

# Improving security, building trust

INTERVIEW WITH **HÉCTOR MAURICIO LÓPEZ BONILLA**

MINISTER OF SECURITY, REPUBLIC OF GUATEMALA



**HÉCTOR MAURICIO LÓPEZ BONILLA** holds a degree in international affairs from the Universidad Francisco Marroquín. Since serving as an officer in the National Army, Mr López Bonilla has enjoyed a long career working in a number of sectors. An expert in risk and crisis management, as well as strategy and contingency planning, he has also designed and carried out conflict resolution consulting, and taught on these areas of specialisation at university level. He also finds time to carry out social research and to write regular opinion pieces.

**You were President Otto Pérez Molina's campaign manager under the 'Mano Dura' (Get Tough) banner, which promised to improve security for ordinary Guatemalans. How would you assess the government's achievements to date in this regard, and what is your strategy going forward?**

The first thing to say about our Get Tough drive is that this was not the same approach to security that we have seen in many electoral campaigns throughout Latin America. For us, getting tough on crime means firmness in implementing the law, acting in accordance with the law, and respecting the democratic order of the country, and is based above all on a commitment to providing security and safety for all Guatemalans. This means crime prevention, and responding to crime through judicial procedures. This is the underlying philosophy of Mano Dura. The first thing we had to address when we took office was that the institutions of the state were weak. So we set ourselves a timetable of four years in which to implement a strategic plan, working in three main areas: firstly, the normative, which means reforming many laws as well as overhauling the police force and the ministry; secondly, institutional reform that will improve and strengthen our institutions, allowing them to carry out new tasks, and giving them a new perspective; and thirdly, making sure that all this was actually applied, that it was put to work. This has meant implementing mechanisms to monitor the situation; this is not just about crisis management, but about looking to the future, and being able to gauge tangible improvements in the situation of the country.

We have already seen some results in the first two years of carrying out these reforms, and in the coming two years we will continue to learn from them, based on statistical data regarding a reduction in crime; extortion, violence, violence against women, and particularly in dealing with organised crime.

**How does the situation in Guatemala compare with other countries in the region? What impact, if any, is it having on Guatemala's economic competitiveness?**

This was always going to be a difficult issue to address. There is a saying here that there is nothing more cowardly than a million dollars, because it will always run away from any situation where it

sees the slightest risk! That said, we understand the importance of how the international community sees Guatemala. Perception is everything. We believe that by guaranteeing the security and safety of our own people, which to a large extent involves an effective fight against organised crime, against impunity, and which means establishing stronger judicial procedures, and of course in strengthening our institutions, we will also offer a guarantee to international investors that Guatemala is a safe place to do business and that the rule of law applies to all.

In two important – but contradictory – senses, Guatemala plays an important role: it is the region's biggest economy, and borders with the country that in turn borders with the world's biggest economy. At the same time, because of its location, a huge amount of trade passes through from north to south; sadly, at the moment, this is largely made up of the drugs trade, as well as money and arms. So, if we address these issues, and provide better security, we are going to attract more investment, and more investment means more possibility of breaking the vicious circle of organised crime and crime in general, because one of the causes of crime is poverty and lack of opportunity, so we need to improve the economy and thus be able to provide more employment. There is a very clear relationship between security and investment. A non-effective security policy means less investment.

**How serious an impact has the displacement of drug cartels from Mexico and Colombia had on security in Guatemala's border regions? How successful has the government's cooperation with its neighbours been in addressing the issue?**

Before, the drugs trade was discussed in terms of supply and demand. There was demand in the north, and there was supply from the south. But there has not been much discussion about the impact of the drugs trade on transit countries, of which Guatemala is one. This involves criminal gangs to guarantee the passage of drugs to the markets of the north. A kilogram of cocaine increases in value throughout its journey northward. It could cost as little as US\$2,000 in Colombia and end up with each gram worth \$90 or even \$150 in the United States and Canada. Cooperating in combating the drugs trade means that these countries recognise our position as transit

countries; it means respecting our right to carry out actions to protect our sovereignty. But that also means employing scarce resources that we would rather invest in health and education, rather than in a war that has nothing to do with us. An accident of geography has forced us assume a responsibility we did not ask for. We believe that the solution is about making producers and consumers aware of our situation and that we have a role to play in the struggle, but that we need support; which means resources and equipment. When our position is recognised and understood, then we can play a bigger regional role in fighting drugs trafficking and money laundering. We have taken steps since we came into office; we have involved the institutions of the state in this fight. We have made more progress in the last two years than all the governments over the last 15 years.

---

**How has your experience in Peru as an adviser to the government affected your approach to your current role?**

---

I had the opportunity to work for the Peruvian government on communication and marketing of the government, at an institutional level. It is very important to inform the electorate about the government's achievements. As people become better informed about the government's progress, they understand more about its policies and strategies: this is a government committed to change, and these changes can be seen. Peru and Guatemala have much in common, so working in Peru was very helpful in preparing for the challenges we faced here.

---

**Talking to ordinary Guatemalans, there is an almost fatalistic lack of faith in the ability of the police and judiciary to bring perpetrators of serious crimes to justice. What steps is the government taking to strengthen public confidence in these crucial institutions?**

---

One of the main challenges we face is recovering the public's trust in the security forces. This is a process that involves greater professionalisation of the police. We have made great progress in this area. We have a new training school for officers, and we have professionalised the military academy. We also have to improve the standing of the police, to give the job greater status: traditionally people have seen being a police officer as a low status job, as a result of which, there has been little empathy between the police and the public. To improve the status of the police means investing in the institution, in having resources to give them better equipment and infrastructure, and to attract better talent. The third pillar of our strategy is to purge the police of corrupt influences, of organised crime or the temptation of officers to get involved with

criminals, because this is where corruption begins, this is what undermines people's trust in the police. So it's about greater professionalism, about trust, about improving the reputation of the PNC. But let me say something else about improving security in Guatemala: it isn't just about the police, it is also a task that society has to play a role in; it affects everybody, we all have a part to play. Guatemalans must be made more aware of the role we all have to play in combating crime, which is something that begins at home, that begins with the way we teach our children, in how we as parents behave, and in how communities respond to crime. We have to overcome this fatalism, this pessimism. What Guatemala needs is enthusiasm, dynamism, a proactive attitude; we all have to play our role. This is how the country will move forward.

---

**One of President Pérez Molina's most important engagements during his visit to the UK will be the launch of the London School of Economics' report on the economic impact of international (in particular, US) drugs policy on the countries of Central America. What do you expect it to contain, and what do you hope its publication will achieve?**

---

Since President Pérez and other regional leaders first began calling for a new approach to tackling the drugs trade, there has been a lot of expectation in Europe and the United States. Our perception is that the orthodox approach, based on prohibition of drugs has not produced the results it should have. So, we feel that this orthodox approach needs to be revised. This is a debate that regional organisations like the Organisation

**We believe that by guaranteeing the security and safety of our own people, we will also offer a guarantee to international investors that Guatemala is a safe place to do business**

Guatemala's  
Fuerza Tecún Umán



Guatemala plays an important role: it is the region's biggest economy, and borders with the country that in turn borders with the world's biggest economy

of American States (OAS) are involved in. Our report should also be a step forward in formulating a new approach, and will hopefully open up the debate about finding new ways to combat drug trafficking and in finding new models that include decriminalisation in some cases, and in others, legalisation, which as we know, is already taking place in some US states. The time has come to move away from a purely prohibitionist model, and to start looking at cause, more than effect.

**How would you describe your cooperation with the British government on security issues, for example, in respect of prison reform?**

In addressing the question of how to improve our prison system, the first thing we have looked at it is the prison infrastructure itself, about the design and conditions of our prisons, which date back 50 years. We also need to begin better segregation and distribution of prisoners, based on the seriousness of their crime. Then there is the question of offering rehabilitation, so as to prevent prisoners from reoffending; we have to give them some expectation that they have a life on the outside. It is very important to us to work with countries like the UK on developing these new strategies.

**One of the UK's most successful 'exports' to Guatemala and the wider region has been its expertise in private security and risk management. What is the government's view of private security companies' activities in Guatemala, and do you see a greater role for the private sector in partnering with the state – for example, in the case of privately managed prisons?**

Private security is something that we need to incorporate into public security and that can make a contribution to public safety. We are working with

private security companies on this to give them a bigger role, and to certify these companies to oversee training, to establish standards of professionalism, to monitor who can work in this sector, to control the use of guns; there are many aspects to this and we are working on them. I see a lot of potential for private companies as a strategic arm of the state and the government. That said, there is still a lot of controversy and opposition to private companies' involvement in providing security. For the moment, we could not outsource the running of prisons, nor could private security companies work directly with the police.

**Guatemala's deputy minister of technology recently visited the Farnborough Security Show. What were the outcomes of the visit? What kinds of security technologies and equipment are you looking to source from the UK?**

We are particularly interested in the experience of the United Kingdom as pioneers of CCTV for combating crime. London is probably the city with the most cameras anywhere in the world, and has developed a sophisticated response system 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This has proved highly successful, and we want to learn from it and how we can incorporate these systems into the judicial system. CCTV is one line of action; we are also interested in incorporating other UK technologies to improve street patrols, to control traffic, to help with registering vehicles. The United Kingdom has huge experience in this area.

**How are you benchmarking your success in your role as Minister of Security, and what are your priorities for the remainder of your tenure?**

We come back to the areas we spoke about earlier in the interview: this means measuring to what degree have we strengthened the institutions of the justice and security system; have we succeeded in reforming the police, in creating a police force of the 21st century? At the same time, reforming the prison system is part of the same process. The second involves restructuring our institutions, about establishing new procedures, new departments, all of which will regenerate the PNC and give us a modern, well equipped, disciplined force. The third aspect is about results: we have to reduce crime, we have to combat organised crime; we have to reduce violence, much of it associated with drug and arms trafficking. So when we come to the end of this term of office in two years time, the statistics that will show what we have achieved. **F**



Minister López Bonilla inspects cadets at the National Police Academy