

**Committee:** United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

**Issue:** Eliminating violence and crime in the Northern Triangle

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**Position:** Deputy President

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## PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

Dear Delegates,

My name is Andreas Haggis and I shall be serving as the Deputy President of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime at the 2<sup>nd</sup> American College of Greece Model United Nations. I am currently in the 11th Grade in St. Lawrence College. This shall be my second conference chairing but my seventh conference overall, and I sincerely hope I can make this conference as enjoyable for you as possible.

During this conference the UNODC shall be discussing three very important and interrelated topics, that hopefully we can propose not only effective solutions to but long lasting ones as well. This study guide will aim to guide you and provide a starting point while researching your first topic, and so I suggest that you all conduct your own personal research into your countries, their policies and our topics. Having said that, if anyone would like more thorough explanation regarding the first topic feel free to contact me at [andreashaggis@gmail.com](mailto:andreashaggis@gmail.com). Finally I would like to say that I look forward to meeting you all and seeing what solutions you propose to these complex issues.

Best regards,  
Andreas Haggis

## TOPIC INTRODUCTION

Violence and crime within the Northern Triangle revolve around the growing influence and power of criminal organizations and gangs such as Cartels. Such organizations fund themselves primarily through racketeering, trafficking of drugs, slaves and immigrants, and manage to stay relevant by abusing the weak justice systems and corrupt governments of the Northern Triangle countries. As a result it is agreed that the three primary causes for violence in the Northern Triangle are trafficking, the failure of local governments and their justice system and the uprising of criminal gangs throughout the three main countries.

As of 2012, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala (the northern triangle countries) rank as the most violent countries in the world with the highest homicide rates across the globe according to the UNODC. The key reason for this spike in violence was the disruption of the power balance among the Northern Triangle's criminal groups triggered by Mexico's "War on Drugs" in 2006. This "War on Drugs" forced drug cartels out of Mexico and created a new demand for a trafficking supply line from Latin America to the United States; the Northern triangle quickly filled this gap, drastically increasing criminal gang presence and violence (overall OSV) [see definitions of key terms below] These criminal gangs and cartels quickly began using funds from the trafficking operations to extort and bribe NT governments, often gaining impunity from the national justice systems. At the same time, this new influx of funds to these gangs allowed them to further cement their positions in terms of their territories. Subsequently this has led to an increase in "gang against gang" violence as they fight over regions of the northern triangle, as well as "gang against law enforcement" violence as they can now fund their own weapon supplies; cartels like the "Los Mendozas" for example are well equipped with military-style firearms.

Ultimately OSV in the Northern Triangle have had a significant humanitarian impact, spanning the majority of Central America. This impact is most prevalent in terms of the social framework in which communities have deteriorated and the public has begun to distrust governments. The economic impact due to widespread extortion and the sheer amounts of money these organizations bring in affect everything from small business owners to families' financial nets, and the forced displacement caused by the extreme amounts of violence. These alone significantly impact countries surrounding the Northern Triangle like Panama and Costa Rica but yet they only make up a small portion of the overall humanitarian impact.

## DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

### Northern Triangle (NT)

The Northern Triangle is a region of Central America encompassing El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

### General Violence

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, or deprivation.<sup>1</sup>

### Other Types of Violence (OSV)

OSV is a term coined by the Red Cross and refers to violence in its more extrapolated non-traditional forms: civil unrest, riots, gang violence, demonstrations, post-election violence etc. The consequences of such violence is often considered to be as bad to civilian populations as the consequences in armed conflict, much like the situation in the Northern Triangle.<sup>2</sup>

### Organized Criminal Groups

Criminal groups are structured groups of three or more individuals acting together to commit one or more serious crimes, or offenses in order to obtain either directly or indirectly, financial or other material benefit. Common examples include territorial groups like: drug cartels that deal in drug trafficking, sale, and occasionally production; Crime syndicates that oversee illegal agreements and engage in racketeering. It must be noted that such groups are often politically motivated as well as financially motivated in their crime.<sup>3</sup>

### Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking is a global illicit trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of substances, which are subject to drug prohibition laws.<sup>4</sup>

### Extortion

Extortion involves using force, intimidation or illegal power, such as threats of violence or exposure of sensitive information, in order to force an individual into "cooperation".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "World report on violence and health."

<sup>2</sup> "External Actors report\_EN - International Committee of the Red Cross."

<sup>3</sup> "United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime."

<sup>4</sup> "Drug trafficking - United Nations Office on drug and crime"

<sup>5</sup> "United Nations Handbook on Practical Anti-Corruption Measures for."

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Opportunistic Criminal Organizations and the Northern Triangles History of Civil Unrest and Civil Wars

Since the 1950s, countries in the Northern Triangle have experienced internal turmoil. The development of their transnational drug trade, rapid increase in violence and flawed development is rooted in the long-lasting wars and protests towards the second half of the twentieth century.

Guatemala's history of civil war started in the 1950s after a U.S-backed coup that overthrew Jacobo Arbenz, the democratically elected president of Guatemala at the time. Following the coup, rebel groups began attempting to combat military regimes that had formed to try to fill the power vacuum left by the coup. Civil war between the regimes and the rebel groups continued until a UN moderated peace accord was signed by all parties on the 29th of December in 1996<sup>6</sup>. By this time however serious damage had been dealt to Guatemala and its peoples, with about 200,000 dead, 40,000 displaced and considerable damage done to rural areas (due to scorched-earth policies). These consequences set the stage for the rise of opportunistic criminal organizations to take advantage of the weakened government and desperate people of Guatemala.

In 1963, Honduras was in a similar situation to Guatemala due to a military coup, which was fueled by civil-military tensions that had been increasing since 1957. The military coup removed Ramon Villeda, a democratically elected president from power and gave way to a series of military regimes until a new constitution was put in place in 1982. As military regimes lost power, the country became a key U.S base for support to rebels in Nicaragua in the 1980's<sup>7</sup>. Around this time the government also began tackling the left wing and 'left wing activism'. As a result of the civil war the country suffered as poverty and migrant flows out of the country increased in the early 1990's, significantly damaging the economy. In 2009 Honduras experienced another military coup after the Honduran president overlooked the Supreme Courts' request to prevent a referendum and the Supreme Court ordered for his arrest. This coup further weakened the government making it easier for criminal organizations to seize power.

El Salvador also fell to a civil war in the 1970's as legitimacy of the results of the election in 1972 gave rise to revolutionary movements. These revolutionary movements quickly evolved as the army began backing right wing "death squads" who then killed tens of thousands of citizens. In protest, the farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) had evolved into a guerrilla force that fought the

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<sup>6</sup> "guatemala memory of silence - AAAS."

<sup>7</sup> "Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America - Crisisgroup"

civil war against the army which ultimately left over 75,000 dead<sup>8</sup>. Peace accords were signed in 1992 but by that time hundreds of thousands had left to other Latin American countries and the real per capita income had declined by 25 % with 57% falling below the poverty line<sup>9</sup>.

As a consequence to the years of internal conflict in these countries, their governments had been weakened, their citizens had become desperate, and their control had collapsed; Ultimately this left the perfect space for criminal organizations (gangs and cartels) to take advantage and seize power. Gangs like MS-13 (or Mara Salvatrucha) have roots in external mafia organizations (in this case the Mexican Mafia) and had the resources to draw form and quickly seize territory and power. Such gangs essentially provide a social as well as an economic crutch to families that were impacted and left vulnerable by the civil wars. The young men of these families turn to these gangs when looking for a source of income, and often find themselves becoming dependent, socially, on these organizations as it gives them “a cause to fight for”. One of the key reasons for the sudden rise of gang crime and activity is their adaptive flexibility, they change and adapt to new laws, territories and markets, as they have become fundamentally embedded in the society of towns and villages in the Northern Triangle. They generally turn to extortion, drug trafficking, racketeering (especially of transport businesses) and money laundering to generate funding, however they do adapt to the changing markets. In Guatemala for example, the gangs don't traffic narcotics but instead operate as watchmen, transporters or even hitmen for the more powerful local criminal organizations that have stronger ties to corrupt state and security forces. Due to the large amounts of money to be made from such illicit activities, these gangs often fight over territory by either directly engaging in gang warfare or by attempting to harm the other gangs business. Gang wars can prove catastrophic as these gangs are well armed, and overall violence between these gangs are some of the greatest contributing factors to the high homicide rates and the ever-increasing rates of displacement in the northern triangle countries.



*#1 El Salvadorian gang members with high powered weaponry*

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<sup>8</sup> "The 12-year war in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the truth for EL Salvador."

<sup>9</sup> "Rebuilding War-Torn States: The Challenge of Post-Conflict Economic reconstruction - Oxford 2008"

### **The humanitarian impacts of situations of Violence on the Northern Triangle and surrounding regions**

The humanitarian impacts of OSV in Northern Triangle countries are far spread and very complex. The greater humanitarian impact can be broken up into Educational, Economic and social impact as well as the issue of forced displacement<sup>10</sup>.

Violence and extortion significantly impact the schooling system of these nations. Gangs like to target school as it allows them to recruit new members from younger ages and ultimately grow. Causing students to dropout- of school significantly restricts their opportunities in the future, making them even more dependent on the criminal lifestyle that gang membership promotes. Gangs also extort teachers and schools, ultimately having an adverse effect on the entire nation's economy as it restricts economic growth and development since there are fewer professionals taking high paying jobs.

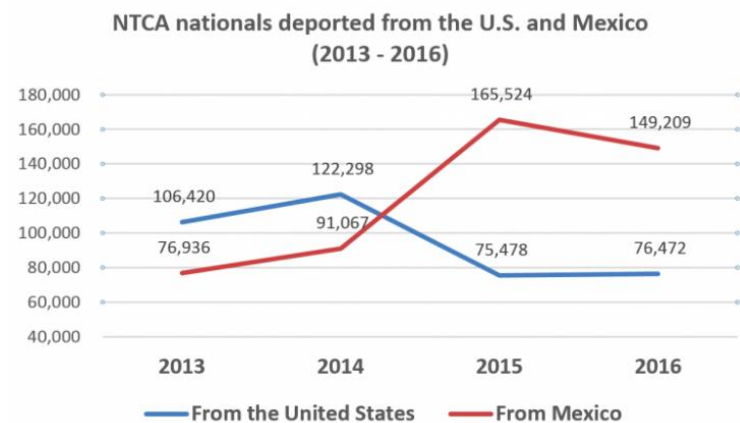
Along with this, gangs create a great economic impact as more and more of the Northern Triangle families become reliant on income provided by them, and wide spread extortion damages small traders and shops. Gangs often force small businesses to pay them “fees” to operate within the gang's territory; these territorial fees often make it harder for local transport and taxi services to operate in these areas. This widespread extortion affects almost every business in the Northern Triangle and causes issues with even the basic needs of the citizens by impacting things like water distribution and prices. The loss of money due to these extortion payments significantly damages all the communities in gang territories, even the ones who work for the actual gangs.

The combating impact these gangs have on the communities and social lives of these countries is pivotal to restricting their power within the nations. The violent nature of organized crime in these regions has promoted an idea of self-censorship, which has placed a restriction in freedom of expression and trust among communities as people feel threatened when they speak openly against the control of organized crime. This mistrust and restriction of conversation damages the cohesion of these communities, eroding their ability to speak out and establish common resistance to the violence caused by organized crime. As a result, community organizations have fallen apart and citizens have lost the pillars of support that a community would have offered them, in terms of social and economic support. Ultimately people are forced to turn to these gangs for financial support or they are forced to leave the area.

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<sup>10</sup> "Other Situations of Violence in the Northern Triangle of ... - ReliefWeb."

Since OSV and the power of organized crime started increasing more and more, Northern Triangle citizens have started migrating outside their countries. A 2012 study showed that 6.2 million people in El Salvador opted for displacement as a strategy to escape violence. A clear link has been established by the UNHCR between the rise in violence and homicide rates and the rise in asylum applications, with a 130% increase of asylum applications from 2009 and 2013 and 31% increase in the granting of refugee status between 2010. However these numbers only encompass the number of legal immigrants fleeing the countries, and don't account for the hundreds of thousands illegal immigrants.



The graph shows the treatment of NTCA nationals who aiming to immigrate and migrate to Mexico and America to escape the violence of the NTCA.

## #2 Deportation Graph

The situation when dealing with the illegal immigration has not been helped by surrounding nations as they have made it increasingly more difficult to gain legal status and have resulted in deporting NTCA nationals. As seen in the graph in countries like Mexico, it has become increasingly harder to obtain legal residence and since President Trump's term began in America the same has applied there. President Trump has attempted to repeal bills passed by the Obama administration that apply to "temporary protected status" (TPS) and "deferred action for childhood arrivals" (DACA). DACA and TPS alone benefit roughly 1 million undocumented migrants and immigrants which entered the US but due to the White House's stricter immigration policy, that may be reverted. The same applies to Mexico where obtaining legal immigration status is a long and difficult process with only 5,954 requests for asylum out of the near 9,000 requests being resolved; Only 3,076 were actually granted<sup>11</sup>. The fact that illegal immigrants and migrants are not being completely acknowledged as asylum seekers significantly worsens the situation as people are sent back to the NTCA. Approximately 20% of the illegal immigrants are also women and minors who are at far greater risk to human exploitation networks and overall trafficking. Countries like Nicaragua, Panamá and Costa Rica have also

<sup>11</sup> "Undocumented Migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America." - crisisgroup

begun to help thanks to work from the UNHRC but this assistance is still much needed to properly facilitate the transport and security of the asylum seekers.

Overall the humanitarian impact feeds into empowering the gangs and criminal organizations that damage the NTCA. The lack of support for the citizens causes them to rely on organized crime for support, which in turn exploits them for its own gain, inevitably growing more and more. Properly providing support and solutions for the citizens will weaken the grasp organized crime has over the NTCA and will significantly better the situation.

## **MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED**

### **Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras (Northern Triangle)**

These are the three key countries that make up the Northern Triangle. As you will see in the timeline of events, all three have been through various stages of political unrest and violence that have allowed criminal organizations to seize power and consolidate their positions. Events like the Mexican war on drugs have made these nations key routes for the Central American to North American drug trade and have ultimately led to the situation we now face in the Northern Triangle.

### **Street Gangs and organized crime of Central America**

Organized crime in Central America was one of the major catalysts for the spike in crime and violence across the Northern Triangle. In 2006 the Latin American and Mexican cartels' routes were damaged due to the Mexican war on drugs. Since then the street gangs of NT countries took advantage of the gap in the market and soon enough were funding themselves off of 'drug money' and slavery. These gangs however compete with each other over territory and smuggling routes, a competition that often turns to deadly gunfights within the cities of the NT, and inevitably strains the nations' resources and impacts civilian life. Such gangs like the Los Mendozas and the Los Lorenzanas are well armed and when provoked start gunfights, and even engage in kidnapping. However it is important to remember that they do act as their own enterprises and thus can be brokered with.

### **Mexico**

Mexico launched a war on drugs in 2006, which ultimately led to the uprising of street gangs and drug crime within the NT. Despite the goal of the war on drugs being to reduce the influx of drug trafficking and tackle drug crime, it was considerably ineffective. Mexico had also dealt with issues such as the cooperation between the street gangs of the Northern Triangle and the Mexican Cartels; this cooperation has caused significant trouble for the Mexican war on drugs.

### **Nicaragua, Panamá and Costa Rica (Central American States)**

Central America has been heavily affected by the violence in the Northern Triangle. As the violence itself seeps into the surrounding nations so do the humanitarian impacts. In Central America Nicaragua, Panamá and Costa Rica are most affected, as citizens of the Northern Triangles' nations are forced to leave their home as asylum seekers. These countries are the largest recipients of asylum seekers; the influence in the past years has been so large that it's been likened to that of a War.

### **United States of America (USA)**

The USA was the first country to openly announce a "war on drugs" as well as the only country to go "head to head" with cartels within another nation's borders. Although America's War on drugs did increase drug traffic into America for a time, it also showed how effective, and simultaneously dangerous, aggressive policies can be if implemented properly when tackling large syndicates like Cartels. So far the US has poured funding into NT countries to carry out violence prevention initiatives and community development, which have significantly helped the nations develop. However at the same time the US has also instigated mass deportation and harsh anti-immigration policies against NT countries without taking into account the impact they have on asylum seekers.

### **Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG)**

The CICIG was an attempt to curb the progress of criminal organizations within Guatemala. It was created as a UN sub-commission charged with the responsibility of investigating and prosecuting serious crime within Guatemala and stands as a key example of how to prevent criminal organizations from gaining impunity in the NT.

### **The Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND)**

The CND is the governing body of the UNODC and was originally established by the ECOSOC in order to help oversee treaties and agreements on drug laws. It has since expanded to investigate "the world drug problem". It may play a crucial part in creating drug treaties and dealing with narcotics when tackling aspects of crime in this topic.

### **United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR)**

The spikes in violence in the NT have caused a significant rise in refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers within the region. The UNHCR has been a key organization to securing the safety of these individuals and improving their conditions. However a 2016 UNHCR report on the situation in the northern triangle

revealed that they were lacking 69% of the requested budget of 23.7 million USD, and that this funding gap has significantly undercut their efforts to better the refugees' situation.

## BLOCS EXPECTED

We expect the alliances on these issues to be divided up into two main groups, the "Pro-war-on-drugs" alliance and the "Zero Tolerance" alliance, as this is one of the most divisive elements of this topic. The "Pro-War-on-drugs" alliance should include countries like the United States of America and Mexico, which are known to support more drastic and direct measures on countering drug trafficking and crime with a goal to directly tackle the source of narcotics and cripple crime. The "Zero tolerance" alliance should include countries like Sweden and Japan, and will most likely focus on tactics like cutting supply through legalization and regulation or improving government stability and decreasing corruption. "Zero tolerance" nations are also known to have strict drug laws and thus focus on improving infrastructure in order to push drug crime and crime "into a corner", essentially countering the impunity that gangs have acquired in the NT.

## TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Description of event
1971	The beginning of the American war on drugs, which ultimately lead to a drastic increase in drug trafficking in the surrounding region
1979-1992	El Salvador's civil war between the military-led government and leftist guerrilla groups
1960-1996	Guatemala's civil war
2006-present day	The Mexican war on drugs, which shifted the balance of power within the criminal underground and lead to the uprising of opportunistic criminal gangs
2007	Guatemala and a UN independent body (CICIG) begin to prosecute criminal groups
2008	Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama experience a sharp increase in migrants from NT countries
2009	Coup in Honduras which significantly disrupted Honduran institutions (mostly the justice system)

2009	The beginning of a significant rise in crime and homicide
2012	Salvadoran government brokers a truce between two major gangs (MS-13 and MS-18) significantly decreasing homicide rates by 40% for that year
2013	Mexican justice department issued a detailed report outlining worrying ties growing between NT gangs and Mexican criminal groups
2014	NT governments form the Inter-American Development bank, a five-year plan with aims to boost economic growth as well as improve job creation and general public safety
2015	Otto Perez Molina (now former president of Guatemala) arrested (on account of a customs corruption scheme) due to cooperation between Guatemalan Attorney General and CICIG. Triggers an Election
2015	Jimmy Morales a comedian with no political background elected as the Guatemalan President over significantly more expressed candidates

## RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

### **The United Nations Convention against Transnational Crime (enforced as of 29th September 2003 adopted 2000 in resolution 55/25)**

This convention aimed to be a starting point and a main instrument in the fight against transnational crime. It is essentially a guide and a call to arms against issues such as the trafficking of women and children, the smuggling of migrants, and the illicit manufacturing and trafficking of firearms, their parts, and ammunition. This convention is vital as it provides the guidelines on how to restrict a lot of the crime in the northern triangle as well as effectively deal with the supply of weapons to the gangs.

### **The United Nations Handbook on Practical Anti-Corruption Measures**

Over recent years several cases of corrupt government officials have surfaced. This convention marks a significant step forward in cooperation against corruption and provides tools and effective solutions that may prove pivotal in tackling corrupt governments or governments prone to extortion and bribery like those of the Northern Triangle.

### The Treaty between MS-13 and MS-18

This treaty was brokered in 2012 between two major Salvadoran gangs, and temporarily brought a ceasefire between the two extremely violent gangs. It was effectively a proof of concept and caused homicide rates to drop from 14 to 5 deaths per day. It still stands as one of the key examples to how peace may be achieved in the NT.

### The Mexican War on Drugs

Mexico's war on drugs is an active effort to directly tackle drug cartels and trafficking by targeting the sources of the narcotics and the head of the cartels. Unfortunately its success has been questionable due to the high homicide rates produced by this counter narcotics effort.

## PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

### The CICIG

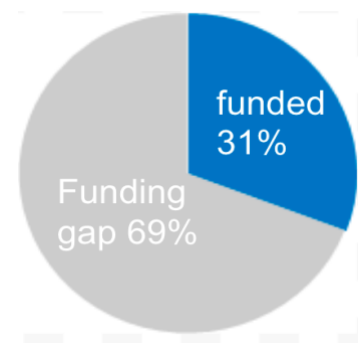
The CICIG has been a key organization in improving the situation in Guatemala and can be used as an example of how to approach the way gangs avoid punishment. With the ability to carry out independent investigations it has been a cornerstone to caving the release of gang members in the NT.

### Negotiation

Negotiated treaties between gangs have been mentioned before but it's important to note that despite being effective these truces quickly dissolved into firefights. Attempts to negotiate with these gangs are risky but do provide, as we have seen, a relevant solution.

### The UNHCR's effort to help asylum seekers

So far, the UNHCR has attempted to solve the humanitarian side of the issue by providing safe passage out of the northern triangle and into other Latin American countries like Mexico, Costa Rica, and Panama. Besides assisting with moving people out of these countries, the UNHCR has also set up child protection initiatives and other safe spaces. Funding however has been an issue as they've had a 69% funding gap as you can see on the right. With better funds perhaps they could more effectively



#3 A pie chart showing the received % of the 23.7 million USD requested

help tackle the issues.

### **The Northern Triangle's efforts**

So far Northern Triangle countries have taken up "Iron Fist" policies, which have called for stricter punishments and responses to criminal activity. These policies ultimately lead to the gangs breaking previous agreements (such as the truces) and homicide levels beginning to rise again, reaching a new peak in 2015.

### **POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

The truce in El Salvador despite being unsuccessful brought up the idea of there being negotiation with gangs. Having governments accept and acknowledge the causes behind the gang problems could be a vital step in neutralizing gang violence, as these groups will no longer feel neglected. Having such a "conversation" with these gangs could lead to the adoption of goodwill measures, where areas like schools are declared safe zones in order to build peace or get the gangs to assist in developing these areas. This of course must be executed with caution so as not to turn the gangs into major political actors.

Improvement of infrastructure so as to offer alternatives to crime and to improve the prison system is also vital. By providing alternatives to crime we could perhaps curve the growth of these gangs and by improving the prison system we could prevent the beginning of new gangs due to negative cohesion. A lot of criminal development that lead to today was caused in part by the overcrowding in jails, where the concentration of gang members allowed them to operate the gangs from within the jails.

Furthermore, it is vital to improve the infrastructure with which we pursue these criminals through organisations like the CICIG. Preventing extortion and bribery would cripple the gangs and make it far easier to imprison members without them bribing their way out of jail.

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