the church, whether this influence is spiritual, political, social or cultural. If churches are not seen by organised crime as a threat, both will coexist. Once the mechanisms of persecution by organised crime and the responses of churches to them are identified, the question remains just how frequent these mechanisms are used and what the occurrence is of the identified reactions by churches.

The following table presents the persecution mechanisms that were identified in II.2, in relation to the analytical categories that are already in use by Open Doors, its vectors, consequences on churches and a series of suggestions of its possible indicators, in order to measure its quantitative impact.

Table 3. Possible indicators of persecution related to organised crime

Mechanism	Vector	Consequences on churches	Possible indicators
<i>Direct persecution</i>	Violence against Christians and churches	Promotion of a culture of fear and terror	Possible indicators for this mechanism are hard data such as the number of martyrs of faith and the number of burned churches, related to organised crime.
<i>Indirect persecution</i>	Infiltration of political institutions	Undermining of the rule of law, threat to religious freedom and legal security	Indexes such as the Government Hostilities Index (PEW), Freedom House or the Survey of Political Rights and Liberties (Paul Marshall) are general indicators of religious freedom. These indicators do not say whether this situation is related to the infiltration of political institutions by organised crime. Therefore, these indexes should be complemented by qualitative analysis to grasp this dimension.
	Infiltration of social and cultural institutions	Loss of credibility of the church as an institution, promotion of a “gospel of violence”	organised crime is not included by the Social Hostilities Index (PEW). Here, too, this index should be complemented by qualitative analysis on the way organised crime influences social and cultural institutions.
	Spiritual warfare	Indirect consequence	No measurement available.

Source: own elaboration.

As this table shows, there are currently no indicators that can accurately measure the impact of organised crime on churches and religious liberty, nor the indirect effects organised crime has on them through the promotion of a climate of fear and hostility, and more generally through negatively influencing social institutions. As a result of this report, we hope that the relation between organised crime and churches has been proven, and that insight has been given in the nature of this relationship.