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Miguel L. Castillo-Girón, Ph.D.
Universidad Francisco Marroquín, Guatemala

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Miguel L. Castillo-Girón, Ph.D.
Universidad Francisco Marroquín
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February 2011
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Applied Research Center
Florida International University
10555 W Flagler Street
Miami, FL 33174
whemsac.fiu.edu
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Miguel L. Castillo-Girón, Ph.D.
Universidad Francisco Marroquín
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The views expressed in this research paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the US Government, Department of Defense, US Southern Command or Florida International University
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Land ownership in Guatemala’s northern Department of the Petén has never followed an orderly or controlled process. For several decades, the land has been occupied and then divided amongst the invaders themselves; only later has the government attempted to provide some sense of legality to the ownership. Despite the efforts of the Guatemalan government to develop the Petén as a sort of American-style manifest destiny, where it was believed that the Petén had to be conquered to provide wealth that would magically bring millions of peasants out of poverty, expectations of land wealth for peasants have proven illusory. Instead, large enterprises dominated the farm lands and have been cultivating African palms in the region for decades. And now drug trafficking groups are buying land, mainly from illegal owners, for money laundering and other illicit activities. While there are no updated, reliable land registry records in the Petén Department, available data shows that significant ownership changes have occurred within municipalities such as San José and La Libertad, with a 90 percent change in ownership from 2005 to 2010.

Petén’s rapid increase in crime, which includes human trafficking, followed the retreat of the Guatemalan army after the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords. Until then, the army had been the only state institution with a presence in the region. Now, however, Guatemala’s main drug trafficking families, the Mendozas and the Lorenzanas, have considerable influence in Petén. And making matters

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1 Data from the Palmicultores of Guatemala Association (GREPALMA) show the returns of said crop in the country are the highest in the world, making it the most attractive agro-crop for new investments.

2 The presence of narcotraffickers is, according to officials in charge of developing the land registry, the principal reason they cannot complete their work. In numerous places they have been pressured to abandon their activities.
worse, the Mexican Zetas have created their own fiefdom in the city of Cobán (located just south of Petén, in the Department of Alta Verapaz), and have essentially turned it into an enclave that lies amongst other DTO’s territories. While there are still no clear indications that the Zetas themselves are purchasing lands in Petén, numerous squatters are often found functioning as advance-guard for the drug dealers; they prevent the authorities from entering, warn of intrusions, and clear land that the drug cartels ultimately take over.³

THE PROMISED LAND

Petén is located in the northern region of Guatemala, bordering Mexico and Belize. It occupies 35,854 square kilometers, has little more than 613,000 inhabitants, and is larger than the Republic of El Salvador (20,742 square kilometers). The capital of the Department, where the centers of government are situated, is located in the Flores Island, around 500 kilometers away from Guatemala City. Petén is famous for the Tikal ruins, the location of the main city of the Mayan civilization.

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4 Instituto Nacional de Estadística
After several centuries of natural life, the disappearance of the Mayan civilization and the scarce interest of the Spanish colonizers in resettling the land due to the inhospitable nature of the jungle, Petén radically and rapidly began to change as a result of major migration flows, mainly consisting of landless peasants coming from other zones of Guatemala in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{5} Various Guatemalan administrations encouraged the settling process for the purpose of providing an escape valve for the social pressures resulting from scarcity of productive land and accelerated growth of the rural population. For this reason, Petén was considered as a sort of American style Wild West – to be conquered with the hopes of providing wealth that would magically bring millions of peasants out of poverty.

The distribution of land went through different stages and priorities, with uneven results. In the 1970’s, the Promotion and Development of Petén (FYDEP) corporation managed the distribution of land as if it were a large farm. In the 1980’s, the National Army used it for counterinsurgency purposes – in cooperation with United States counter insurgency (COIN) programs conducted in Central America during the height of the Cold War.

Since the 1990’s the Protection of the Rainforest of Petén Program, the Ministry of Agriculture (MAGA), PROSELVA, the National Fund for Peace (FONAPAZ) and the National Fund for Land (FONTIERRA) have all acted with both conservationist and political intentions, but without unified criteria of beneficiaries’ selection or land distribution and without providing beneficiaries with technical or financial assistance to help cultivate or develop the land.\textsuperscript{6} As an example, FYDEP transferred a significant

\textsuperscript{5} Instituto Nacional de Estadística
\textsuperscript{6} For a critical view of the FONTIERRA paper refer to the Agrarian Platform presentation in the Global Forum on Agrarian Reform, Valencia, Spain, 2004.
number of people from the Pacific Ocean coast to prevent peasants’ pressure on the big cotton, sugar and banana plantations. Later, FONAPAZ encouraged the mobilization of entire towns that survived the internal armed conflict in the Department of Alta Verapaz, mainly the municipalities of Raxruhá, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas and Chisec, after the Army organized the majority of the existing communities by forcing inhabitants to live close to each other to control their movements and to prevent them from giving logistical support to guerrilla organizations.

The land acquisitions process was never orderly or controlled, it was more of an anarchical and improvised process often referred to as the “land grab.” In the majority of cases, the peasants arrived on their own account and the land distribution was carried out through agreements between the invaders themselves. Later, the government institutions arrived to adjust properties and more importantly to legalize property ownership.⁷

**DISENCHANTMENT**

Expectations of fertile lands and great agricultural wealth proved false; the good harvests lasted only the first two or three years, followed by a notable decline in land fertility. The demolished jungle resulted in terrain with low corn yields that ended up as cattle pastures requiring little labor. In no time, the population of the region began to get hired as temporary workers who migrated to other zones of the country, repeating the poverty cycle from which they tried to escape.

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⁷ According to the Pastoral Social del Vicariato Apostólico of Petén (Catholic Church), the informality and irregularities in the land allocation process is very well known by the narcotraffickers, and they take advantage in forcing the poor farmers to sell their lands.
Another factor that changed colonization was the assumption that the region had big mineral deposits, similar to the nickel ones in neighboring departments. During the 1970’s and 1980’s, this attracted influential military and political leaders who began to appropriate land with the hope of obtaining benefits from these “magical” resources. Thus, plundering and occupation of land were common practice. Ultimately, Spanish, French and American companies began oil exploration and exploitation operations with poor results in the midst of protests by displaced peasants and the pollution of their main sources of living.\(^8\)

These events allowed insurgent organizations like the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) in the southern zone, and primarily, the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR) in the northern zone to achieve a strong presence in the Department. Between 1978 and 1983, the war had a great impact on the Department due to constant warfare, massacres and the subsequent exodus of the population. Like in other areas of Guatemala, the inhabitants of Petén were forced to make a choice: enroll in the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG), the united structure of the guerrilla movement, or in the Civil Self Defense Patrols (PAC), organized by the Army. This had such an impact that even today both sides constitute the origin of the local political leadership, expressed by the polarization between the present political party in power, the National Unity of Hope (UNE), and the Patriotic Party. It is almost certain that they will compete for the Presidency of the Republic in the September 2011 elections.

\(^8\) Perspectives from the “anti-globalization” left: 
http://www.aselobs.org/contents/elobservadorno.7.pdf. and 
CATTLE RANCHING OR GROWING AFRICAN PALM

The end of the war brought the arrival of new human contingents, especially returning refugees from Mexico. But the lack of soil fertility was a well-known phenomenon and it accelerated the process of land reconversion into new activities. Options to survive and escape from poverty were scarce. For this reason, many peasants tried to start cattle ranching activities on their own or sold their properties to farmers from the Eastern zone of the country (the Departments of Zacapa and Chiquimula) that had experience in cattle ranching on lands with low fertility levels. Only those that incorporated forests preservation programs, supported by United States’ NGOs, were slightly successful in improving their living conditions.

Almost at the same time, national agro industrial enterprises previously growing African palm in the southern zone of the country as a substitute for cotton plantations offered to buy large expanses of land to increase their production. Given that the sense of ownership in the zone has never developed and the prevalent criterion was that the land was not productive, there was a literal “fever” to get rid of land.

Peasants who sold their land to the palm producing enterprises faced the dilemma of working on their old properties for new owners or moving to the northern zone of Petén (already declared a protected area) to invade state owned land with the hope that, again, the government in power would legalize their ownership. A significant number of peasants chose the latter and began a new stage in the uncontrollable taking over of state owned land and environmental destruction.
THE ARMY RETREATS

The swift changes in land property in Petén took place within the context of institutional reforms contained in the Peace Agreement signed in 1996 between the government of President Alvaro Arzú and the opposition URNG that brought about, among other aspects, the drastic reduction of the Army that until then had been the State institution with the most presence in the Department. The Civilian National Police (PNC), organized to take care of citizen security, was never able to provide sufficient manpower or the operational capacity to cover the vacuum left by the military.\(^9\)

The first impact of the retreat of the Army was, like in other zones of Guatemala, a rapid and unstoppable increase in crime, especially directed—in the case of Petén—to the stealing of cattle that was moved to Mexico through hundreds of unchecked border crossings. Later, smugglers of agricultural and industrial products came and moved from the border area on the Pacific Ocean due to existing facilities and human traffickers from all over Central America who tried to illegally enter the United States. The impact was of such magnitude that zones like the neighboring state of Tabasco in Mexico began to be invaded by all kinds of contraband and in no time criminal gangs tried to control it.

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE SITUATION

While the Army was present in Petén, drug trafficking activity was not very visible and remained limited to the “unchecked locations” largely along the Mexican border for the shipping of drugs. Even when they knew that there were

\(^9\) The new PNC was organized through a recycling process of its previous members which represented the continuation of corruption practices and a feeling of distrust—that still persists—from the population. That weakness has been taken advantage of, for example, by narcotraffickers to “buy” protection.
few military officers who did not have enough equipment to control their activities, drug traffickers never tried to increase their activity or question military authority. However, there were accusations that some officers provided protection to drug traffickers.

After the military literally abandoned Petén, one of the local main drug trafficking groups, the Mendoza family, moved there from the Department of Izabal, along the border with Honduras and leaving the Lorenzana family in charge of that area, in an orderly and calm process that led to the friendly distribution of northern and eastern regions of the country. It should be pointed out that the participation of these families in drug trafficking was a gradual process encouraged by the Colombian cartels who needed to guarantee drug shipping routes to Mexico by land. The cartels first used several local government officials (mayors) and landlords from areas bordering Honduras and El Salvador and later, they used only groups (families) who offered them the best protection services.¹⁰

The Mendoza family specialized in ensuring aerial shipments from Colombia to Petén while the Lorenzana family stayed in the Department of Izabal and was in charge of land shipments from Costa Rica and Panama that later transited Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador. The internal routes did not provoke conflict since the latter used the northern part of the Departments of Huehuetenango and Quiché for their shipments to Chiapas, Mexico, while the former took total control of Petén and the shipments via Tabasco and Campeche. Other groups specialized in protecting the shipments by sea, taking advantage of the military’s

¹⁰ In a study conducted by the Secretaria de Análisis Estratégico (SAE) in 1987 pointed out that the narcotraffickers preferred an “understanding” with the municipal mayors to obtain territorial security and they did not wish to do it with the national government, which members they considered extremely corrupt.
incapacity to protect the large coastline along the Pacific Ocean.

**THE NEED TO BUY LAND FOR MONEY LAUNDERING**

Guatemalan drug trafficking groups have faced a challenge in that the entrepreneurial sector has totally opposed any association with them. They have been forced to operate in relatively rural areas like Petén, Zacapa, San Marcos, Huehuetenango and Alta Verapaz where no one questions their money’s legitimacy and are socially recognized and protected by the poorest sector of the population who consider them as modern “Robin Hoods” because they offered them services (such as health, education and security) that the State has never provided. In October 2010, for example, the capture of a drug dealer, Mauro Salomón Rodríguez, who operated on the Pacific coast, led to public protests in support by the nearby communities that praised him for creating jobs and building schools.\(^\text{11}\)

The impossibility of joining sectors dominating agriculture, banking or traditional services motivated, for example, the Lorenzana family to begin their own agricultural activities such as melon growing for export to the United States market. For this reason, they bought land in the Departments of Zacapa, Izabal and Chiquimula and also entered politics by supporting former president Alfonso Portillo (originally from Zacapa and currently in the process of extradition to United States for money laundering charges) which allowed them to open their own regional bank that subsequently went bankrupt and was rescued by the same government, purchasing its laundered capital.

On the other hand, the Mendoza family did the same and began to buy large plots of land supposedly for cattle ranching. In reality it was for money laundering purposes that could only be done in the large plains of Petén, given that the availability of land in the rest of the country was practically nonexistent, either because the land was already owned by traditional agricultural sectors or by hundreds of small landowners whose property was not large enough for that purpose.

Taking into consideration the scarcity of land, the agreement of the “good neighbors” was again put into practice: the Mendoza family monopolized the municipalities on the north of Petén (especially San José, where they had their headquarters and controlled the local government) and allowed the Lorenzana family to buy land on the south of the Department (municipality of Sayaxché). However, they arrived late to this zone because the African palm companies have already purchased all “legal” land, meaning land from owners who had valid documents to buy it.

Narcotraffickers, located in southern Petén, purchased as much land as possible (mainly illegal land) in order to conduct illicit money laundering activities, largely through cattle ranching activity. As happened with other illegal land acquisitions, the cartels hoped that the State would end up granting documents that would legitimize their ownership. The purchase of land almost always took place under death threats.\textsuperscript{12} The illegality of the invaders’ property seizures makes them vulnerable to pressure from cartels.

\textsuperscript{12} The group of NGOs that work on the topic of agrarian conflict in Petén have denounced that the state is aware of this situation and does not act to prevent the extortion that the farmers are suffering.
Some drug traffickers have planted their own African palms, attempting to capitalize on already developed industries. In other cases they have used, without owners’ authorization, some of the many landing strips that exist in this large zone with limited road infrastructure. In the north, the Mendoza family used the same procedure to takeover land, pressuring peasants who have invaded the Mayan biosphere after selling their land on south of Petén and especially those who lived in zones adjacent to the Tiger Lagoon. As their land occupation was not legal, the peasants could not oppose the drug traffickers’ pressure, which then used the lands for money laundering --by buying large cattle ranches-- and for safe landing areas for aircraft coming from Colombia.
THE ARRIVAL OF THE ZETAS

Due to ongoing internal divisions, the relationship between five of the most important drug trafficking groups (Mendoza and Lorenzana on the north and the east, and Chamalé, Serceño and Luciano cartels on the south and west) gradually deteriorated. Also, the theft of drug shipments among them led to distrust and a sense that the rules of non-aggression and coexistence were no longer in place. Personalities like Juancho León, who was married to a member of the Lorenzana family and attempted to create his own cartel, was violently murdered by the well-known Mexican Zetas, who were hired by traditional drug trafficking families in 2008.\textsuperscript{13}

This event proved transcendental since the Zetas did not leave the area after finishing their “job” and instead, attempted to gain control of drug trafficking routes in Guatemala and Central America. Through indiscriminate violence against all existing groups to date, the Zetas have created their own fiefdom in the city of Cobán (the Department of Alta Verapaz), a strategic location near Petén (to the north), Izabal, Zacapa, Chiquimula and Baja Verapaz (to the center and east) as well as Quiché (to the west), and turned it into an enclave within other groups’ territories. The Zetas, based in Mexico’s northeastern border area, founded by Mexican former Special Forces troops, broke off from the Gulf Cartel. They began operating in the Petén in 2009 and have fought fierce battles with Guatemalan security forces.\textsuperscript{14}

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\textsuperscript{13} On Juan Leon’s paper and the implications of his death, see: http://www.prensalibre.com/noticias/Denuncian-patrullajes-hombres-armados_0_385161521.html.

So far the Zetas have not shown any interest in purchasing land, however, if they were to take possession of land from any of the local families they would automatically become land owners in the Petén region. It seems that their main motives would be to operate and develop infrastructure to support drug routes destined for the United States. Many of the other land owners in Petén, from those with large extensions of African palms to small cattle ranchers; have little or no direct relationship with the Zetas. The locals seem to be aware of the level of violence associated with the Zetas and appear apprehensive about getting involved in their operations.

THE UNCONTROLLED VARIABLE

In the midst of the current economic dynamism in the Petén due primarily to the growing of African palm and drug trafficking, there is also a factor not seen in other similar areas. That is, the accelerated population growth of the q’eqchi’ ethnic group that, until recently, had been almost exclusively based on the Department of Alta Verapaz and Izabal as well as the south of Petén. Contrary to what happens with other groups (quichés, kakchiqueles and mames) which are gradually facing a population decline as a result of their relationships with non-indigenous cultures, the q’eqchi’ group is experiencing a population growth that could turn Petén, Belize and Tabasco (Mexico) into mainly Mayan speaking areas in no more than two generations (forty years).

Local sources explain this accelerated process of population and territorial growth with the following: “q’eqchi’s are content with having a water source nearby, a fertile land for corn production and then they will settle; when the soil of the region is not fertile they just simply abandon it.”

In any case, the q’eqchi’ growth adds another factor to the zone’s complexity. It could be speculated that if any of the
drug trafficking groups realizes this phenomenon, they could try to use it in their favor, either to gain protection or to encourage the development of an autonomous zone that would comprise areas of Guatemala such as Petén and the Campeche, Tabasco and Chiapas areas of Mexico; where neither of the states have a strong institutional presence or border control.

**LAND PROPERTY CHANGE DATA**

The Department of Petén does not have a reliable and updated land registry due to its expansive territory, the lack of resources to manage it and the need for drug trafficking to keep records ambiguous. Due to these factors, it is impossible to have precise and updated information regarding land property changes. However, available data shows that the changes in ownership are significant in municipalities such as San José and La Libertad (Mendoza family) as well as Sayaxché (Lorenzana family). This may suggest that drug trafficking families or groups are acquiring territory in the area.¹⁵

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¹⁵ Based on interviews that the author has held with families and organizations throughout the region.

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<th>Rural area</th>
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Source: Land Registry (RIC) of the Department of Petén, 2010.

CONCLUSION

Exacerbating the underlying socio-economic, political, cultural, and environmental complexities of the Department of Petén is the arrival of narcotraffickers. Their presence and growth corresponds to patterns of property change that have been observed in the region. The Guatemalan government lacks sufficient authority to control the region’s land acquisitions, and has historically viewed and treated the region as a “drain” for the tensions that take place in the broader Guatemalan State, rather than provide a strategy to improve the living conditions of its citizens.
Until now the Zetas have made sporadic incursions into Petén from their base of operations in the Department of Alta Verapaz as they have attempted to gain control of the drug routes that traverse from El Salvador and Honduras to Mexico. However, they have yet to permanently establish themselves in society. News of their violence is widely known, so the population in Petén will be apprehensive in openly supporting or accepting their activities.

The absence of the Guatemalan government in the region is affording the opportunity for narcotraffickers and cartels to fill socio-economic and security voids – education, health services, infrastructure development, and security. If successful, and if groups like the Zetas permanently settle in the region, a transfer of legitimacy from the State to the cartels could take place, making the region much more dangerous and unmanageable. However, in contrast to what is known of southern Mexico, where drug cartels are dominant actors who impose their wills on the rest of society, in Petén narcotraffickers arrived – same as other groups in the past – in search of personal security, tranquility, and gains. Just like those seeking land or displaced by the armed conflict, the narcotraffickers arrived thinking they would “magically” secure both their individual and personal heirs’ futures by using the land to achieve wealth.

Ultimately, and much like the American Wild West, the region’s security will depend on the ability of the Guatemalan State to develop and implement a national development strategy that seeks to enhance the quality of life for the citizens of Petén and its surrounding departments. Only once the State makes the reassertion of its presence and functions a strategic priority, will the narcotraffickers finally be rendered unable to gain the loyalty of local populations.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Miguel L. Castillo-Girón is affiliated with the Institute of Political Studies and International Relations of the Universidad Francisco Marroquín (UFM) in Guatemala, where his research focuses on public administration and political risk analysis. He is currently serving as the coordinator for UFM’s entrepreneurship program and policy (PEP). Since 2008 he has served as the Managing Director of the Institute of Risk Analysis and Strategic Foresight - ARPES-(www.arpes.org), which conducts surveys of political risk analysis companies such as the National Association of Generators (ANG), Firestone Ventures Inc., and Guild of Palm Growers of Guatemala (GREPALMA), among others. Between 2005 and 2007, Dr. Castillo coordinated various United Nations Development Program (UNDP) programs which were sponsored by the Governments of the Netherlands, Spain and Norway.

Dr. Castillo-Girón has been associated with the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, USA (2007); Center for Population & Development (HCPD) from Harvard University in Cambridge, MA, USA (2006); Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management - Berlin - and Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung - Gummersbach - both in Germany (from 2002 to 2005); National Democratic Institute for International affair in Washington DC, USA (1995); Summer Public Policy Institute, Ohio, USA (1993). International Academy for Liberty and Development Portugal (1990).

From 1998 to 1999 worked as Chief Adviser with the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) on citizen participation on a USAID project in El Salvador called Strengthening Municipal and Citizen Participation.
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**PHASE I**


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