

## Eyes Wide Shut

### Corruption and Drug-Related Violence in Rosario

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Drug trafficking is not a new phenomenon in the Argentinian city of Rosario. Since the 1990s, and largely under the public radar, the distribution of illicit drugs in the poor, peripheral neighbourhoods of the city has been managed by family-run gangs and small-time dealers; poverty and social marginalisation have facilitated the trade; young gang members, known as *soldados*, have fought over territory; local demand for illegal drugs has provided the engine; illicit profits have been laundered in collaboration with local lawyers and financial advisors; and corruption among the police and local officials has ensured that the main traffickers, while their identities are widely known, can operate with few concerns other than threats from rivals. This last element appears to explain why, until the issue was forced into the public domain, there had been a conspicuous lack of political concern with drug trafficking in the city.

The change came on New Year's Day 2012. That day, three community activists were shot and killed in the Villa Moreno neighbourhood by gang members who mistook them for rivals. The killings were not unique, but the victims were; unlike the usual casualties, the assassinated activists had a movement behind them. Their deaths led to local demonstrations and calls for action. The press and local officials were suddenly impelled to pay attention to drug trafficking and related violence. Since then, a spate of official investigations has deepened public understanding of the nature of the drug trade in the city. They have also provided further evidence of the complicity of the security forces and the negligence of the state that have long been known to facilitate trafficking.

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#### Recommendations

- Maintain the focus on the leadership of the most powerful and violent gangs, including following the money trail, and reverse the trend where simply increasing the number of security forces in violent areas is considered a sufficient policy response.
- Re-focus the judiciary away from a two-tiered approach: recognize underage gang members as a vulnerable population, and that confronting the culture of violence will require special initiatives.
- Root out corruption in the local and provincial security forces, recognise the way the state's approach facilitates this complicity, and produce more reliable statistics to better inform policymakers.

#### The Gangs of Rosario

Four or five principal groups are considered to control the distribution of illicit drugs in Rosario. Each dominates a section of the city where drugs are sold, either by themselves, the numerous smaller gangs who hold a few blocks of territory, or dealers who pay for protection. In the impoverished neighbourhoods that form a loose ring around the city and are known as the *villas*,

drugs are sold at a 'bunker' or 'kiosk', usually a small one-room building staffed by a young person normally no older than 17, so as to avoid them being punishable as adults, and in some cases as young as 10. These *soldados* (when minors they are referred to by the diminutive *soldaditos*) are locked inside and spend the day behind a small slot where the money enters and the drugs are passed out. The main drugs sold are cocaine, marihuana, and pharmaceuticals - referred to as *pastillas* (tablets), they are mixed with alcohol in order to create an effect. On the streets outside, armed *soldados* stay on watch for thieves and encroaching rivals. According to a source cited in an official investigation last year, a *soldado* is paid 400 pesos (57 euro) a day to staff a bunker, 200 pesos if they are minors; a *soldado* outside makes 150 pesos (21 euro), double that if he is armed; and 1500 pesos (215 euro), according to the source, is the rate to ensure police protection.<sup>1</sup>

National-level investigations which followed the murders in Villa Moreno suggested as many as 400 bunkers are operating in the city of Rosario (a city of around a million inhabitants), which would mean the number of young people working in and protecting them is in the thousands. A source cited in one investigation claimed a bunker makes around 12,000 pesos (1400 euro) a day on average. Many local journalists, as well as a prominent university study, have multiplied these figures to claim that, at a rough estimate, the annual value of the trade is between 1.8 and 2 billion pesos (between 255 and 286 million euro) for the entire city. This number is widely published, but the crude deduction method does not instil much confidence in its accuracy. Moreover, it is likely that income from bunkers represents only a portion of the market given that not all illicit drugs, and perhaps not even the majority, are sold via this method; noting the purported size of the local trade, local experts have argued that the primary source of the demand is the middle and upper classes in the city centre.<sup>2</sup>

A 5 year university study in which researchers spent time in three local neighbourhoods

with high levels of violence described the gangs as quite loose operations, without much stability or hierarchical organisation, or internal rules. The report's author called the violence "highly regulated", focused against rivals, with members sometimes obligated to punish other members who have killed innocent people not involved in the feud or the drug trade. They noted the boys and young men constructed identity through membership; that killings enhanced personal prestige and recognition; and that the majority of *soldados* interviewed were only involved temporarily, leaving the gangs with time.<sup>3</sup>

The most powerful group, known as *Los Monos*, suspected to be led by the Cantero family, and who appear to differ from the regular gangs, has grown over the past few years. During the 1990s they were involved in a number of criminal activities that included bringing in marijuana from neighbouring Paraguay. By the early 2000s they were taking on other gangs in the south of the city and, after defeating their rivals, they developed in to a fully-fledged criminal organisation. *Los Monos* now have a wider remit than just trafficking drugs: they extort local businesses, run their own bunkers, operate 'kitchens' where coca base is turned into powder, and have reportedly become powerful enough to levy charges on others wanting to sell drugs in the city. As a means of garnering support, they also reinvest a portion of the proceeds in local communities.<sup>4</sup>

Interlinked with the gangs are the *barras bravas*, the groups of die-hard football fans that, in Argentina, sometimes better resemble a criminal outfit organised around football. They play a role in the drugs trade, selling inside the stadium during matches and giving gangs access to a large group of young men who both buy drugs and work as *soldados*. The leader of the *barra* controls and profits from selling drugs - along with other activities the group use to make money like collecting fees for car parking in areas close to the stadium or even taking a cut of the players' wages - and there are regular

disputes over the position. In Rosario, the connections between gangs involved in trafficking and the *barras* of the two main local football teams, Rosario Central and Newells Old Boys, are both collaborative and confrontational. Certain gangs are affiliated with certain teams, although it is clear profits are more important than club loyalty: *Los Monos* reportedly offer protection services to both *barras*. At the same time, the leaders of *Los Monos*, the Cantero family, are linked to Newells and have been involved in disputes over the leadership of the *barra*. The interplay means gang-rivalries and struggles for control of the *barra* can become confused or connected.

The number of homicides has increased in recent years in Rosario, driven, it seems, by inter-gang violence.<sup>5</sup> According to the Criminal Analysis Division of the Ministry of Security of Santa Fe, there were 89 homicides in 2004, 108 in 2005, 90 in 2006, 113 in 2007, 121 in 2008, 130 in 2009, and 124 in 2010. At the end of 2010 there was a noticeable jump in killings of young people, and over the course of 2011 there were 169 murders. By the end of the following year the figure had reached 182, a homicide rate of 15.1 per 100,000 inhabitants; by comparison, the average in the capital, Buenos Aires, was 7.6 for the same year. This year has been bloodier again. At the time of writing in late November, the number of dead has already reached 220. The majority of the murders recorded last year were of males between the ages of 16 and 39 from the *villas*, and over 70% of the victims were killed with firearms.<sup>6</sup>

The reasons behind this sudden increase in violence are not clear. The most plausible explanation is that the killings were the outcome of heightened competition between gangs. The evidence suggests it was most likely attempts by *Los Monos* to control more territory, and their subsequent clash with another gang based in the neighbouring city of Villa Gobernador Galvez.<sup>7</sup> A prominent leader of the Newell's *barra*, a man linked to *Los Monos*, was also murdered in 2010, which may have been the first shot fired

in this new conflict, setting off a series of revenge attacks.

While the spark for the violence is difficult to state with confidence, what can be said is that these gangs have found themselves operating in a newly lucrative context in recent years, and the spoils for the most powerful group are substantial.

## Violence in the New Context

The environment for drug trafficking organisations in Argentina has changed significantly over the past two decades. In the 1980s, the country was used mainly as a transit route for drugs being moved by foreign cartels on to Europe, but by the 90s this was being complemented by a considerable growth in local demand for drugs, coinciding with economic policies that caused widespread poverty and inequality, and eventually drove the country into recession. According to official statistics, since the end of the 1990s the demand for cocaine has declined and levelled, and is now below the average for South America.<sup>8</sup> However, crackdowns on trafficking in Colombia and Mexico have forced cartels to use new routes, and Argentina's role as a corridor for the transit of illicit drugs has deepened.<sup>9</sup> Bordered by Bolivia and Paraguay, respectively cocaine and marihuana producers, Argentina is now a territory where precursor chemicals are produced and exported, where coca base is transformed into powder form, and is also an important source of ephedrine, imported from Europe before it is moved on to cartels in Mexico.<sup>10</sup> And Rosario in particular, a port city on the route for primarily Bolivian but also Peruvian and Colombian cocaine destined for Europe, is located at an important point in the trafficking chain.

The task of moving drugs across the country is outsourced by larger foreign cartels to local clients who then take a cut of the profits or receive a percentage of the cargo to sell themselves.<sup>11</sup> The relationship between local criminal groups operating in

Rosario and the cartels is not clear, although, according to officials cited in the press, members of the Colombian cartels are active in the city.<sup>12</sup>

Argentina's changing role has no doubt made for a more lucrative environment, but it is important to recognise that while a few of Rosario's more powerful gangs may have their finances bolstered by assisting the movement of drugs across the country, the violent confrontations that have raised the homicide rate are the result of battles among *soldados* over the right to serve the local market in the city. And at the core of this violence are socio-economic conditions that have led many children and young adults in the *villas* to opt for the life of a *soldado*.

## Fertile Ground

The *villas* provide fertile ground for drug traffickers and criminal gangs looking to outsource the day-to-day management of the trade, and the risks, to local youths. The economic reforms of the 1990s that eventually drove the country into depression and destroyed the local industry around Rosario, then part of one of the most important industrial belts in Latin America, generated the conditions in which trafficking and the gang-mentality could take root. The reforms meant massive unemployment and poverty, and, throughout the decade, community workers and drugs experts tried largely in vain to draw attention to the dire social conditions, to the number of children dropping out of secondary school, to trafficking, drug use, and the emergence of violent and criminal tendencies among a young generation at risk.<sup>13</sup>

Alongside the economic reforms, the Argentinian government's approach to the drugs issue was dominated by repressive policies solidified in the 1970s during a six year dictatorship and continued later under the 'Drug War' approach backed by the United States. Social and criminal control was given preference over public health and welfare.<sup>14</sup> Consumers and small-time

actors were heavily targeted and initiatives ostensibly focused on drugs served primarily to bolster the security forces; in 2007, then Interior Minister and current senator, Aníbal Fernández, publicly acknowledged the role these policies played: "Gangs blossomed and have become what they are today," he said, "because we have focused on consumers."<sup>15</sup> By the end of the 1990s, local experts were noting high levels of drug use and the presence of gangs and larger traffickers, and expressing concern at the lack of political response.

Since the early 2000s, Argentina's economy has rebounded impressively, driven by protectionist measures that have stimulated the internal economy. This has taken place with little Foreign Direct Investment and little access to foreign loans. Poverty, unemployment and income inequality have been substantially reduced and social spending as a percentage of GDP has tripled.<sup>16</sup> Despite the remarkable revival, not everyone has been affected equally, and in many parts of the country there are areas that remain impoverished. Official unemployment in the province of Santa Fe is 8.6%, but it is important to note that outside of this statistic is a large section of the population who have a non-permanent precarious work arrangement, and often need to supplement their official earnings with another source of income. The burden of unemployment in Rosario also falls disproportionately on the young: a report by the provincial government in May this year found 34.8% of the unemployed people are aged between 20 and 29.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, school dropout rates in the *villas* grew in the 1990s, and they remain high. According to official statistics, in homes in the lowest 20% income bracket in greater Rosario, 8 out of 10 people haven't finished secondary school. A June 2010 assessment by the provincial government looking at the social character of housing over the period 2003 to 2009 also found that in greater Rosario 20% of children under the age of 10 were living in households in the lowest income bracket. The authors noted "this implies a situation of vulnerability among a considerable group of the youngest

children, reducing their opportunities for insertion into society with a dignified life.”<sup>18</sup> And, as families have been forced out of surrounding rural areas by the government’s adoption of an agro-development model that preferences soy and mono-culture over traditional agriculture, the population of the *villas* has swelled in the past few years. Around 10% of the population of Rosario are today considered to live in what are referred to as “informal settlements”.<sup>19</sup>

Regardless of the economic recovery, the cumulative effect of sustained abandonment and social exclusion in certain sectors has had a lasting impact, and in Rosario’s *villas* there exists a young generation that, like in many other Latin American cities, respond to exclusion and a background of joblessness with rejection of the society. School dropout rates are one indication, drug use is another, and another is the culture of violence that has emerged hand-in-hand with poverty and trafficking. Many reported killings or attacks among young adults and children in the *villas* demonstrate a willingness to resolve conflict with violence. These tendencies were noted during the 1990s, and they appear to have recently worsened. It is important to recognise this aspect, as a concerted political response would require more than simply providing employment opportunities.

Last year, a revealing study carried out by a non-governmental group illustrated the social characteristics of this young generation who are prepared to fight and die for the money involved in the drugs trade. The group interviewed 48 children between the ages of 16 and 18 who were incarcerated at a juvenile detention centre (The Adolescent Recovery Institute of Rosario) over the first six months of 2012 for crimes ranging from robbery to homicide. The survey produced the following results:

94% came from the villas around the city; 83% hadn’t finished primary school and not one had completed secondary school; 23% live with both parents, 23% don’t live with either parent and 44% live with their mother; 21% have a parent who has died; 19% have

a father in prison; the average number of siblings was 5.8, and 65% have half brothers or sisters; 23% have had a sibling killed by violence or overdose; 31% have a sibling in prison; and 40% have children of their own, but only half of these live with the children.

The group also found drug use tended to begin around the ages of 12 to 13, and every prisoner interviewed said they used psychoactive substances, with over 65% using four or more (the most popular being tobacco, marihuana, cocaine, and pharmaceuticals).<sup>20</sup>

### **Corruption, Complicity and Impunity**

Investigations which followed the killings of the three activists in 2012 have provided further evidence of what has long been known: police involvement in the drugs trade is extensive. High ranking national government officials of the *Frente Para la Victoria* (Front for Victory) administration have, for their part, openly acknowledged the drug-police connection in Rosario, which, like the province of Sante Fe, is governed by the rival *Socialista* (Socialist) party. Agustin Rossi, the former National Deputy for Santa Fe province who was recently promoted to Minister of Defence, has said, “what is happening in this city is has to do with the connivance of the security forces with drug crime. The problem in the province of Santa Fe is that the level of complicity that exists between sectors of the police and drug trafficking organisations is very high, and that permits crime to grow to the levels it has grown to in Santa Fe and Rosario.”<sup>21</sup>

Police are bribed not to touch bunkers; they pass information to traffickers and have assisted them in escaping capture; and are considered to supply weapons to *soldados*. It is likely that very few bunkers could operate without the complicity of the local security forces: their locations are well known and barely hidden, and local residents claim there are regularly queues outside. This past January, an ex-gang member told the national newspaper *Pagina 12*, “the [drug

trafficker] who ends up dominating is the one who has the better arrangement with *Drogas Peligrosas* [Dangerous Drugs, the police division concerned with illicit drug-related issues]. Without that arrangement, there is nothing. They tell you where you are able to put a kiosk, although sometimes they need to destroy one and they ask you give them a site they can take down.<sup>22</sup> The police do occasionally move on bunkers, but the effect is minimal and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion, noted by local experts, that this is done more for the PR results than as part of any concerted effort against the trade.<sup>23</sup> The police have also developed a reputation for having loose triggers - *gatillo fácil* - and there are cases of police killing people in the villas in cloudy circumstances.<sup>24</sup>

The *Drogas Peligrosas* division, now renamed the Directorate of Narcotics Control and Prevention, is particularly notorious and has a history of collaboration with drug trafficking. Occasional purges of members of the force seem to have had little impact on behaviour. There are also suspicions of in-fighting between *Drogas Peligrosas* and another department, *Comando Radioeléctrico* [Radio Command], for jurisdiction over areas of the city that are more 'profitable' i.e. where members of the force can make more in bribes from local drug traffickers. But corruption among the security forces is not limited to Rosario. Across the country, the police were the enforcers of Argentina's brutal dictatorship that lasted from 1976 to 1983, and they have since maintained some of the personnel and tactics of that period. One dictatorship-era hangover is the *caja negra*, the 'black box' where proceeds from illicit gains, historically from prostitution and illegal gambling but now increasingly from drug trafficking, are held and distributed amongst members of the force as a form of bonus. There are allegations that this same illicit money is passed to local political campaigners and used to fund the campaigns of the parties supported by the police.<sup>25</sup>

The investigations last year, and events since, have produced new examples of the narco-police connection and for a brief moment

brought these issues, rather than the usual focus on violence among the *soldados*, into the public eye. The most prominent case revolved around accusations that Hugo Tognoli, the one-time head of the *Drogas Peligrosas* division of Santa Fe, and later, when investigations led him to step down, the Chief of Police in the province, had been supporting and protecting drug-traffickers. The investigation provided evidence that appeared conclusive, although in June, the case against Tognoli for being part of a criminal network was dismissed by the Federal Court of Appeal. He is currently held on lesser charges of assisting drug traffickers.<sup>26</sup> Tognoli is not the first high ranking official of the security forces in the region to be linked to drug trafficking, and his no.2 and successor, Cristian Sola, was also removed from the position and is being investigated for "illegal enrichment". The accusations against Tognoli, and the suggestions of corruption at the highest levels, have so far implicated six other members of *Drogas Peligrosas* but have not resulted in any serious institutional changes.

In January this year, an incident similar to the Triple Crime shed further light on the role of the police and the complacency of local officials. Three members of the *Movimiento Evita*, a social organisation linked to the ruling FPV party, were shot and injured by *soldados* in the neighbourhood of Nuevo Alberdi. A report submitted by the Secretary for the Prevention of Drug Addiction and Fight Against Drug Trafficking to a court in Rosario noted that just before the activists were attacked, a shootout had taken place at the same spot between members of rival gangs. Local residents had called the police, who subsequently arrived and, according to testimonies, talked amicably with young members of the gangs who were still holding their weapons. The report said a commissioner had ordered the police present not to make arrests. When the rival group returned looking for retribution and fired on the activists, one member of the gang was wearing a bullet proof jacket with 'POLICE' marked on the back. The report into the incident acknowledged that

the local police are aware of the identities of the main drug traffickers operating in this particular villa.<sup>27</sup> Following the attack, members of the movement denounced the provincial government, accusing them of being complicit in drug trafficking. After they named one official in particular, a leader of the movement, also the father of two of the injured, began to receive death threats. The provincial official in charge of witness protection had initially claimed the three activists were involved in drug trafficking, and one official was found to have leaked information about the activists to local drug traffickers. The relatives of the activists were given no protection and the father and his family of 15 have since been forced to leave Rosario. For reasons such as this, it seems the majority of residents in the *villas* are afraid to speak out against local traffickers or the police. While there is little evidence that gangs or traffickers are purposefully targeting journalists and community workers to be killed, prominent journalists covering drug-trafficking have received threats, and there have been cases in which young community activists have been threatened by *soldados* and told to stay out of their neighbourhood; where infuriated neighbours have come together to destroy bunkers and have received death threats for doing so; and, in one infamous case, a popular local community leader, caught in the middle of a fire fight, was shot and killed by gang members.<sup>28</sup> There have been a number of instances of bunkers being destroyed by residents, only to be rebuilt a few days later or moved nearby, and, recently, in a worrying case of vigilantism, a 25 year old man died of his injuries after neighbours set fire to the bunker while he was locked inside. It is evident that residents are exasperated with the situation and the violence, and vigilantism is a worrying new trend. In one villa known as La Banana, activists helped locals convert a former bunker into a cultural centre, an initiative that has been praised by residents and, despite repeated requests, received no official support.

The extent of police corruption, and its persistence over time, suggests political complicity. Prosecutions against members

of the force are generally reactionary, emerging only when the issue is forced into the public eye, and when investigations are initiated they have historically tended to stop short before they reach members of the government. Furthermore, the nature of the penal approach, in which small time players in the trade are prosecuted but the larger actors and beneficiaries are relatively untouched, suggests complicity among the government and the judiciary, particularly when the primary traffickers are considered to be well-known.

In February this year, local journalist Carlos Del Frade, drawing on information leaked from national government investigations initiated in August 2012 in an attempt to provide a “thorough diagnosis” of the situation in Rosario, reported how one official analysis had outlined “the links between the families that manage drug sales in the peripheral neighbourhoods of Rosario and several of the companies involved in the bleaching of this money through alleged laundering manoeuvres.”<sup>29</sup> The enormous sums of money involved in the trade mean drug traffickers rely on accountants, financial advisors and lawyers who ensure the money they make illicitly is cleaned. The gains from drug trafficking appear to have become closely inter-mixed with the legal economy and property, construction, nightclubs and car dealerships are considered the main investments used to clean money. But the white collar facilitators and beneficiaries of drug trafficking in Rosario are rarely the subject of media attention, let alone serious investigation. The judicial and police focus is overwhelmingly with the *soldados*, the most vulnerable and most easily replaceable links in the drug trafficking chain. Efforts to follow the illicit money trail in Rosario have been rare. Enrique Font, a criminologist based in Rosario, has described the approach: “Consumers are made out to be pathological victims, the *soldaditos* and the drug workers are criminalised and punished, but they never identify or lock up the businessmen.”<sup>30</sup>

Members of local civil society have tried to raise these issues. In June there was a

meeting of leaders from across the political spectrum who had come together to call for a greater focus on the investigation of large investments in Rosario and on the destination of the profits gained from drug trafficking. That same month, a large street protest of different groups, including journalists, academics, national and provincial government officials, social movements and church groups, took place in the city, calling for an end to the impunity for drug-traffickers. A University of Rosario study on the situation in the city, published in June and widely reported in the local and national press, focused primarily on corruption among the police, the judicial focus on small time players involved in the trade, and on the lack of initiatives to 'follow the money' and investigate how, and by whom, profits gained illicitly are cleaned and invested in the legal economy.

## Response

The University of Rosario study noted, "Since the national media made public the graveness of the situation in Rosario in relation to drug trafficking, many officials and political candidates have referred to the issue." The sudden attention on drug trafficking and related homicides in Rosario has brought uncomfortable issues into the public eye, and with officials trying to publicly address issues that have long been simmering but largely ignored, the responses have tended towards political gamesmanship between the national government and their rivals, the Socialists, who have governed Santa Fe since 2007.

To give an example, Agustin Rossi, the Minister of Defence, has tried to make the case that before the Socialists came to power in the province the current situation would have been impossible.<sup>31</sup> The argument is disingenuous at best: the fundamental conditions were already present before the Socialist party took over Santa Fe, and the increase in violence is the result of decisions by the gangs, rather than any political change.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, violence can be the result of less corruption rather

than more, and it could be that a less corrupt administration has meant more confrontational drug gangs. With political considerations in mind, Rossi and others have also argued that something unique is happening in Rosario. This is only true in a very narrow sense: the level of violence. The other characteristics - local drugs gangs, known sites where drugs are sold, police corruption, poor peripheral neighbourhoods, and official complicity - are present in other cities across the country. The situation in major cities like Cordoba and Buenos Aires, for example, is essentially identical, although the levels of violence are lower. In both cases, drugs are sold from people's houses or small 'kiosks' in impoverished areas on the outskirts of the city, the trade is controlled by local gangs, and, in a more pronounced manner than in Rosario, there have been threats on the media and targeted attacks against social workers who confront drug traffickers. Likewise, trafficking touches the highest levels of the security forces and implies political complicity: In October, the Minister of Security for the Province of Cordoba and the Chief of Police resigned following accusations they were connected to drug trafficking.<sup>33</sup> However, given the lower level of violence in these cities, and hence visibility of the trade, media attention and official investigations in to drug trafficking are less frequent than in Rosario. Officials from the provincial government, speaking with the press, have tried to downplay the extent of the violence in Rosario, claiming recently that of the 182 homicides recorded in 2012 only 25% were related to drug trafficking. The Provincial Secretary of Public Safety recently dismissed the drug-related violence, saying Rosario has "complex problems with violence and criminality similar to any Argentinian or Latin American city."<sup>34</sup> This is undoubtedly misleading, but difficult to clarify thanks to a police predilection for categorising homicides in the *villas* almost uniformly as "*ajuste de cuentas*" or "score settling", a catch-all term that encompasses arguments between neighbours and inter-family disputes; the murders in Villa Moreno were originally labelled by the police in this way, and, until it was challenged

by activists, the newspapers, as is generally the case, used the police report as their reference and published the same.<sup>35</sup> One of the effects of this approach is that it refuses to acknowledge these killings as clashes between rival gangs and hence obscures the true number of gang-related killings. There may also be some self-preservation involved on the part of the local police: acknowledging these murders as gang-related would draw attention to drug trafficking and hence possibly initiate investigations into their own role in the trade. Furthermore, experts have criticised the federal justice system for not producing more information and analysis related to criminal activity.<sup>36</sup>

In general, the public discussion related to drug trafficking and related violence in Rosario has focused on interdiction - the porous nature of the country's borders, the lack of oversight in the private ports - and 'security', meaning the level of violence, and underplayed the root causes - lack of employment prospects, poverty, social alienation, corruption and demand. (It should be noted, however, that in their discourse provincial officials acknowledge they are cognizant of the root causes, particularly poverty.)<sup>37</sup> Rosario itself is a port city with large numbers of containers shipping grain and soya - almost 80% of the national soya production leaves through the city's ports - and many of these ports are private with little oversight, creating a conducive situation for trafficking. The lack of regulation in the ports is regularly mentioned as a primary concern, as is the weakness of the radar program in the north, called Northern Shield, which is supposed to be preventing drug trafficking flights into the country headed for private runways. Members of the provincial government have publicly laid the blame with their national counterparts for not improving interdiction efforts on the country's borders and have called for more security forces to be sent to the region. The mayor's office in Rosario has asked for the *gendarmeria*, a special division of the army who work on the borders and motorways, to be brought in and suggested they be used to 'patrol'

the poor neighbourhoods.<sup>38</sup> A recently initiated provincial program is set to use community police in the neighbourhood of *Las Flores*, considered the power base of *Los Monos*, to improve the relationship with the security forces.<sup>39</sup> A national government official recently advocated lowering the age of impunity to 14 from 18, hence allowing for the incarceration of more *soldados*.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, Matilde Bruera, a federal public defence lawyer, responding to press reports that, since 2011, 120 children between the ages of 16 and 18 had been detained for working in bunkers and are awaiting trial in federal tribunals, pointed out the selectivity of the penal system and argued the *soldados* should be treated as victims rather than criminals, advocating they be covered under human trafficking laws given they could technically be classified under the category of "labour exploitation."<sup>41</sup>

While proposals are varied, and public discourse has focused on greater use of security forces to confront the issue, it is worth noting that in the background the national government has, publicly at least, distanced itself from the War on Drugs approach and there is momentum in Argentina towards the adoption of more progressive drugs policies based on public health considerations and social support rather than criminalisation and punishment. The INCB has praised the current national administration for taking "comprehensive measures to extend prevention programmes and treatment and rehabilitation facilities to all sectors of the population, including at the provincial level."<sup>42</sup> There is also recognition of the importance of complicity among members of the government and the security forces. In February this year, the Attorney General's office announced that as a result of the situation in Rosario they would be adding a new prosecutor specialised in drug trafficking. According to the draft resolution recommending the creation of the role, the aim will be to focus on the network that sustains "narcocriminality" which persists thanks to "the corruption of the structures of control of the state, including those dedicated to preventing and punishing drug trafficking,

facilitated by the high profitability of the business.”<sup>43</sup>

Regardless, a political strategy towards the situation in Rosario is difficult to discern, and until proposals become policy they mean little. It has long been clear that the judicial approach and police corruption desperately needed to be addressed, and much has been said, but, even after the killings and attention in 2012, little had been done. Once again, it wasn't until the government seemed impelled to act that serious action was taken.

## New Operations

At the end of May, Claudio Cantero, the suspected leader of *Los Monos*, was murdered outside of a nightclub in a drive-by shooting. Three more killings, considered to be revenge attacks, followed in the next two days, drawing widespread national press coverage. Within days, the police moved on properties owned by the Canteros family in operations that, it was claimed, were related to an investigation into a murder in September 2012 in which the Canteros were the primary suspects. Given the history of police involvement, the timing of the operations - just as a series of killings brought national press attention to the situation - appeared fortuitous. Moreover, the raids that followed, on dozens of properties, made it clear that the security forces were aware of these sites long before. Investigations are now proceeding.<sup>44</sup> At the time of writing, six members of the police force have been arrested for supposed collaboration with *Los Monos*, and the leaders of both the *barras* and a provincial government employee are detained on the same charge. Cantero's brother has been detained, and his father and half-brother are on the run. The operations included raids on a number of mansions, including an enormous rural home owned by the Canteros on the outskirts of the city, found around 20 cars, some of them luxury vehicles, and a raid on one property uncovered a 'kitchen' and led to a haul of 60 kilograms of cocaine and precursor chemicals. In a related

operation, an individual considered to have been responsible for laundering money for the Canteros was captured in Buenos Aires.

As the case has progressed, the judge responsible has learned of threats against his life, as well as the lives of the Provincial Secretary of Community Security, the Minister of Security of Santa Fe, and those involved in the raids on the properties of *Los Monos*.<sup>45</sup> In October, the governor of the province, the man taking credit for these moves against certain known traffickers, was at home when his house was shot-up. Gang members were immediately suspected and three people linked to the *barra brava* of both local clubs have been captured, although commentators have advised not to discount disgruntled local police.

The primary suspect in Cantero's murder is a man considered to be a rival drug trafficker from the neighbouring city of Villa Gobernador Galvez. Police raids have taken place on a number of properties he is thought to own, and he is now on the run. Another raid in September, this time by the national government, destroyed one of the largest cocaine kitchens ever encountered in Argentina. Three people were arrested and around 300kg of cocaine and coca base - an amount which, considering it was held in one place, suggests police or official collusion - were captured by the police in Funes, a city 23km from Rosario, as part of an investigation initiated in March last year. Although these were important actions on the part of the national and provincial security forces, it is again difficult to discount political factors, and this is supported in particular by the way the raid on the 'kitchen' was handled by the federal police: just as the provincial government was taking credit for the moves on the Canteros, the national government made it very clear their own operation had been undertaken alone because the provincial government had shown an unwillingness to move on a trafficker who they said was well known.<sup>46</sup> It is also noteworthy that all of these operations came just prior to the beginning of elections in October. The long term impact of the operations is

uncertain. It is clear that the rate of killing has increased since Cantero's death, but it is impossible to determine whether the gangs will collapse, reform under new leadership or be broken up into smaller operations. According to the prosecutor, Claudio Cantero's father and half-brother appear to be managing the trade from hiding. Speaking with journalists, neighbours in Las Flores claim members of *Los Bassi*, a gang based in nearby Villa Gobernador Galvez and considered to be headed by the lead suspect in the murder of Claudio Cantero, had arrived in the area and begun threatening people.

Nevertheless, the focus on certain leading traffickers and their facilitators are positive steps, although there are still a number of high profile individuals who have faced no repercussions. The most relevant features in Rosario, which must be addressed over the long term for the situation to change, are the demand for illicit drugs, the involvement of the police forces and complicity of the state, a two-tiered penal approach, and the existence of socio-economic conditions that mean many young people are not being presented with opportunities for more fulfilling lives than the one offered by drug-traffickers. Any attempt to address the use and trade of illicit drugs should first recognise these factors, and also acknowledge that, albeit with lower levels of violence, they are replicated across Argentina.

## Conclusions

In Rosario, the presence of criminal organisations involved in drug trafficking was a low priority for the government until New Year's day last year, when the killing of three innocent civilians by members of a gang sparked press attention. A rising homicide rate, driven by this territorial conflict between rival gangs, has drawn further attention to the issue. Poverty in the *villas* where the majority of the killings take place is the product of state abandonment and the devastating economic reforms of the 90s. The domestic industry was destroyed over the

course of the decade, and with it went the primary source of employment in the region. Warnings about the worsening situation were ignored by successive governments. For around two decades, gangs have controlled of territory in these areas where drugs are sold via 'bunkers', small buildings staffed by children and young adults. These young people - primarily male and under 30 - fight and die for territorial control. On the other side of the trade, rarely the focus of investigation or the media, are middle class citizens who facilitate the launder of money gained illegally and who reap the benefits with essentially no risk. Crucially, drug trafficking has long been facilitated by corruption among the security forces and complicity among the government and the judiciary, which maintains a two-tiered focus, concentrating on the most vulnerable and visible. Recent police operations against the leadership of the largest gang in the city suggest a new determination to confront high level members. However, if the underlying issues are not addressed, the situation will not markedly improve. Lowering the levels of violence should not be considered a solitary objective in a situation where demand for illicit drugs exists, and the trade is facilitated by poverty, a two-tier legal system, and corruption.

## Notes

1. Del Frade, C. (February 19, 2013). Rosario de Los Narcos. *El Guardian*. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://elguardian.com.ar/nota/revista/1115/el-rosario--de-los-drugs>;
2. Calles Perdidas. (June 2013). Universidad Nacional de Rosario. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.documedia.com.ar/callesperdidas/>
3. Bandas, broncas y muertos: análisis de la violencia en Rosario. (December 2013). Infojus Noticias. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://infojusnoticias.gov.ar/provinciales/bandas-broncas-y-muertos-analisis-de-la-violencia-en-rosario-923.html>
4. Una década de poder sin lugar a discusiones. (May 27, 2013). *La Capital*. Retrieved December 2013 from [http://www.lacapital.com.ar/ed\\_impresa/2013/5/edicion\\_1659/contenidos/noticia\\_5261.html](http://www.lacapital.com.ar/ed_impresa/2013/5/edicion_1659/contenidos/noticia_5261.html)
5. The sudden media coverage has also meant a tendency towards sensationalism among certain journalists and analysts. Terms like ‘Drug War’ or ‘Narco War’ for example, used by the national press, suggest a comparison with Mexico, which is misleading. The University of Rosario recently released a report on drug trafficking in Rosario in which, drawing on provincial police statistics, they published the number of homicides in the city each year for the past 9 years. The total figure is just over 1,000, a statistic the national newspaper *La Nacion* transformed into 1,000 *drug-related* homicides. This claim was then repeated by the analysis site *InsightCrime* under the headline ‘*Drug Violence Cost 1,000 Lives In Northern Argentina: Study*’. An article in the British press, headlined ‘*No one is safe from Argentina’s Drug War*’, claimed that of the first 20 killings in 2013 the majority were of innocents caught in the crossfire, and the author also maintained that the violence in Rosario was “rapidly spreading across other major cities in Argentina, including Buenos Aires”. The source for the initial claim is unclear; the latter is wrong and, by asserting the violence is “spreading”, it misinterprets the nature of the situation in Rosario. The article also claimed that a spate of violence at the beginning of 2013 was proof the days when “the country was largely untouched by the brutal cartels that control the narco trade in Latin America” are now over. Again, this misinterprets the source of the violence and the nature of the trade in the city, controlled by family-run gangs, not cartels.  
El negocio narco en Rosario ya dejó 1000 muertos y mueve \$ 2000 millones al año. (July 15, 2013). *La Nacion*. Retrieved December 2013 from: <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1601132-el-negocio-drug-en-rosario-ya-dejo-1000-muertos-y-mueve-2000-millones-al-ano> ; Wells, M. Drug Violence Cost 1000 Lives in Northern Argentina. *Insight Crime*. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/drug-violence-cost-1000-lives-in-northern-argentina-study>;
6. Lascano, H. (December 30, 2012). Hubo 182 homicidios en Rosario en 2012, un 15 por ciento más que el año pasado. *La Capital*. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.lacapital.com.ar/policiales/Hubo-182-homicidios-en-Rosario-en-2012-un-15-por-ciento-mas-que-el-ao-pasado-20121230-0036.html>
7. According to the text of a 2012 government investigation leaked to local journalist and author Carlos Del Frade by national government officials, at the beginning of 2009 Máximo ‘El Guille’ Cantero, one of the leaders of *Los Monos*, made contact with Paraguayan arms dealers who later supplied him with weapons brought across from Brazil. Around the same time, Maximo’s father, Ariel, travelled to the favelas around Rio to meet with a local gang known as *Comando Vermelho* and returned to Rosario to link up with a local trafficker and put the methods learned in Brazil into practice. The viability of these claims is not clear, but if verified they would support the theory that the increase in violence in 2010 was the result of an attempt by the Canteros to dominate the distribution of drugs in Rosario. Del Frade, C. (February 19, 2013). Rosario de Los Narcos.
8. According to government statistics, annual prevalence of cocaine use began to decline at the end of the 1990s, falling from 3.7% in 1999 to 2.4% in 2004, remained relatively high until beginning to decline after 2006, and again steadied. The latest statistics from the Argentinian government agency concerned with drug trafficking and addiction, SEDRONAR (Secretariat for the Prevention of Drug Abuse and Drug Trafficking), put the annual prevalence of cocaine use for the population between the ages of 16 and 65 at 0.9%, below the UNODC’s average for South America of 1.3%. Cannabis use has also been declining since 2006 and is now, according to official figures, lower than average in South America. The UNODC speculated in 2006 that Argentina’s enormous decrease in cocaine use recorded between 1999 and 2004 may be related to methodological changes adopted by the new government, adding, however, that “it would be extremely unlikely that cocaine consumption, in reality, had increased,” and that, “All of these encouraging trends are probably associated with both intensified prevention efforts in the countries concerned as well as with the overall stabilization of cocaine production in the Andean countries over the past few years.” There has been some controversy surrounding the prevalence of cocaine use among the population. In 2011, the

UNODC World Report claimed the rate was 2.6% for 2009, meaning Argentina had the second highest level of cocaine use in the western hemisphere. The same number was used by the US State Department and replicated widely in the press. The head of SEDRONAR challenged this figure when it was published, arguing that the UN was re-using statistics from 2005 and that the real number was 0.9%. The UNODC's 2012 report revised the figure based on SEDRONAR's analysis, retroactively adjusting the rate for 2009 to 0.9%. The 2013 UNODC World Report notes that according to the latest figures, "Cocaine use has increased significantly in Brazil, Costa Rica and, to lesser extent, Peru while no change in its use was reported in Argentina." The rate for Western and Central Europe - where the cocaine transited through Argentina is generally considered to be headed - is 1.2% according to the UNODC. World Drug Report 2006. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Retrieved December 2013 from [http://www.unodc.org/pdf/WDR\\_2006/wdr2006\\_volume1.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/pdf/WDR_2006/wdr2006_volume1.pdf); World Drug Report 2011. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Retrieved December 2013 from [http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR2011/World\\_Drug\\_Report\\_2011\\_ebook.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR2011/World_Drug_Report_2011_ebook.pdf); World Drug Report 2013. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Retrieved December 2013 from [http://www.unodc.org/unodc/secured/wdr/wdr2013/World\\_Drug\\_Report\\_2013.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/secured/wdr/wdr2013/World_Drug_Report_2013.pdf).

9. According to the UNODC, in terms of the number of seizures of cocaine made in Europe, Argentina is reportedly 3rd in the region as a country of origin. But the seizures are generally small, and in total quantity Argentina appears to be less important. Regardless, the local press have tended to confuse quantity of cocaine being shipped with number of individual seizures and have consequently interpreted the figures to suggest Argentina is the third most important source country, a claim that is not sufficiently clear to be stated with confidence; the UNODC itself warns the figures should be treated with caution. World Drug Report 2013. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

10. The 2012 report of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) claimed government statistics had shown an "increase in the number of illicit laboratories processing coca base detected in Argentina in recent years," most of which they said were dedicated to supplying domestic demand. The claim was denied by the Argentinian government, which argued no such statistics existed and, in response, cited their own report in which they claimed the number of illicit "processing centres" encountered had indeed increased between 2007 and 2009 but that there had been a marked decrease in 2011. The government also sought to separate the processing centres or kitchens where the final stages of creating cocaine powder are carried out - and that they said were not particularly professional, often located inside precarious buildings or sheds -

from laboratories. The kitchens, it was claimed, are primarily found in the province of Buenos Aires. The government also took issue with the INCB statement that "important quantities" of synthetic drugs were seized in 2011, responding, "The available information does not support that claim with respect to the trends that have been recorded in recent years".

Annual Report 2012. (March 5, 2013). International Narcotics Control Board. Retrieved December 2013 from [http://www.incb.org/documents/Publications/AnnualReports/AR2012/AR\\_2012\\_E.pdf](http://www.incb.org/documents/Publications/AnnualReports/AR2012/AR_2012_E.pdf); Ruchansky, E. (March 8, 2013). Una Junta que no junta datos. Pagina 12. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-215367-2013-03-08.html>; See also, Centros de Procesamiento Ilícito de Estupefacientes en Argentina. (March, 2011). Sedronar. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.sedronar.gov.ar/images/novedades/biblioteca/centros%20de%20procesamiento%20il%20C3%ADcito.pdf>

11. For a recent example of the connections, see: Parkinson, C. (November 1, 2013). Argentina Dismantles International Drug Gang, Arrests Clergyman. Insight Crime. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/argentina-dismantles-international-drug-gang-arrests-clergyman>

12. Rodriguez, N.C. (June 15, 2013) El Espectador. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/elmundo/articulo-428003-rosario-capital-drug-argentina>

13. Socolsky, C. (February 17, 2013). "El gobierno provincial debe intervenir, sin echar culpas". Pagina12. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/rosario/18-37700-2013-02-17.html>; Del Frade, C. (2000) Ciudad Blanca, Cronica Negra. Ediciones Letra Libre.

14. For a study on this distortion, read "Sistemas desproporcionados, Desproporción y costos económicos, institucionales y humanas de la política sobre estupefacientes en Argentina", by R. Alejandro Corda, Serie Documentos de trabajo, Intercambios Asociación Civil. June 2012, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

15. Cited in Touzé, G. (July, 2010). Argentina: Reform on the way? Transnational Institute. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.druglawreform.info/images/stories/documents/dlr6.pdf>

16. The Argentine Success Story and its Implications. (October 2011). Center for Economic and Policy Research. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/argentina-success-2011-10.pdf>

17. Informe laboral de la Encuesta Permanente de Hogares. (May 2013). Santa Fe Government. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.santafe.gov.ar/index.php/web/content/download/168397/817774/file/EPH.pdf>;
18. Informe Social de la Encuesta Permanente de Hogares. (June, 2010). Ministry of Government and State Reform. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.santafe.gov.ar/index.php/web/content/download/94105/453543/file/iSocial+EPH+10-8.pdf>
19. Tessa, S. (January 25, 2013). Las Chicas de la Esquina. Pagina12. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/las12/13-7794-2013-01-25.html>;
20. “Desamurallar para que el Otro ingrese”. (July, 2012). Colectivo de Acompañantes Juveniles del IRAR. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://colectivocijpp.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/presentacion3b3n-27-de-septiembre.pdf>
21. Rossi: “Lo que hay en Rosario es un brutal enfrentamiento entre organizaciones narcos” (May 29, 2013). La Capital. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.lacapital.com.ar/policiales/Rossi-Lo-que-hay-en-Rosario-es-un-brutal-enfrentamiento-entre-organizaciones-drugs-20130529-0049.html>
22. Kollmann, R. (January 27, 2013) Con orden de no ver nada. Pagina12. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-212719-2013-01-27.html>
23. This is hardly a novel approach in Latin America. Here, for example, are comments by a resident after the destruction of ‘dens’ in the *comunas* on the outskirts of Medellin, Colombia: “They closed six drug dens here in Barbaocoas, and what a show it was, with all the cameras and the president talking about a grand intervention and investment, but if you look at the problem now, it’s just moved over one block.” Bargent, J. (November 4, 2013). Pushing Around the Problem: Colombia’s ‘War’ on Micro-trafficking. InsightCrime. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/pushing-around-the-problem-colombias-war-on-micro-trafficking>
24. For a recent example, in which the witness to the police killing was later himself murdered, see Fue testigo de un supuesto caso de gatillo fácil, lo contó y lo mataron. (November 8, 2013). Rosario3.com. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.rosario3.com/noticias/policiales/noticias.aspx?idNot=138321>
25. See, for example, Socolsky, C. (February 17, 2013). “El gobierno provincial debe intervenir, sin echar culpas”. Pagina12.
26. Naymark, S. M. (June 13, 2013). Atenúan la acusación contra Tognoli pero deciden que siga detenido. La Capital. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.lacapital.com.ar/policiales/Atenuan-la-acusacion-contra-Tognoli-pero-deciden-que-siga-detenido-20130613-0030.html>
27. Kollmann, R. (January 27, 2013) Con orden de no ver nada. Pagina12.
28. Un periodista recibió amenazas. (April 3, 2012). Rosario3.com. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.rosario3.com/noticias/policiales/noticias.aspx?idNot=109537>
29. Del Frade, C. (February 19, 2013). Rosario de Los Narcos. El Guardian.
30. Calles Perdidas. (June 2013). Universidad Nacional de Rosario.
31. Las Muertes por el Narcotráfico. (June 2013). Universidad Nacional de Rosario. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.unr.edu.ar/noticia/6606/las-muertes-por-el-drugtrafico>
32. Inter-gang violence was also present during the rule of the Peronist government but it was less pronounced and attracted little political attention. *Los Monos*, for example, fought a turf war with their local rivals during the early 2000s while the province was governed by Peronists, the political ideology with which the current government is associated.
33. Notarfrancesco, M. (September 14, 2013) Dos salidas para intentar aplacar el incendio. Pagina12. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-229032-2013-09-14.html>
34. Rechaza el gobierno de Santa Fe que haya una guerra de narcos. (July 16, 2013). La Nacion. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1601474-rechaza-el-gobierno-de-santa-fe-que-haya-una-guerra-de-drugs>
35. “La provincia se negó a producir información pública sobre los homicidios” (July 16, 2013). La Capital. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.lacapital.com.ar/politica/La-provincia-se-nego-a-producir-informacion-publica-sobre-los-homicidios-20130716-0077.html>
36. Calles Perdidas. (June 2013). Universidad Nacional de Rosario.
37. Binner: “No podemos culpar al chico que asesinó, tampoco hay derecho que esté suelto”. (September 12, 2013). La Capital. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.lacapital.com.ar/politica/Binner-No->

[podemos-culpar-al-chico-que-asesino-pero-tampoco-hay-derecho-que-este-suelto-20130912-0072.html](http://www.lacapital.com.ar/politica/El-gobierno-provincial-pide-gendarmes-para-que-patrullen-barrrios-rosarinos-20131115-0004.html)

38. El gobierno provincial pide gendarmes para que patrullen barrios rosarinos. (November 15, 2013). La Capital. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.lacapital.com.ar/politica/El-gobierno-provincial-pide-gendarmes-para-que-patrullen-barrrios-rosarinos-20131115-0004.html>

39. G, Acrich. (September 11, 2013). La Policía Comunitaria operará en el corazón de Los Monos. Diario Cruz del Sur. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.diariocruzdelsur.com.ar/noticia/noticia/id/13883>

40. Binner: "No podemos culpar al chico que asesinó, tampoco hay derecho que esté suelto". (September 12, 2013). La Capital.

41. "El sistema penal tiene selectividad, van presos los más vulnerables" (September 9, 2013). La Capital. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.lacapital.com.ar/policiales/El-sistema-penal-tiene-selectividad-los-que-van-presos-son-los-mas-vulnerables-20130909-0042.html>; For the implications of this approach on prisons in Argentina see Systems Overload. (December 2010). Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) / Transnational Institute (TNI). Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.druglawreform.info/en/publications/systems-overload>

42. Among high level officials there is recognition that the policies which dominated during the 1990s have failed, and there are indications, including discussions within congress, that Argentina is moving towards decriminalisation of personal possession. Importantly, representatives of SEDRONAR, the government body responsible for drug policy, have expressed their support for such an initiative. Moreover, during the latest annual national conference on drug policy organised by the local NGO *Intercambios*, a panel on 'Drugs and Security' - which included the Deputy National Attorney for Narco-Criminality and a representative of the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) - agreed unanimously on the failure of US-backed 'drug war' style policies, on the need to make a distinction between the penal issue and the phenomenon of drug use, and the importance of ending the criminal stigmatisation of users. Members of government have also publicly recognised the implications of an approach that overwhelmingly targets the weakest links in the chain. The primary law related to drug use and trafficking is the Narcotics Law of 1989, itself based on a law passed in the 1970s during the dictatorship. A 2009 supreme court ruling has technically made prison sentences for personal possession illegal, but the wording has left the situation opaque; police continue to arrest people for personal

possession and it seems it is often left to the judges' own interpretation. There is now a movement towards the development of a new narcotics law. Based on the proposals of the officials involved, there appears to be a tendency towards decriminalisation of personal possession and less severe treatment for the minor players involved. Other proposals suggest lowering or even removing criminalisation of simple possession as well as legally enforcing drug users' right to treatment. Annual Report 2012. (March 5, 2013). International Narcotics Control Board; Argentina Overview. Drug Law Reform. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.druglawreform.info/en/country-information/argentina/item/199-argentina>

43. Hauser, I. (February 16, 2013). Para combatir la narcocriminalidad organizada. Pagina12. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-213997-2013-02-16.html>

44. There has been some controversy over the way the investigations, raids and current legal case against the Canteros have been handled. Despite touching on drug trafficking, a federal crime, the case has remained in a provincial court on grounds that drug trafficking organisations were supposedly linked to the September 2012 murder; homicide is a provincial issue. The lawyer representing the Canteros requested the case be annulled given this discrepancy, although the request has so far been rejected by the judge responsible for the case. The head of the Public Defence Service of Santa Fe, Gabriel Ganón, who has previously been critical of the judiciary in relation to drug trafficking, has argued the case should take place in a federal court and has accused the judges involved of incompetence. Ganón's statement led a block of Socialist judges to call for his impeachment.

45. El secretario de Seguridad Comunitaria denunció amenazas contra su vida. (June 29, 2013) La Capital. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.lacapital.com.ar/policiales/El-secretario-de-Seguridad-Comunitaria-denuncio-amenazas-contra-su-vida-20130629-0033.html>

46. Again, there was some controversy surrounding the operation. The National Security Secretary, the man in charge of the operation, said publicly that the raid was undertaken without provincial assistance and that the main target had been known in Rosario for some time but, he said, their had not been "the will to advance the investigation." The governor of Santa Fe claimed their forces were, in fact, involved in the investigation. Then members of his government criticised the national government for acting independently and, also, for taking the recent decision to transfer 5,000 members of the *gendarmeria* out of the provinces into Buenos Aires, a move local officials claimed would displace criminal gangs out of the capital into the provinces.

The National Security secretary responded, saying, “If the state would have been absent in the province last week we would not have broken up a major drugs gang operating in Rosario.” As noted, gamesmanship, after the provincial government had gained credit for their moves against *Los Monos*, is difficult to discount. El fiscal Murray dijo que la provincia puso “en severo riesgo la investigación”. (September 6, 2013). La Capital. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.lacapital.com.ar/policiales/El-fiscal-Murray-dijo-que-la-provincia-puso-en-severo-riesgo-la-investigacion-20130906-0049.html>; Berni: “La provincia en esta investigación por narcotráfico no tuvo nada que ver” (September 6, 2013). La Capital. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.lacapital.com.ar/policiales/Berni-La-provincia-en-esta-investigacion-por-narcotrafico-no-tuvo-nada-que-ver-20130906-0052.html>; Bonfatti dijo que “la provincia también fue parte de la investigación de la cocina de cocaína de Funes”. (September 6, 2013). La Capital. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://www.lacapital.com.ar/la-ciudad/Bonfatti-dijo-que-la-provincia-tambien-fue-parte-de-la-investigacion-de-la-cocina-de-cocaina-de-Funes-20130906-0054.html>

### Briefing Series on Drug Markets and Violence

This briefing series on Drug Markets and Violence will address the complex interaction between the dynamics of an illicit market and the policies that are designed to repress it. The series will focus on local examples where violence is linked to the drugs trade, but not only. It will critically analyze the policy responses and law enforcement practices applied and recommend alternatives prioritising the reduction of violence.



### Transnational Institute

Since 1996, the TNI Drugs & Democracy programme has been analysing the trends in the illegal drugs market and in drug policies globally. The programme has gained a reputation worldwide as one of the leading international drug policy research institutes and as a serious critical watchdog of UN drug control institutions, in particular the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB).

TNI promotes evidence-based policies guided by the principles of harm reduction, human rights for users and producers, as well as the cultural and traditional uses of substances. The project seeks the reform of the current out-dated UN conventions on drugs, which were inconsistent from the start and have been surpassed by new scientific insights and new pragmatic policies that have proven to be successful.

For the past decade, the programme has maintained its main focus on developments in drug policy and its implication for countries in the South. The strategic objective is to contribute to a more integrated and coherent policy where drug control is regarded as a cross-cutting issue within the broader development goals of poverty reduction, public health promotion, human rights protection, peace building and good governance.

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