



Paradise Lost? Ecuador's Battle with Organised Crime

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Principal Findings

What's new? Once one of South America's safest countries, Ecuador has in under a decade become its most violent, transforming into a hub of the drug trade to Europe. President Daniel Noboa's iron-fist approach brought murder rates down at first, but violence has since soared again and crime continues unabated.

Why does it matter? Ecuador's authorities have declared the country to be in the grip of internal armed conflict, deploying soldiers to prisons and crime-hit communities. With no sign of violence falling, the government is set to double down on its tough approach, expanding cooperation with the U.S. military and private security contractors.

What should be done? Crackdowns send a strong message to communities and criminals alike, but alone they tend not to overwhelm drug markets. Ecuador should do more to bring state services and licit economic opportunities to crime-hit neighbourhoods while quelling the corruption in ports, prisons and the state that helps generate the crime wave.

Executive Summary

Close to two years into a self-proclaimed war on criminal groups, Ecuador is still struggling to stem a high tide of violence. The joint military and police operations that are the backbone of the crackdown have enjoyed no more than fleeting success. A fall in the homicide rate in 2024 from record heights and a tapering-off of prison riots and massacres seemed to bode well, only for a surge in murders to make the first half of 2025 Ecuador's most violent semester ever. Drugs, above all cocaine, continue to make their way in industrial quantities from the country's ports to U.S. and European markets. Poor communities, particularly along the Pacific coast, are languishing in the grip of a bevy of hyper-violent groups battling for control. Reports of security force abuses such as arbitrary detentions and extrajudicial killings are stacking up, while the government proclaims its proximity to U.S. President Donald Trump and faith in military-led law enforcement. Without stronger public services in crime-hit areas and a firmer stand against corruption in ports, prisons and the state, Ecuador risks losing its battle for public security.

Preying on Ecuador's commercial assets as well as its institutional frailties, trafficking groups have pushed the country into the heart of the global narcotic supply chain. Ecuador had long served as a transit corridor, trading on its strategic location between Colombia and Peru, two of the world's largest producers of coca, the raw material used to manufacture cocaine. But a series of shifts in the Latin American drug trade, including the break-up of large criminal cartels, the rise of trafficking by sea containers and the consequences of the Colombian peace agreement of 2016, favoured the country's transformation into an export platform.

Ecuador offered organised crime more than a mere alternative to previous trafficking routes – in many ways it represented an upgrade. The adoption of the dollar as the country's legal tender, a decision made in 2000 to stem financial collapse, enabled the laundering of ill-gotten gains; busy seaports, an extensive road network and weak border controls make it easy to move drugs around. Corruption within state institutions compounded by spending cuts from 2017 on prisons and security forces neutered the work of law enforcement. For all these reasons, Ecuador's Pacific ports, especially those in Guayaquil, now act as the region's most efficient gateways for bulk cocaine shipments destined for Europe and the U.S.

At the same time, rates of criminal violence soared. The splintering in 2020 of what had been the dominant illegal outfit, Los Choneros, triggered a brutal turf war, above all with the fast-expanding group Los Lobos. Mexican syndicates have fuelled the infighting, with the

Sinaloa Cartel underwriting Los Choneros while the Jalisco New Generation Cartel supports Los Lobos. Meanwhile, dozens of smaller gangs, many of them rooted in poor neighbourhoods starved of basic services and job opportunities, vie to be masters of local drug market-places and extortion rackets, while seeking to prove themselves worthy allies of larger, richer outfits.

Provinces along the Pacific coast remain the heartland of Ecuador's bloodshed. Violence has come in many shapes and forms: killings of judges, prison workers and mayors, skirmishes among criminal groups, murders of extortion victims and car bombings. For many, daily life has become unbearable as communities are divided by invisible borders demarcating the operating zones of rival bands, forcing families to abandon their homes in search of safety. Young women and girls are often lured or forced into crime, and they may pay with their lives for those associations.

First elected in November 2023 and then returned to office in polls in early 2025, centre-right President Daniel Noboa has brought an uncompromising approach to the crime wave. Declaring Ecuador to be in a state of internal armed conflict in January 2024, Noboa's government has relied heavily on military-led operations (including army control of the prison system), "states of exception" – in which a number of civil rights protections are temporarily lifted – and a battery of legal reforms aimed at stiffening penalties for criminals and entrenching the armed forces' responsibilities for public safety. One of his initiatives is to change the constitution so as to allow foreign states to set up military bases in the country, some sixteen years after the last U.S. facility in the country was closed. Noboa's relations with the Trump administration remain warm, and U.S. officials have pledged deeper cooperation with Quito in its efforts to staunch the flow of drugs.

Noboa's tough stance has certainly won public plaudits. But the effects of the campaign have been patchy and short-lived. Military and police raids project state power, scatter criminal groups and push them underground. But the abrupt withdrawal of security forces allows these outfits to regroup. Worse still, the arrest or killing of crime bosses can lead outfits to splinter or tempt expansionist rivals to move in. The string of massacres in Ecuador's prisons that started in 2021 subsided after the military took over, but jails remain under the de facto control of criminal networks and violence has returned. Drug exports from the country's ports may have shifted to new exit points, but there is no evidence that seizures have reduced the volume of traffic.

Ecuador now faces the same dilemmas that the booming drug trade and the often counterproductive efforts to combat it have brought to other Latin American countries over the past half-century. Faced with a tightening noose of law enforcement, criminal groups adapt –

shifting to new territories, tapping fresh recruits, weaving new webs of corruption and diversifying their revenue streams. Prosecuting criminal groups is of course essential, but a workable, sustainable security strategy should also address the specific causes of Ecuador's breakneck rise in violence. On one side, the supply of criminal recruits and the spate of extortion victims from hard-up communities that have been largely abandoned by the state can only be tackled through building stronger public services and community policing. On the other, Quito should train its focus on the engines that have turned Ecuador into such an inviting location for grand criminal activity. Above all, the government will need to develop a concerted set of policies aimed at rolling back collusion between illegal groups and officials in ports, prisons and the state more generally.

While it is not likely that the "war on drugs" will be won any time soon, Ecuador can do far more to contain the wave of violence that has enveloped parts of the country. Military force sends a sharp message to illegal groups, but so long as Ecuador remains a magnet for organised crime, it may well go unheard.

Quito/Bogotá/New York/Brussels, 12 November 2025

Paradise Lost? Ecuador's Battle with Organised Crime

I. Introduction

For decades, as its Andean neighbours descended into conflict and drug-related crime, Ecuador remained a peaceful oasis. Though it saw its share of political convulsions, this small country remained largely free of the spasms of criminal violence witnessed elsewhere in Latin America.¹ At the turn of the 21st century, the main threat to public safety was urban gangs, but a 2007 government program aimed at pacifying these groups brought homicide rates down by two thirds.² Ecuador's relative peace, however, ended abruptly. In 2020, homicides rose sharply; over the next few years, murder rates nearly doubled annually. Prison massacres became routine.³ By 2023, Ecuador was South America's most violent country. That same year, presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio was assassinated days before the election. Months later, in January 2024, criminal groups captured global attention when they stormed a television studio during a live news broadcast and held journalists at gunpoint.

Ecuador was ill equipped to confront the wave of violence that swept the country. Under President Lenín Moreno (2017 -2021), austerity measures led to the dismantling of key institutions, including the Security Coordination Ministry and the Justice Ministry.⁴ These cuts

¹ In the 1990s, Ecuador's homicide rate average was eleven per 100,000, while neighbouring Colombia's hovered around 60. "Homicide Rate Per 100,000 Population by UNODC", Our World in Data, 2025.

² In 2007, President Rafael Correa launched a program aimed at curbing gang-related violence through social inclusion, providing job training, employment opportunities and state funding for cultural, educational, and community projects. As a result, homicides dropped from 15.35 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2011 to just five per 100,000 in 2017. Though successful at first, the program was hampered by uneven gang participation, and it came to an end due to government spending cuts after Correa left office in 2017. David C. Brotherton and Rafael Gude, "Social Inclusion from Below: The Perspectives of Street Gangs and Their Possible Effects on Declining Homicide Rates in Ecuador", Inter-American Development Bank, March 2018. Crisis Group interview, former gang member, Guayaquil, May 2024.

³ Prison massacres claimed more than 450 lives between 2021 and 2023. Carla Morena Álvarez Velasco, "Las cárceles de la muerte en Ecuador", *Nueva Sociedad*, January 2022.

⁴ Moreno reduced public spending and sought emergency funding from the International Monetary Fund. The Justice Ministry's dissolution led to the transfer of control of the nation's prisons to the National Service of Comprehensive Attention to Adults Deprived of Liberty and Adolescent Offenders, stripping the system of ministerial oversight and weakening its ability to secure funding.

weakened the state's security provision and management of the prison system, leaving correctional facilities vulnerable to criminal control. In the words of a former military officer, "That's when the security disorder began".⁵

Public outcry over rising violence has since triggered an emphatic state response. President Daniel Noboa, who came to power in 2023 and was re-elected for a full term in 2025, has adopted a *mano dura* (iron fist) approach to crime.⁶ While Noboa has downplayed comparisons of himself to El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele, his policies echo Bukele's anti-gang initiatives and even seek to emulate some of what are seen as El Salvador's achievements in that respect.⁷ Both presidents have also cultivated ties to U.S. President Donald Trump. But the results of Noboa's crackdown have so far been mixed. In January 2024, he formally declared Ecuador to be in the midst of an internal armed conflict, designated 22 criminal groups as terrorist organisations and deployed the military against them.⁸ The murder rate fell by 17 per cent in the year after the announcement, while the number of prison riots and massacres initially declined.⁹ The first half of 2025, however, saw violence on a scale previously unseen in the country, with over 4,500 homicides reported.¹⁰

This report examines the causes of Ecuador's surge in organised crime and violence. It documents the impact on poor communities and prisons, and it assesses the scope and limitations of current security

Between 2017 and 2020, the prison budget was cut by over 40 per cent, resulting in dilapidated infrastructure, overcrowding and staff shortages. "El acuerdo con el FMI obliga a Ecuador a subir el IVA al 15% y recortar el gasto público", *El País*, 6 October 2020. "The Prison System in Ecuador – History and Challenges of an Epicenter of Crime", Insight Crime, December 2024.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, former military officer, Quito, October 2024.

⁶ Guillermo Lasso, Ecuador's president from 2021 to 2023, left office with impeachment proceedings pending. In mid-May 2023, facing accusations of embezzlement, Lasso invoked the *muerte cruzada* (two-way death) constitutional clause, allowing him to dissolve the National Assembly and call for early elections at the same time – a move that cut his term short by two years. Vanessa Buschschlüter, "Guillermo Lasso: Ecuador's president dissolves parliament", BBC, 17 May 2023.

⁷ Jon Lee Anderson, "Ecuador's Risky War on Narcos", *The New Yorker*, 17 June 2024. In April, Ecuador's interior and defence ministers visited El Salvador, touring the CECOT maximum-security prison. "Ministros Loffredo y Reimberg visitan megacárcel de El Salvador donde Bukele encierra pandilleros", *Primicias*, 25 April 2025.

⁸ Glaeldys González Calanche, "Can a War on Crime Bring Relief to Ecuador?", Crisis Group Commentary, 19 January 2024.

⁹ "Entre enero y diciembre de 2024 se registra un 17% de reducción en homicidios intencionales a nivel nacional", press release, Ecuadorian Interior Ministry, 3 December 2024.

¹⁰ "El primer semestre de 2025 se cerró como el más violento de la historia reciente de Ecuador", *Primicias*, 24 July 2025.

policies. Its findings are based on over 100 interviews conducted between April 2024 and July 2025 in Quito and Guayaquil or by remote means. Interviewees included current and former Ecuadorian officials, civil society representatives, experts on public safety, members of Congress, diplomats, security officers, former criminal group members and residents of affected communities. Women made up nearly 20 per cent of the interviewees, mostly representing civil society organisations, reflecting their under-representation in decision-making and official security roles in the country.

II. Ecuador's Criminal Surge

The reconfiguration of Latin American drug trafficking and a spike in rivalry among criminal groups have driven the worst effects of Ecuador's crime wave. These have become plain to see along the country's Pacific coast, home to more than half of the country's population, where around 70 per cent of homicides are concentrated and which has become a battleground for gangs and organised crime networks.¹¹

A. A Changing Drug Market

Drug trafficking in Latin America has undergone a profound transformation in recent decades, changing hands from a set of hierarchical, all-powerful cartels that oversaw the entirety of the commodity chain to a decentralised network of groups that work independently.¹² Financiers, international traffickers, national-level operators and local gangs form a loosely connected yet highly interdependent supply chain. These smaller, specialised units function autonomously, making it more difficult for state security forces to detect and dismantle them. This fragmented structure enables criminal organisations to expand rapidly into new territories, where resistance is often minimal. It also allows them to alter their trafficking routes and switch their alliances in response to law enforcement pressure.

As criminal enterprises across Latin America made the shift from large to small, Ecuador emerged as a crucial node – above all in the supply of cocaine. Local criminal groups were quickly absorbed into a transnational grid. Acting as subcontractors for international traffickers, they manage logistics, protect shipments of the drug and exert territorial control. These groups, in turn, collaborate with urban gangs, who are paid in narcotics and weapons and carry out extortion, kidnappings and retail drug sales. The fragmentation of Ecuador's criminal landscape is not an outlier.¹³ Indeed, as Crisis Group has documented, the trend can be discerned in other Andean countries, such as Colombia, and Mexico.¹⁴ Local criminal outfits fight one another to partner with the transnational organisations that oversee the trafficking routes, leading violence to skyrocket.

¹¹ Karina Lalangui Vivanco, Christian Sánchez-Carrillo and Emmanuelle Quentin, "Evolución espacio-temporal de los homicidios en Ecuador de 2015 a 2022", *Investigaciones Geográficas* (2025).

¹² For a detailed overview of the changes in Latin America's drug trade, see Crisis Group Latin America Report N°108, *Curbing Violence in Latin America's Drug Trafficking Hotspots*, 11 March 2025.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Crisis Group Visual explainer, "How a New Trafficking Landscape Fuels Violence in Latin America", March 2025.

Ecuador's strategic location, porous borders and institutional vulnerabilities made it an ideal environment for traffickers looking to embed and expand.¹⁵ Following the landmark 2016 peace agreement that led to the demobilisation of the guerrilla Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), traditional trafficking routes out of Colombia, the world's primary cocaine producer, were disrupted. This reconfiguration pushed Ecuador to the heart of the narcotics supply chain.¹⁶ The country borders two of Colombia's most prolific coca-producing regions, Nariño and Putumayo, allowing for easy movement of drugs. Following the dollarisation of the Ecuadorian economy in 2000, the country had already become a magnet for criminal groups seeking to launder their illicit profits and make large cash transactions.

The country's infrastructure also played a critical role. Ecuador's Pacific ports, which enjoy preferential trade access to Europe, are a prime exit point for narcotics bound for international markets.¹⁷ The port of Guayaquil, the sixth largest in the region by cargo volume, is a major gateway for cocaine exports.¹⁸ Traffickers conceal cocaine in shipping containers using various methods: at the point of origin through shell companies posing as exporters; at banana farms where the fruit is packed directly into containers; in the ports where some staff are corrupt; and even at sea.¹⁹ Bananas are used frequently because they must be shipped rapidly so as not to spoil, but drugs are also commonly hidden in loads of products such as fishmeal, tuna and canned goods. In November 2024, authorities seized over thirteen tonnes of cocaine secreted in banana boxes from Guayaquil at the port of Algeciras in Spain, the biggest haul in Spanish counter-narcotics history and the second largest in all of Europe found in a single container.²⁰

¹⁵ "Ecuador's High Tide of Drug Violence", Crisis Group Commentary, 4 November 2022.

¹⁶ Intense battles among criminal groups to take over areas previously under FARC control resulted in transnational crime organisations moving many operations out of Colombia into Ecuador. Crisis Group Latin America Report N°63, *Colombia's Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace*, 19 October 2017.

¹⁷ Until the COVID-19 pandemic briefly paralysed drug trafficking, 80 per cent of Ecuador's cocaine traffic reportedly went to the U.S. and 20 per cent to European Union member states. The proportions have flipped since, with 80 per cent reportedly now heading to the EU and 20 per cent to the U.S. This change is closely tied to the expanding market for synthetic drugs in the U.S. Crisis Group interview, anti-narcotics police officer, Guayaquil, May 2024. "Global Report on Cocaine 2023: Local Dynamics, Global Challenges", UNODC, 2023, p. 58.

¹⁸ "Informe portuario 2023-2024: señales mixtas en el comercio y los puertos y nuevas disrupciones en la logística internacional marítima de contenedores", Economic Commission for Latin America, 8 September 2025.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, counter-narcotics police officer, Guayaquil, May 2025.

²⁰ "Interceptado en Algeciras el mayor alijo en la historia del narcotráfico en España", press release, Interior Ministry of Spain, 6 November 2024.

B. *The Emergence of Violent Criminal Groups*

As drug trafficking routes shifted, larger Ecuadorian criminal groups strengthened their connections with international trafficking organisations – including Colombian and Balkan mafias, as well as Mexican cartels (see Section II.D).²¹ According to a former member of a criminal group, “[The Mexican criminal groups] began to look for [local] leaders of strong organisations that could duplicate their logistics. So many weapons and so much drug money came in that the young people began to fall in love with it”.²²

Impoverished communities, which were hit hard during the COVID-19 pandemic, provided a fertile environment for local criminal outfits.²³ Lockdowns pushed many residents into poverty, creating an opportunity for organised crime groups to recruit new members, particularly young people.²⁴ Subsequent austerity measures, meant to reduce public spending, ate holes in the social safety net even as economic growth slowed.²⁵

Once the pandemic restrictions were lifted, the gangs battled one another for territorial control and sway over communities as they strove to boost stagnant profits.²⁶ A recent study mapping criminal networks identified at least 37 different groups operating in Ecuador in 2024, but this number may be an underestimate.²⁷ In some communities in the coastal Guayas province, like Flor de Bastión and Durán, the number of rival factions has risen to the point where they are carving up neighbourhoods among them. “Before we had two or

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, former gang and criminal group members; security expert, Guayaquil, May 2025.

²² Crisis Group interview, former gang member, Guayaquil, May 2024.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, residents and social leaders, Guayaquil, May and October 2024. The health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic led to a contraction in Ecuador's GDP by 7.8 per cent in 2020, a severe downturn in the labour market, a rise in informal employment and a worsening of gender inequalities. Poverty and inequality deepened, alongside hunger and chronic child undernutrition. In less than a year, the pandemic erased a decade of social progress, with 56.4 per cent of households experiencing job losses and informal employment rising from 46.7 per cent in 2019 to 51.1 per cent in 2020. “Economic Survey of Latin America and the Caribbean 2021: Labour Dynamics and Employment Policies for Sustainable and Inclusive Recovery beyond the COVID-19 Crisis”, Economic Commission for Latin America, 15 October 2021. “Más de 431 000 nuevos pobres y 532 359 empleos perdidos dejó la pandemia en Ecuador en 2020, según el Gobierno”, *El Comercio*, 22 September 2021.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, residents and social leaders, Guayaquil, May and October 2024.

²⁵ “La pandemia incidió en el crecimiento 2020: la economía ecuatoriana decreció 7,8%”, press release, Central Bank of Ecuador, 1 April 2021.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, government official, Quito, July 2025.

²⁷ “Ecuador's Noboa declared war on 22 gangs. In his new term, he faces many more”, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, 3 June 2025.

three gangs spaced far apart”, a community leader said. “Now they are [present] every two blocks. It’s impossible to determine how many there are”.²⁸

Despite the evident dangers, many young people in poor areas with limited access to education, jobs or other economic opportunities are drawn into these groups’ ranks. “The violence that is taking place is because of this”, a former gang member explained. “Young people see the mafias as an option”.²⁹ Local criminal leaders, known as “neighbourhood bosses”, are “desperate to make money”, a young leader said. “The gang members are sixteen years old. The leader is probably 25”.³⁰ As the gangs jostle for control of communities, the stakes get higher, with many seeking to attract the attention of higher criminal echelons and to position themselves as credible partners for national and international traffickers.

C. *Overlords in the Underworld: Los Choneros and Los Lobos*

Organised crime in Ecuador is now dominated by two groups – Los Choneros and Los Lobos. Los Choneros, which controlled the national drug trade until 2020, is enmeshed in transnational cocaine trafficking and has several footholds in the prison system. Los Lobos is now Ecuador’s largest criminal organisation, with a footprint that reaches into the highlands and the Amazon as well as the country’s penitentiaries.³¹

The origins of Los Choneros can be traced to the 1990s, when the group emerged in the coastal town of Chone, in Manabí province, under the leadership of Jorge Bismark Véliz España, alias Teniente España. Busy at first with car theft and kidnapping, the group gradually found its way into the drug trade by offering protection and logistical support to Ecuadorian traffickers tied to Colombian and Mexican cartels.³² “They were the custodians of narco money, the bodyguards”, a security expert explained.³³ Under the leadership of Jorge Luis Zambrano, alias Rasquiña, who took control in 2010 after Teniente España’s death, the organisation extended its reach into other provinces along the Pacific coast, including Guayas, Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas, Los Ríos and Esmeraldas.³⁴

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, young leader, Guayaquil, July 2025.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, former gang member, Guayaquil, October 2024.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, youth leader, Guayaquil, July 2025.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, intelligence official, former military and police officers, former gang members and journalist, Quito and Guayaquil, October 2024 and July 2025.

³² Cristian Ordóñez, *Ecuador en Guerra: La paulatina penetración del crimen organizado* (Quito, 2024).

³³ Crisis Group interview, military officer, Guayaquil, May 2024.

³⁴ Teniente España was killed in 2007. “Del ‘Teniente España’ a ‘Fito’: el historial criminal de Los Choneros”, *Primicias*, 14 June 2021.

Los Choneros grew by eliminating rivals and absorbing smaller criminal units. They soon fashioned a federation of loosely affiliated sub-groups, each with its own leadership but under Rasquiña's central command. When Mexican cartels based in Sinaloa state sought to bolster their operations in South America and disrupt the long-standing dominance of Colombian trafficking networks, Ecuadorian groups became important partners, storing drugs and arranging exports.³⁵ The 2019 extradition of alias Gerald, one of Sinaloa's main logistics coordinators in Ecuador, and the death of another, Telmo Castro, cemented the Choneros' dominance in local trafficking.³⁶

The group's hegemony, however, was short-lived. The assassination of Rasquiña in 2020 convulsed the organisation.³⁷ Deprived of its boss, the group's tenuous cohesion was shattered, triggering a fierce turf war on the streets and behind prison walls. The violent competition unleashed by Rasquiña's murder took on various forms – not just within Los Choneros for leadership of the organisation, but also among rival criminal groups eager to capitalise on the vacuum created by the internal struggle. At stake was control of strategic trafficking routes, prisons and local gangs.³⁸

Formed initially by alias Pipo as a faction of Los Choneros, Los Lobos broke away following Rasquiña's assassination and established itself as an independent criminal force.³⁹ In recent years, it has provided logistical and security support to Mexico's Jalisco New Generation Cartel while searching for ways to reap profits beyond drug trafficking, including illegal gold mining, a market they now dominate. The organisation has been labelled "the largest drug trafficking organi-

³⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Curbing Violence in Latin America's Drug Trafficking Hotspots*, op. cit.

³⁶ Alias Gerald was arrested on 12 April 2017 in Ipiales, Colombia, and extradited to the U.S. on 24 February 2018, where he was sentenced to twenty years in federal prison for drug trafficking. Telmo Castro, alias El Capi, was arrested in June 2013 in Ecuador on charges of drug trafficking and money laundering and sentenced to thirteen years in prison. On 3 December 2019, he was found murdered in his Guayaquil prison cell. "Colombia extradites 'Pablo Escobar of Ecuador' to US", *The Guardian*, 25 February 2018. Crisis Group interview, security expert, Guayaquil, May 2025. "Narcotráfico en Ecuador: qué dice el asesinato del excapitán Telmo Castro en la cárcel de la presencia del narco en el país", BBC, 10 December 2019.

³⁷ Rasquiña was shot dead on 28 December 2020 at a shopping centre in Manta, Ecuador. Three individuals were charged in connection with the killing, but in April 2021 a judge in Manabí acquitted them. No further legal proceedings have been reported. A 2023 investigation by the Attorney General's Office suggested that Zambrano was murdered as retaliation for the killing of Jaime Mallorca Almache, alias El Mexicano. "El caso Metástasis reafirma la hipótesis sobre la muerte de 'Rasquiña'", *Primicias*, 20 January 2024.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, naval officer, Guayaquil, May 2024.

³⁹ "¿Quién es 'Pipo', el líder de Los Lobos que es sancionado por Estados Unidos?", *Primicias*, 6 June 2024.

sation in Ecuador” by the U.S. government.⁴⁰ “Los Lobos are trying to become the new Choneros”, said a police officer. “They’re seeking to consolidate their hegemony”.⁴¹ Los Choneros and Los Lobos, as well as their leaders, are subject to U.S. sanctions and have been designated as Foreign Terrorist Organisations.⁴²

Both groups, meanwhile, partner with midsize groups or smaller gangs for support, whether storing drugs, moving them safely through cities en route to export, expanding local drug retail markets or assuring control of territory.⁴³ These profit-driven partnerships are inherently fragile; when they break, violent turf wars can erupt.⁴⁴ “The worst that can happen is for an alliance to break or a group to switch sides”, a former police chief explained.⁴⁵

D. *Transnational Alliances*

Large international trafficking networks, for their part, scout Ecuadorian groups to supply cocaine by land or sea. Ecuador’s most prominent criminal groups have forged direct links with Mexican traffickers. Los Choneros has long maintained a partnership with the Sinaloa Cartel, while Los Lobos has struck an alliance with the Jalisco New Generation Cartel.⁴⁶ These ties are often managed through emissaries, sent by transnational networks to Ecuador to negotiate terms of business, such as profit margins and delivery deadlines, ensure product quality and guarantee that the drugs reach their destination.⁴⁷ “The Mexican

⁴⁰ “Treasury Sanctions Ecuador’s Los Lobos Drug Trafficking Organization and Its Leader”, press release, U.S. Department of the Treasury, 6 June 2024.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, police officer, Quito, July 2025.

⁴² The U.S. Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned Los Choneros and its leader, Adolfo Macías, alias Fito, on 7 February 2024, while Los Lobos and its leader, Wilmer Geovanny Chavarria Barre, alias Pipo, were sanctioned on 6 June 2024. “Treasury Sanctions Ecuador’s Notorious Los Choneros Gang and Its Leader”, press release, U.S. Department of the Treasury, 7 February 2024. “Treasury Sanctions Ecuador’s Los Lobos Drug Trafficking Organization and Its Leader”, op. cit. “Terrorist Designations of Los Choneros and Los Lobos”, press release, U.S. Department of State, 4 September 2025.

⁴³ For example, Los Tiguerones, which operates in Esmeraldas and parts of Guayaquil, and the Chone Killers, which controls much of Durán, compete to provide services to larger drug trafficking networks. “The Prison System in Ecuador – History and Challenges of an Epicenter of Crime”, op. cit.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, security expert and state official, Quito, October 2024.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, former police chief, Quito, October 2025. Internal disputes sparked by the arrest or assassination of a leader can also fuel mayhem. For example, the killing of Chone Killers’ leader Antonio Benjamín Camacho Pacheco, alias Ben 10, in December 2024 fractured the group into five factions, all battling for control of territory in Durán, one of the country’s most violent cantons. “Durán superó por segundo año a la ‘ciudad más violenta del mundo’; fractura de Los Chone Killers agrava crisis”, *Primicias*, 24 March 2025.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, former intelligence official, October 2024.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, counter-narcotics police officer, Guayaquil, May 2024.

cartels act like a business when they hire [Ecuadorian groups] for logistics”, a police officer said. “They pay 70 per cent in drugs and 30 per cent in weapons. Then [the local criminal groups], have to distribute [drugs] for domestic consumption and fight for turf”.⁴⁸

According to officials and former gang members, Mexican cartels have played a decisive role in stoking violence in Ecuador. In late 2020, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel spotted an opportunity to challenge the Sinaloa Cartel's dominance in the region's drug markets and invested in strengthening Los Lobos, fuelling a fight between this group and Los Choneros.⁴⁹ Balkan mafias, particularly from Albania, are also prominent contractors. Active in Ecuador since the 1990s, they have kept a lower profile than their Mexican counterparts but have established direct links with Colombian cocaine suppliers and oversee the transport of drugs from Colombia to Ecuador, where they use their influence in the port of Guayaquil to arrange exports to Europe. To reduce their visibility, they rely on Ecuadorian gangs for day-to-day operations.⁵⁰

Ecuadorian groups also maintain links with Colombian crime networks operating in border provinces such as Carchi, Sucumbíos and Esmeraldas. These connections enable cocaine to be imported from Colombia to Ecuador, as well as for chemical precursors, particularly gasoline used to produce the refined drug, to be smuggled in the opposite direction.⁵¹ Comandos de la Frontera, a criminal group born of a merger between dissidents from the former FARC and right-wing paramilitaries, originally from the southern Colombian region of Putumayo, has a growing presence on both sides of the border, working primarily with Los Lobos.⁵² Competition in the area can be violent: Comandos de la Frontera has killed coca buyers from Los Choneros who have tried to enter southern Colombia.⁵³

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, former police officers, Quito, October 2024.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Quito and Guayaquil, May and October 2024.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, military officer, former gang member and security expert, Quito and Guayaquil, May and October 2024; July 2025. See also “Balkan criminal groups are taking advantage of instability in Ecuador”, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, May 2024. Law enforcement agencies have discovered Balkan illicit interests behind legitimate businesses, such as banana traders, that are used as a front to export drugs. Fatjona Mejdini, “Cocaine connections: Links between the western Balkans and South America”, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, April 2025.

⁵¹ Anastasia Austin and Henry Shuldiner, “Unmasking the Foreign Players on Ecuador's Criminal Chessboard”, *Insight Crime*, 7 March 2024.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, intelligence official, October 2024.

⁵³ Bram Ebus, “The State of Coca”, *Amazon Underworld*, 19 August 2025.

“Los grupos narcotraficantes de Colombia y Ecuador se enfrentan en la frontera amazónica por el negocio de la coca”, *El País*, 29 November 2024.

E. *Corruption and State Weakness*

Organised crime has embedded itself in Ecuadorian state institutions in a bid to secure protection, impunity and profit.⁵⁴ Criminal groups use extortion and intimidation to co-opt officials throughout the public sector, including in the justice and prison systems, ports, and security forces, as well as many local governments.

Criminal networks manipulate legal proceedings through illegal dealings. Several prosecutors and judges have been accused of destroying evidence or arranging early release for criminals in exchange for cash and luxury goods. Bribes range from as little as \$1,000 to more than \$100,000, depending on the service provided.⁵⁵ Seven of the twelve judges in a court in Guayas, including the former president, were removed in March 2024 due to allegations of links to organised crime.⁵⁶

Ecuador's justice system is severely underfunded and understaffed, leaving courts and prosecutors ill equipped to tackle the challenges posed by organised crime. Judges and prosecutors are often not afforded adequate protection; at least fifteen have been killed since 2022.⁵⁷ A government review found that the country needs at least 600 more prosecutors, as attorneys are saddled with unmanageable caseloads.⁵⁸ The judiciary's weakness in turn enables organised crime to infiltrate the legal system, resulting in alarming levels of impunity: an estimated 90 per cent of investigations of violent offences – including homicide, extortion and kidnapping for ransom – never progress beyond the preliminary stage.⁵⁹ Victims complain that the

⁵⁴ For more, see Crisis Group Report, *Curbing Violence in Latin America's Drug Trafficking Hotspots*, op. cit.

⁵⁵ "Daniel Salcedo expone las tarifas de la corrupción judicial: ¿por cuánto se venden los jueces en Ecuador?", *Ecuavisa*, 4 June 2024. "La Contraloría ha reportado 59 casos de posibles delitos entre jueces y fiscales desde noviembre de 2023", *Primicias*, 20 June 2025.

⁵⁶ Provincial officials, including former legislator Pablo Muentes and ex-court president Fabiola Gallardo, allegedly ran a criminal network that manipulated judicial decisions and court appointments to protect allies in organised crime. Their operations reportedly benefited figures like Adolfo Macías, alias Fito, leader of Los Choneros. "Pablo Muentes y jueces de Guayas detenidos en el caso Purga, que vincula la política legislativa con el narcotráfico", *Plan V*, 4 March 2024. "El caso Purga, explicado", *GK*, 3 March 2025.

⁵⁷ Juanita Goebertus, "Ecuador Needs a Different Approach to Fighting Organized Crime", *Americas Quarterly*, 16 January 2025.

⁵⁸ Ecuador's Attorney General's Office and its Judicial Council, which is in charge of judicial oversight, report a serious shortage of personnel. According to a government official, the Attorney General's Office has been requesting more prosecutors since 2019. Crisis Group interview, Quito, July 2025.

⁵⁹ In 2023, fewer than 9 per cent of homicide investigations resulted in convictions. The situation is particularly dire in coastal provinces such as Guayas, Manabí, Los Ríos and El Oro, where resolution rates fell below 8 per cent. "El nivel de asesinatos resueltos está por debajo del 9% en cinco provincias costeras",

bureaucratic process is onerous and that cases often go nowhere. "It is very easy for [a] complaint not to be accepted", a human rights defender noted. "The collaboration between protection institutions and crime is clear".⁶⁰

Various investigations led by the Attorney General's Office, known as *Metástasis*, *Plaga* and *Purga*, have revealed the strength of organised crime's grip on state institutions.⁶¹ *Metástasis* uncovered how drug trafficker Leandro Norero had orchestrated a criminal network reaching into the uppermost echelons of the judiciary, security forces and other state institutions.⁶² As a result, he was able to manipulate judicial proceedings, ensure impunity for suspects and gather confidential information on law enforcement operations.⁶³ The prosecution secured 32 convictions between July and November 2024, implicating high-ranking officials, including judges, prosecutors and police officers. Among them was Wilman Terán, then-president of the Judiciary Council, the institution responsible for appointing and sanctioning judges and judicial officials.⁶⁴

Corruption also thrives at the local level. In the canton of Durán, criminal networks have allegedly forged alliances with politicians and municipal officials to secure public contracts, regulate access to essential services and extort residents.⁶⁵ A former local official explained, "[These groups] threaten municipal workers, demanding 50 per cent of their salaries or forcing them to resign. There are

Primicias, 15 January 2024. Crisis Group interviews, public official and security experts, October 2024 and July 2025.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, human rights activist, Guayaquil, May 2024.

⁶¹ For detailed information on these cases, see "Caso *Metástasis*", "Caso *Plaga*" and "Caso *Purga*", webpages maintained by the Attorney General's Office.

⁶² Leandro Norero, known as *El Patrón*, rose from being a lowly member of *Los Ñetas*, a gang that was legalised under former President Correa, to become a prominent drug trafficker and one of the main financial backers of criminal groups such as *Los Lobos* and the *Chone Killers*. Norero was murdered in Cotopaxi prison in 2022. Following his death, evidence recovered from his cell phone revealed that he had been running a vast corruption network from prison. "¿Quién fue Leandro Norero, el presunto narcotraficante que operaba en Ecuador?", *GK*, 14 April 2024.

⁶³ "Un megaoperativo en Ecuador revela la profundidad de la narcopolítica en el sistema judicial", *El País*, 16 December 2023.

⁶⁴ Terán was convicted in three major corruption cases (*Metástasis*, *Independencia Judicial* and *Pantalla*) and sentenced to a total of 25 years and three months for obstruction of justice, organised crime and illicit association. "Independencia Judicial, *Metástasis* y *Pantalla*: los tres casos en los que Wilman Terán fue sentenciado por corrupción en la justicia", *El Universo*, 7 July 2025.

⁶⁵ In Durán, the leader of *Los Chone Killers* – Julio Martínez, alias *Negro Tulio* – built an extensive criminal network that infiltrated municipal bodies including the traffic agency and fire department. Through these institutions, the group not only secured fraudulent municipal contracts to finance its operations, but also used official vehicles to transport drugs. "Durán, Ecuador: A Window into Ecuador's Organized Crime Explosion", *Insight Crime*, September 2024.

[public] contracts directly linked to criminal organisations. It's relentless harassment, day and night, until the person either quits or leaves. There's nowhere to turn".⁶⁶ Criminal groups' access to municipal institutions enables them to obtain advance information about police operations and control strategic areas, such as transport corridors.⁶⁷

Corruption also permeates the security forces. Police officers receive meagre paychecks, making them particularly vulnerable to bribery. Public distrust of the police is high, and officers are frequently accused of colluding with organised crime.⁶⁸ Anti-graft mechanisms have been ineffective in addressing misconduct as internal investigations rarely result in dismissal.⁶⁹ Local security experts and residents of Guayaquil told Crisis Group they suspect police officers are involved in turf wars among criminal groups, with some even carrying out killings under the cover of official operations.⁷⁰ With military personnel taking on larger roles in fighting organised crime, there is widespread fear that corruption is also festering in the armed forces. "The military has become more corrupt as it is exposed to drug trafficking", a U.S. official told Crisis Group.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, former municipal official, Guayaquil 2024.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, local journalists, 2024.

⁶⁸ Public trust in Ecuador's national police force fell to 35 per cent in 2023, marking a sharp decline from the 50 per cent trust levels reported in 2018 and 2019. See LAPOP Lab, Americas Barometer Ecuador, Trust in National Police, 2006-2023.

⁶⁹ A former police officer described anti-corruption efforts as inadequate, warning that whistle-blowers risk severe repercussions. "The system does not protect those who report corrupt officials. They are left isolated, abandoned and exposed to criminal gangs", he explained. Crisis Group interview, Quito, October 2024. See also "Delitos policiales: La ineficiente depuración en Ecuador", Connectas, 2022.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, security expert, 2022; Guayaquil residents, 2024 and 2025.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Quito, October 2024.

III. Violence at the Grassroots

Violence and crime now shape the daily lives of many Ecuadorians, but as mentioned above, the Pacific coast is the region most affected. In 2024, six of Ecuador's ten most dangerous cantons – with yearly homicide rates surpassing 120 per 100,000 inhabitants – were located on the coast.⁷² The year before, eight of ten murders in the whole of Ecuador took place in coastal provinces.⁷³ In mid-October, a car bomb exploded in a busy commercial district of Guayaquil, Ecuador's business capital and most important port, near a shopping complex owned by a relative of President Noboa, killing one person and injuring over twenty.⁷⁴

Guayaquil has become a nerve centre of drug trafficking and organised crime. In this city and along the coast, larger crime groups employ targeted violence in their fight for control of strategic drug corridors, river routes, highways and illegal mining zones. Public officials, including judges, prosecutors, mayors and port managers, are routinely subject to intimidation or bribery.⁷⁵ Over the past year, at least six port workers have been killed in Guayaquil.⁷⁶ In other coastal cities like Manta, in Manabí province, fisherfolk are coerced into supporting maritime drug trafficking under threat of kidnapping or death.⁷⁷ “Those who are involved in fishing only have two outcomes: to end up dead or in prison”, a former gang member told Crisis Group.⁷⁸

Not far from Guayaquil's city centre and its wealthiest neighbourhoods, meanwhile, a different facet of Ecuador's crime wave is on display. Gangs lord over poor communities through extortion, kidnapping and

⁷² In 2024, Pueblo Viejo, located in Los Ríos province, was the most violent city in the country's coastal regions, with 207.19 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, a rate more than four times higher than that in St. Louis, Missouri, the most violent U.S. city that year. “En 30 ciudades de Ecuador se incrementó la violencia, algunas a niveles históricos”, *Plan V*, 19 February 2025. “Crime Trends in U.S. Cities: Year-End 2024 Update”, Council on Criminal Justice, January 2025.

⁷³ Coastal areas comprise the metropolitan district of Guayaquil, Los Ríos, Guayas, Manabí, El Oro and Esmeraldas. Crisis Group was allowed to read confidential police documents containing this data.

⁷⁴ According to the interior minister, the car bomb was planted by Los Lobos in retaliation for a military operation in Buenos Aires, Imbabura, which targeted its illegal mining activities. “Los Lobos emergen como autores del ataque con coche bomba en Guayaquil, según el ministro del Interior”, *Primicias*, 15 October 2025.

⁷⁵ According to the Association of Municipalities of Ecuador, five mayors were murdered in the country between 2023 and 2024. “Patricio Maldonado: 25% de alcaldes cuentan con seguridad de la Policía Nacional”, *Teleamazonas*, 14 January 2025.

⁷⁶ “Seis trabajadores portuarios han asesinados en Guayaquil en los últimos dos meses”, *Ecuavisa*, 17 September 2025.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, former gang member, July 2025.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, former gang member, July 2025.

retail drug sales.⁷⁹ Extortion of local businesses and residents has become a parallel economy in the canton of Durán, considered the country's repository of drugs, with criminal groups even profiting from their control of access to essential services like provision of drinking water.⁸⁰ "Here we have all the geographical conditions that facilitate crime", a local official explained.⁸¹

Armed with guns received in exchange for their trafficking services, urban gangs demand extortion payments from locals. Explosive devices have even been deployed against those who resist shakedowns.⁸² Reports of extortion have soared nationwide since 2022, with over 20,000 criminal complaints filed since 2024 alone, of which only 34 resulted in convictions.⁸³ In the province of Guayas, several entire communities, including staff at schools, hospitals and churches, are forced to pay extortion fees, known as *vacunas*.⁸⁴ "Everyone pays. If you don't pay, you die", a former gang member told Crisis Group.⁸⁵ According to residents, the weekly payments range from as little as \$1 per household to thousands of dollars for large and medium-size businesses.⁸⁶ On flyers or in personal visits, gang members describe the payments as protection money. It is typically young women, who attract less attention from law enforcement, who make the collections.⁸⁷

Child recruitment has also soared as trafficking groups expand. As noted above, minors and young adults in impoverished neighbourhoods, whether due to economic necessity, peer pressure or the chance at upward mobility, often feel they have no choice but to join gangs. Boys and young men are particularly vulnerable. "Knowing that you have no breakfast, nothing for lunch, and nothing for dinner leads these children to look for the groups and say 'give me the gun'",

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Guayaquil, 2024.

⁸⁰ "Terranexus Durán. Las conexiones detrás del tráfico de tierras en la bodega de la droga de Ecuador", Tierra de Nadie and Connectas, 22 September 2024. "Ecuador's High Tide of Drug Violence", op. cit.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, local authority, Guayaquil, May 2024.

⁸² Bomb attacks are frequently used to intimidate shopkeepers who refuse to accede to extortion demands, particularly in Guayaquil. On 3 June, for example, explosives planted near Guayaquil's bay destroyed several commercial stalls after the vendors had received threatening pamphlets and WhatsApp messages from a criminal group. "Detonan explosivos en la Bahía de Guayaquil, el corazón comercial de la ciudad", *Primicias*, 4 June 2025.

⁸³ "Radiografía de la Extorsión: Tipologías y resultado de la Encuesta Nacional de Victimización de Casos de Extorsión Empresarial", Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2024. Data from the Attorney General's Office of Ecuador Statistics and Information Systems Directorate.

⁸⁴ "Delito de extorsión, un mal que viven los ecuatorianos, ¿qué pasó en 2024?", *El Comercio*, 16 December 2024.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, former criminal group member, Guayaquil, May 2024.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, community leaders and residents, Guayaquil, May 2024.

⁸⁷ Crisis group interview, woman community leader, May 2024.

a former gang member explained. “These groups offer them groceries.”⁸⁸ Children as young as eight are often lured into joining criminal groups, where they may assume roles as drug distributors, hit men, recruiters or collectors of extortion fees.⁸⁹ For many, the money they amass and the reputation they attain as they climb the criminal ladder come to outweigh any risks they may face.

Violence against children has grown exponentially as a result.⁹⁰ Disappearances of children and young people nearly doubled between 2023 and 2024, with over 300 cases registered in the latter year; young girls accounted for more than 70 per cent of these cases.⁹¹ The child homicide rate surged by 640 per cent between 2019 and 2023, while there were 403 reported cases of such murders in 2024.⁹² Nearly half of these killings occurred in Guayas province.

Criminals also target young women and girls for recruitment, sometimes in the guise of romantic relationships. “They knock on their door and say, ‘I want you to be with me’”, a former gang member explained. “Some women end up giving in”.⁹³ Criminal leaders offer security and money to families in exchange for their daughters, whom they treat as property, with girls as young as twelve subjected to sexual exploitation and trafficking. Once in these groups, girls and women often handle administrative tasks, such as collecting extortion fees and maintaining financial records. They are involved in making sure the drugs for retail are packaged in the right doses. In addition, they act as lookouts, warning other members of the group when the police are coming.⁹⁴ Women rarely hold leadership positions in the organisations.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, former gang member, Guayaquil, May 2024.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Guayaquil and Quito, May and October 2024. A teacher in Guayaquil reported that of 40 students in her classroom, five were working with these groups as drug distributors, gunmen and recruiters. Crisis Group interview, October 2024.

⁹⁰ For analysis of the social, economic and cultural factors contributing to involvement of children and young people in organised crime, see “Estudio sobre vinculación de niños, niñas y adolescentes a organizaciones criminales en Ecuador”, Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, Pan American Development Foundation, Programa de Comunidades Seguras, June 2025.

⁹¹ “Desaparecidos: Los niños perdidos en la guerra interna de Ecuador”, Tierra de Nadie and Connectas, April 2025.

⁹² “En Ecuador, la tasa de homicidios de niños, niñas y adolescentes aumenta en un 640% en cuatro años”, press release, UNICEF, 16 January 2024. “70 niños y adolescentes menores de 15 años murieron en hechos violentos en Ecuador durante 2024”, *Primicias*, 21 January 2025.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, former gang member, Guayaquil, May 2024.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, police chief, Durán, October 2024.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Guayaquil, May and October 2024.

Femicides and other violence against women have spiked in Ecuador in the past five years.⁹⁶ According to a civil society coalition tracking femicides in the country, nearly half of the gender-related killings of women documented in 2024 were linked to organised crime.⁹⁷ It is not just women involved with these organisations who are at high risk: girls and women face retaliation if they are merely perceived to be associating with a rival group. In Flor de Bastión, a neighbourhood in northern Guayaquil and one of the city's most violent areas, locals said simply being seen with a man belonging to a rival gang can have deadly consequences.⁹⁸ At the same time, women play a crucial role in protecting and supporting their neighbours. In parts of Guayaquil and Esmeraldas, they act as mediators with local gangs, seeking solutions to community issues and enabling access to public and humanitarian services, often while facing threats from criminal groups.⁹⁹

Insecurity has also triggered a spike in internal displacement, although its full scale remains under-reported as victims usually leave without informing their neighbours or local authorities, while the Ecuadorian government has so far failed to measure the problem with any accuracy.¹⁰⁰ According to a study from a France-based NGO, as of December 2024 over 90,000 Ecuadorians were internally displaced due to criminal violence.¹⁰¹ A youth leader in Guayaquil told Crisis Group he had to abandon his home after being kidnapped. "In each block, which has between fifteen and twenty houses, at least four to five families have left. Those who don't leave [stay] because they don't

⁹⁶ According to government figures, 812 femicides were recorded between 2014 and 26 January 2025, with the highest annual totals reported in 2017 (100 cases) and 2023 (111 cases). The number of violent deaths of women has more than tripled since 2020, rising from 165 cases that year to a record 603 in 2023. "Información estadística de femicidios a nivel nacional", Ministry of Women and Human Rights of Ecuador, 26 January 2025.

⁹⁷ In the first three months of 2025, at least 50 women linked to organised crime suffered violent deaths, accounting for 61 per cent of the total recorded. "2024, año mortal para mujeres y niñas en Ecuador: al menos 274 feminicidios", Fundación Aldea, 28 January 2025. "82 feminicidios en Ecuador: las cifras que el Estado ignora", Fundación Aldea, 31 March 2025.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, youth leader, Guayaquil, May 2024.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, woman community leader, Guayaquil, May 2024; journalist reporting on Esmeraldas, Quito, October 2024.

¹⁰⁰ Abandoned houses are often turned into hubs of illicit activity. Residents of Guayaquil and Durán report that empty properties are frequently used to store drugs and weapons, to conduct recruitment and even to hold kidnapping victims. Crisis Group interviews, police chief, former gang member, former local official and human rights activist, Guayaquil, May and October 2024. In 2024, police in the Socio Vivienda district recovered more than 400 houses that had once belonged to displaced families but had fallen under the control of criminal groups. Crisis Group interview, police officer, Guayaquil, October 2024.

¹⁰¹ "Desplazamiento interno en Ecuador: Enero-diciembre 2024", 3iSolution, April 2025.

have resources or family elsewhere. On my block ... between five and six families [remain]”, he said.¹⁰² Clashes between criminal groups often bring massive displacement. In Socio Vivienda, a troubled neighbourhood in north-western Guayaquil, members of the criminal group Los Tiguerones killed at least 22 people in March, marking the deadliest massacre outside prison walls in the country's recent history. Some 32 families were forcibly displaced from their homes in the aftermath.¹⁰³

Although drug trafficking remains the most lucrative criminal business in Ecuador, groups such as Los Lobos have also pushed into other more established illicit activities, including mining. The involvement of criminal networks has turned mining areas into battlegrounds as the groups “extort money from multinationals or by directly controlling mining sites themselves”, a security expert told Crisis Group.¹⁰⁴ Los Lobos has operations spanning seven provinces, stretching from Imbabura in the northern highlands to Camilo Ponce Enríquez in Azuay, the country's most violent canton in 2024.¹⁰⁵ There, homicides doubled between 2023 and 2024 as criminal groups fought for control of mining.¹⁰⁶ Miners are coerced by criminal groups into handing over part of their earnings, and those who refuse are kidnapped or murdered.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, youth leader, Guayaquil, July 2025.

¹⁰³ “Desplazamiento forzado interno de familias de la comunidad de Socio Vivienda en Guayaquil. Reporte preliminar”, Comité Permanente por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos de Guayaquil, 22 March 2025. “Reporte sobre desplazamiento forzado en Socio Vivienda – versión 20.05.2025”, Comité Permanente por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos de Guayaquil, May 2025.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, security expert, Guayaquil, October 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former police officers, Quito, October 2024.

“Los Lobos extienden su explotación criminal de oro a siete provincias”, *Código Vidrio*, 18 June 2024.

¹⁰⁶ “Boletín anual de homicidios intencionales en Ecuador: 2023”, Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2024. “Camilo Ponce Enríquez pasó a ser el cantón más violento de Ecuador por tasa de homicidios en 2024”, *Primicias*, 27 January 2025.

IV. Crime behind Bars

Prisons in Ecuador have become hotbeds of crime themselves. Overcrowding and rampant corruption have given criminal groups a stranglehold over the jail system, leaving them free to extort fellow inmates and coordinate operations on the outside with impunity.¹⁰⁷

Criminal groups establish control by bribing and threatening guards and administrators. Corruption permeates the institution in charge of the prison system, the National Service of Comprehensive Attention to Adults Deprived of Liberty and Adolescent Offenders.¹⁰⁸ “Not all prison workers are corrupt”, a prison guard told Crisis Group, although personnel often come to depend on illicit payments, particularly because their wages are low and benefits meagre. “For them, it becomes their family’s livelihood”.¹⁰⁹ Those who do not cooperate can end up paying with their lives. Since 2024, at least 27 prison workers, including three directors, have been killed.¹¹⁰ A prison guard described taking the job as a “suicidal” act, citing the lack of essential protective gear, such as bulletproof vests.¹¹¹

Criminal control of prisons leads to extortion of not just inmates but also their families. Inside, everything comes at a price. A bad behaviour record can be erased for \$400, while a release certificate can be secured for \$600 to \$1,000.¹¹² Inmates are systematically coerced into joining criminal groups; in the process, their families are often drawn into illicit activity as well. “When someone enters a prison, they are forced to do things for the group, for example having their family deliver drugs for them”, a young activist from Guayaquil

¹⁰⁷ Under former President Correa, Ecuador’s prison population grew sharply following a shift toward longer pre-trial detention, harsher sentences and the withdrawal of alternatives to incarceration. Between 2007 and the end of 2017, the number of inmates nearly doubled, climbing from 17,283 to 35,967. For the history of Ecuador’s prison crisis, see Carla Morena Álvarez Velasco, “Las cárceles de la muerte en Ecuador”, *Nueva Sociedad*, January 2022; “Personas Privadas de Libertad en Ecuador”, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, February 2022; and “The Prison System in Ecuador – History and Challenges of an Epicenter of Crime”, op. cit.

¹⁰⁸ The Commission for Penitentiary Dialogue and Pacification, created in December 2021 by former President Lasso to address the country’s prison crisis, found that corruption is widespread and deeply ingrained in state institutions linked to the prison system, including the police and judiciary. See “Análisis y propuestas: Informe final de la Comisión”, Comisión para el Diálogo Penitenciario y la Pacificación, 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, prison guard, Quito, October 2024.

¹¹⁰ “24 servidores penitenciarios han sido asesinados desde 2024, guías trabajan con equipos caducados y sin uniformes”, Radio Pichincha, 8 April 2025.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, prison guard, Quito, October 2024.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, former prison official, Quito, October 2024.

explained.¹¹³ Prisons, as a result, have become hubs of criminal activity, and lucrative extortion rackets behind bars are padding these groups' bottom line.¹¹⁴

In part because of the role they play in illicit business, jails have become the site of brutal turf wars. After the assassination of alias Rasquiña in 2020, splinter groups including Los Lobos, Los Tiguerones and Los Chone Killers embarked on a ruthless campaign for control of prison wings that used to be run by Los Choneros. As these groups battled to eliminate rivals, decapitations and dismemberments became routine. "The early prison massacres weakened the Choneros as factions vied for control of coveted prison spaces", a security expert told Crisis Group.¹¹⁵

Violence in Ecuadorian prisons reached new heights in 2021, exposing the state's inability to control the penal system. Coordinated attacks in February by four gangs in three Guayaquil prisons killed 75 inmates. Clashes in Guayaquil and Cotopaxi prisons claimed another 21 lives in July. In September, the Penitenciaría del Litoral, the country's largest prison located in Guayaquil, was the site of the biggest prison massacre in Ecuador's history, when clashes between Los Choneros and Los Lobos claimed 119 lives.¹¹⁶ A senior prison official explained that during these murder sprees "the police do nothing. They wait for them to kill each other". The monetary rewards of establishing dominance, the official added, can be eye-popping: "Just to take over a cellblock ... represents between \$5,000 and 8,000" in criminal revenue.¹¹⁷ Ecuador has seen over fifteen prison massacres since 2021, all of them in prisons with only male inmates, resulting in more than 500 deaths.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, youth leader, Guayaquil, May 2024.

¹¹⁴ Criminal group members have said they prefer to be in prison for safety reasons, as some of them have access to arsenals, with weapons including rifles and grenade launchers, that are more sophisticated than those available to Ecuadorian soldiers. "Análisis y propuestas: Informe final de la Comisión", op. cit.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, security expert, Quito, October 2024.

¹¹⁶ "Once masacres carcelarias y 413 presos asesinados en 21 meses", *Primicias*, 18 November 2022.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, former senior prison official, Quito, October 2024.

¹¹⁸ While violence has concentrated in Guayaquil, incidents have taken place in prisons in Azuay, Cotopaxi, Esmeraldas, Pichincha and Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas. "The Prison System in Ecuador – History and Challenges of an Epicenter of Crime", op. cit. "Estas son las masacres carcelarias documentadas en Ecuador entre 2021 y 2023", *GK*, 25 July 2023.

V. Noboa's War on Organised Crime

When Daniel Noboa assumed the presidency in November 2023, following a campaign convulsed by the assassination of candidate Fernando Villavicencio, he promised to act decisively against crime and insecurity during his abbreviated first term in office.¹¹⁹ The heart of his approach was to hand new crime-fighting responsibilities to Ecuador's military.¹²⁰ He also took a page from his predecessor Guillermo Lasso and instituted states of exception – which suspend certain civil rights – in many of the country's most populous regions.¹²¹ Noboa was re-elected to a full four-year term in April, beating Luisa González, a candidate closely linked to former President Rafael Correa, in the second round. He took office the next month, promising that “there will be no truce with crime” and reaffirming the government's commitment to combating drug trafficking.¹²²

A. *Calling Up the Military*

Less than two months into his first term, Noboa's government faced its greatest security threat to date. On 7 January 2024, the leader of Los Choneros – José Adolfo Macías Villamar, alias Fito, one of Ecuador's top criminal figures – disappeared from Guayaquil's Regional Prison.¹²³ Authorities had intended to transfer him to a high-security facility called La Roca. But Fito could not be located when security forces arrived. His disappearance prompted a manhunt involving over 3,000 police and military personnel. Seizing the

¹¹⁹ “Ecuador presidential candidate Villavicencio assassinated”, Reuters, 10 August 2023.

¹²⁰ Noboa also mobilised the military in October to quell protests over the elimination of a cut to the diesel subsidy, resulting in at least two deaths and dozens injured. “Conaie denuncia otro fallecido en Otavalo y acusa al Gobierno de masacre en protestas”, *Expreso*, 15 October 2025.

¹²¹ Lasso signed over ten decrees declaring that violence-affected provinces (including Guayas, Santa Elena, Los Ríos, Manabí, Esmeraldas and Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas) were facing a “grave internal commotion”. Lasso attempted to strengthen the criminal justice system and bolster the security forces, including by creating specialised judicial units for corruption and organised crime and recruiting 8,000 new police officers, but his government was distracted by political tensions that resulted in two impeachment proceedings against him. “Lasso suma 11 decretos de estado de excepción por inseguridad ciudadana”, *Primicias*, 24 July 2023.

¹²² Glaeldys González Calanche, “Resurgent Crime Casts a Shadow over Ecuador's Polls”, Crisis Group Commentary, 6 February 2025. Daniel Noboa, “Discurso de posesión presidencial”, inauguration speech, 24 May 2025.

¹²³ Alias Fito, the fugitive leader of Los Choneros, was recaptured in Manta in June, almost eighteen months after escaping. He was later extradited to the U.S., where he faces seven charges linked to drug and arms trafficking. “José Adolfo ‘Fito’ Macías Villamar, Leader of Los Choneros Transnational Criminal Organization Extradited to Brooklyn Federal Court to Face International Drug and Gun Charges”, press release, U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of New York, 21 July 2025.

moment, rival criminal groups led by Los Lobos incited uprisings in the streets and orchestrated riots in at least six jails under their control, taking more than 100 prison staff hostage. Armed assailants, believed to belong to Los Tiguerones, stormed a television studio during a live news broadcast in Guayaquil, threatening journalists until law enforcement intervened. The two-day wave of violence claimed at least eight lives.¹²⁴

Noboa initially declared a 60-day nationwide state of exception, imposing a curfew and authorising troop deployments to the prison. But, as violence persisted, he took an even more draconian approach, declaring the country's crisis on 9 January to be an "internal armed conflict".¹²⁵ On these grounds, the president mobilised the armed forces and national police to conduct operations against 22 criminal groups identified in the same proclamation as terrorists. A sharp decline in violence was the immediate result, bolstering Noboa's standing.¹²⁶ "[Declaring an internal armed conflict] has been the government's banner and it has worked very well", a government official told Crisis Group.¹²⁷

The decision, however, raised legal concerns that have not gone away. The Constitutional Court has consistently rejected the notion that Ecuador is in the midst of an internal armed conflict.¹²⁸ Security experts, academics, state officials and human rights organisations consulted by Crisis Group have voiced similar doubts. They also caution that handing public safety responsibilities to the military could have the unintended effect of driving up rates of violence.¹²⁹

At the core of Noboa's military-led strategy is the Security Bloc, a joint task force established in late 2023 comprising the Defence and Interior Ministries, the armed forces and the police, which has

¹²⁴ Calanche, "Can a War on Crime Bring Relief to Ecuador?", op. cit.

¹²⁵ "Daniel Noboa declares an 'internal armed conflict' in Ecuador after an armed commando breaks into a television station live on air", *El País*, 9 January 2024. "Decreto Ejecutivo 110", Presidency of the Republic of Ecuador, 8 January 2024.

¹²⁶ "Daniel Noboa tiene la aceptación más alta de un Presidente desde 1979, según Cedatos", *Primicias*, 29 February 2024. "Noboa reduce drásticamente los homicidios en Ecuador, aunque continúa el desafío criminal", *El País*, 17 March 2024.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, government official, Quito, July 2025.

¹²⁸ The Constitutional Court ruled that the government has failed to prove that Ecuador meets international legal standards regarding the organisation and intensity of violence required to justify the "internal armed conflict" designation. "Dictamen 4-24-EE/24", Constitutional Court of Ecuador, May 2024.

¹²⁹ "The [internal armed conflict] decree has no grounds whatsoever", one official said. "It only justifies violence and the ... use of force". Crisis Group interviews, military officer, diplomat, state official, former government official and police officers, Guayaquil and Quito, 2024. See also "Pronunciamiento de la Alianza de Derechos Humanos del Ecuador", Alianza de Organizaciones por los Derechos Humanos del Ecuador, 10 January 2024.

been deployed in prisons, violence-stricken communities and ports in response to surges in violence.¹³⁰ Since January 2024, the bloc has focused on arresting criminal suspects and seizing drugs, firearms and ammunition in Ecuador's most violent provinces.¹³¹ Operations have been concentrated in provinces under states of exception, particularly the coastal regions as well as the Amazonian province of Orellana. State forces in these areas patrol the streets, maintain fixed surveillance points and enforce weapons, ammunition and explosives controls in high-risk zones and along main roads. Soldiers and police also carry out raids, looking to seize narcotics and firearms, and arrest alleged members of criminal groups.

Noboa has also introduced constitutional and legal changes with a punitive bent. He has issued at least fourteen security-related states of exception, including both fresh decrees and renewals.¹³² In some regions – such as Guayas, Los Ríos, Manabí, Orellana, Santa Elena, El Oro and Sucumbíos – the decrees have been recurrent, making these extraordinary measures, in effect, permanent. Besides paving the way for the Bloc's operations against organised crime, these measures authorise warrantless searches of private residences and restrict movement and public gatherings. They have been complemented by other reforms, approved in an April 2024 referendum, that grant the armed forces permanent control of prison access; allow the extradition of Ecuadorian nationals wanted on criminal charges in other countries; impose harsher penalties for organised crime-related offences, including human and arms trafficking; and abolish prison benefits such as sentence reductions.¹³³

¹³⁰ In 2023, Noboa introduced "Plan Fénix", described by the government as a framework for tackling organised crime, but references to this plan have faded. The Bloc is at the core of Noboa's present security campaign. "Ley de Solidaridad: Gobierno define los criterios que deben cumplir los GDO para declarar un conflicto armado interno", *Primicias*, 16 July 2025. Crisis Group interviews, military officer and former government official, Quito and Guayaquil, July 2025.

¹³¹ In 2024, Security Bloc operations resulted in the seizure of 278 tonnes of drugs, a 28 per cent increase from 2023, along with nearly 10,000 firearms and over 400,000 rounds of ammunition, while authorities detained thirteen high-value targets and 153 mid-level criminals. "278 toneladas de droga incautadas por el bloque de seguridad en este año", press release, Ecuadorian Ministry of Defence, 12 December 2024.

¹³² "Ecuador ha vivido 279 días en estado de excepción, en los 320 días de gobierno de Noboa", *Primicias*, 8 October 2024.

¹³³ On 21 April 2024, Ecuador held a legally binding constitutional referendum as part of a public consultation focused on security reforms. Voters overwhelmingly approved all nine ballot questions on security measures put forward by President Noboa. Genevieve Glatzky, "A country awash in violence backs its leader's hard-line stance", *The New York Times*, 21 April 2024. "Ecuador holds constitutional referendum and plebiscite focused on security", Global State of Democracy Initiative, April 2024.

Government representatives told Crisis Group they are laying the legal foundations for strengthening coordination between the military and judicial system in fighting organised crime.¹³⁴ As it did with the declaration of internal armed conflict, the Constitutional Court has disputed these reforms, first by provisionally suspending seventeen articles in three government-backed laws and later declaring two of them unconstitutional.¹³⁵ In response, Noboa led a protest at the court in Quito in August and said the next month he would convene a Constitutional Assembly to “free the country from an institutional kidnapping”.¹³⁶ Alarmed by what they see as a threat to the rule of law, civil society groups have accused Noboa of eroding democratic checks and balances and judicial independence.¹³⁷ These critics fear that the government is using the anti-drug trafficking fight as a pretext to govern essentially by decree, paving the way for crackdowns on opposition figures and Indigenous activists.¹³⁸

A “new phase of the war” on organised crime, meanwhile, was unveiled by the Defence Ministry in early September, following a reshuffle of the military command. The three pillars of the plan are territorial control and direct offensive operations; the strengthening of military intelligence and special operations; and the neutralisation of high-

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Quito, July 2025.

¹³⁵ In September, the Constitutional Court declared unconstitutional the Solidarity Law, which established penalties of up to 30 years for belonging to an armed group and offers tax benefits to companies supporting security forces. It also struck down the Public Integrity Law, which increased penalties for young people involved in organised crime and expedited appointments to the bench. The Intelligence Law, which the court allowed to stand, centralises surveillance under the presidency without judicial oversight. “Ley Orgánica de Solidaridad Nacional”, Registro Oficial Sexto Suplemento Año I – No. 56, 10 June 2025. “Ley Orgánica de Inteligencia”, Registro Oficial Cuarto Suplemento Año I – No. 57, 11 June 2025. “Ley Orgánica de Integridad Pública”, Registro Oficial Tercer Suplemento Año I – No. 68, 26 June 2025. “Estos son los artículos que suspendió la Corte Constitucional de tres leyes impulsadas por el Gobierno”, *Ecuavisa*, 4 August 2025. “Leyes de Integridad Pública y de Solidaridad Nacional son declaradas inconstitucionales por la Corte”, *Primicias*, 26 September 2025.

¹³⁶ On 24 September, the Constitutional Court authorised a proposal to hold a vote on convening a constitutional assembly. The vote is scheduled for 16 November. “La Corte Constitucional emite dictamen favorable para la convocatoria a Asamblea Constituyente”, Ecuador’s Constitutional Court, 24 September 2025. “Ecuador’s president Noboa marches against suspensión of security measures”, Reuters, 12 August 2025: “Asamblea Constituyente: ¿El presidente Daniel Noboa juega su última carta contra la Corte Constitucional”, *Primicias*, 21 September 2025.

¹³⁷ “Pronunciamientos Ataque a la Corte Constitucional y a las organizaciones”, Comité Permanente por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, 15 August 2025. “Organizaciones internacionales de DD. HH. rechazan ataques contra la Corte Constitucional”, *Ecuavisa*, 12 August 2025.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous activists; expert on corruption and human rights; human rights activist, Quito and Guayaquil, July 2025.

value targets, with criminal ringleaders as the top priority.¹³⁹ In addition, the government boosted the security budget by over \$300 million. A portion of these funds will go toward the construction of two maximum-security prisons in Santa Elena in western Ecuador. These facilities are meant to replicate, on a smaller scale, the mega-prison President Bukele constructed in El Salvador, which became notorious after the U.S. sent several hundred Venezuelan immigrants there in March.¹⁴⁰

B. International Cooperation

The Noboa administration has also stepped up the country's security cooperation with the U.S. and the European Union. After former President Correa closed the Manta military base in 2009, arguing that its presence undermined Ecuador's sovereignty, Quito's ties to Washington got weaker.¹⁴¹ But the crime wave had spurred Ecuador's authorities to change tack even before Noboa took office. In 2023, former President Lasso agreed to reinforce military and law enforcement cooperation with the U.S., particularly in the maritime domain.¹⁴² Under Noboa, U.S. support and training for Ecuador's armed forces has continued to expand.

Noboa now stands as one of the Trump administration's most ardent supporters in Latin America. Alongside his Argentine and Salvadoran counterparts, Javier Milei and Nayib Bukele, Noboa is one of the growing number of Latin American politicians aligning themselves with the White House. He attended Trump's inauguration, the first time that an Ecuadorian president had joined the ceremony.¹⁴³ Emblematic of the change in bilateral relations was the approval by Ecuador's National Assembly in June of a constitutional amendment

¹³⁹ "Fuerzas armadas anuncian que eliminar cabecillas es prioridad en la 'nueva fase de la guerra' contra el crimen organizado en Ecuador", *Primicias*, 10 September 2025.

¹⁴⁰ "Gobierno aumentó el gasto en seguridad en 2024; la inversión en obras y energía no despegó", *Primicias*, 6 January 2025. "Ecuador construye una cárcel de máxima seguridad al estilo Bukele", *France 24*, 21 June 2024. On Bukele's gang crackdown, see Crisis Group Latin America Report N°96, *A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever*, 5 October 2022; and Natalie Kitroeff, "El Salvador decimated its ruthless gangs. But at what cost?", *The New York Times*, 9 April 2023.

¹⁴¹ During his 2006 presidential campaign, Correa pledged to shut down the U.S. military post in Manta. He later announced he would not renew the ten-year agreement, signed in 1999, that granted U.S. forces access to the site for drug trafficking surveillance. The 2008 Ecuadorian constitution bans foreign military bases. Simon Romero, "Ecuador's leader purges military and moves to expel American base", *The New York Times*, 21 April 2008.

¹⁴² "Ecuador President Noboa ratifies military cooperation agreements with US", Reuters, 15 February 2024.

¹⁴³ "Con la participación de Daniel Noboa, Ecuador estuvo presente por primera vez en la juramentación de un presidente de EE.UU.", General Secretariat for Communication of the Presidency, 20 January 2025.

allowing for foreign military bases to be set up in the country.¹⁴⁴ If ratified in a referendum, foreign governments invited by Quito would be allowed to establish a permanent military presence in the country for the first time since Correa shut down the Manta base. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio suggested during a visit to the country that a U.S. garrison could help address shared threats, adding that, if invited to establish a base, the U.S. would “consider it very seriously because it’s a request of an ally in a very strategic part of the world”.¹⁴⁵

Ecuador has also looked beyond the U.S. for support from abroad. Though regional cooperation is often hampered by political distrust and ideological divisions, Ecuador is part of several initiatives seeking to deepen coordination among Latin American countries in fighting crime. Together with Peru and Colombia, Ecuador is striving to improve security near the tri-border area in the Amazon.¹⁴⁶ Separately, the Andean Community in January 2024 set up a high-level working group on public safety, while the Community of Latin America and Caribbean States has agreed to work more closely with the EU on tackling drug trafficking.¹⁴⁷ Bilateral cooperation with the EU, meanwhile, has focused on intelligence sharing, port security and money laundering.¹⁴⁸ The EU has also worked alongside Quito on prison reform, funding training for security personnel, improving infrastructure and surveillance and backing human rights and rehabilitation programs.¹⁴⁹ A newly launched initiative aims to strengthen Ecuador’s law enforcement agencies as well as to back community resilience projects.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ “La Asamblea aprueba informe para permitir instalación de bases militares extranjeras en Ecuador”, *Ecuavisa*, 3 June 2025.

¹⁴⁵ “Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Ecuadorian Foreign Minister Gabriela Sommerfeld at a Joint Press Availability”, press release, U.S. Department of State, 4 September 2025.

¹⁴⁶ “Colombia, Perú y Ecuador ejercen control sobre la triple frontera que comparten en la Amazonía”, press release, Colombian Presidency, 12 August 2025; “Canciller (e) Rosa Yolanda Villavicencio Mapy y su homóloga de Ecuador, Gabriela Sommerfeld, dialogan sobre asuntos estratégicos de interés común”, press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Colombia, 12 August 2025.

¹⁴⁷ The Andean Community’s plan sets out measures to bolster border security, enhance intelligence-sharing, fight corruption and promote prison reform. “Decisión N° 922”, Andean Council of Foreign Affairs Ministers, 21 January 2024; “EU-LAC response to the threat of transnational crime and illicit drugs”, press release, European External Action Service, 24 September 2024.

¹⁴⁸ “Ecuador y Unión Europea impulsan nuevos proyectos de cooperación conjunta por EUR 20 millones”, press release, Delegation of the European Union to Ecuador, 9 December 2024.

¹⁴⁹ The EU’s Emergency Response Program for Strengthening Ecuador’s Prison System was a two-year (2022-2024) initiative, funded by the EU and run by the Italo-Latin American Institute. “El programa EURESP de la Unión Europea concluye tras dos años de apoyo al fortalecimiento penitenciario”, press release, SNAI, 27 August 2024.

¹⁵⁰ The EU and its member states have stepped up support for tackling organised crime in Latin America, with Ecuador emerging as a key security partner. See

The government has also resorted to private military companies. Erik Prince, founder of the firm Blackwater (now known as Academi), has visited Ecuador on three occasions, and is reportedly providing training and advice to its security forces. Details of the arrangement are not public.¹⁵¹

C. A Brief Success

Many Ecuadorians have welcomed Noboa's commitment to deploy the military in fighting criminal groups, as they are alarmed by the sudden downturn in public safety and the state's struggles to respond. Support for a tough approach to crime also stems from deep mistrust of the police and belief that military deployment will improve matters.¹⁵² "[When the government] brought in the armed forces and took over prisons, there was a sense of relief", a former gang member from Guayaquil told Crisis Group. "Because it was horrible, with bombs here and there".¹⁵³

The initial results of Noboa's campaign appeared promising. By the second half of 2024, when he was campaigning for re-election, Ecuador recorded a sharp fall in murders, while prisons were reported to be far safer.¹⁵⁴ Claiming these achievements to be the result of his crackdown, Noboa was comfortably re-elected in April 2025. His newly created political party, National Democratic Action, also emerged as the leading force in the legislature.¹⁵⁵

Recent months, however, have cast a pall over these claims of success. The first six months of 2025 have turned out to be the most violent in Ecuador's history. In nineteen of the country's 24 provinces, insecurity has worsened since January, with clashes over turf fuelling a rise in killings, including several massacres.¹⁵⁶

"About EL PAcCTO", EL PAcCTO website; and "Ecuador y la Unión Europea presentan SERPAZ, alianza por la paz, la seguridad y el fortalecimiento institucional", press release, Delegation of the European Union to Ecuador, 8 July 2025.

¹⁵¹ Prince has announced a "strategic alliance" with Quito to train the military and police forces. The terms of the agreement, including its cost to the Ecuadorian state, remain undisclosed. "La tercera visita de Erik Prince a Ecuador duró dos días", *Ecuavisa*, 21 July 2025.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Quito, July 2025.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interview, former gang member, Guayaquil, May 2024.

¹⁵⁴ "Entre enero y diciembre de 2024 se registra un 17% de reducción en homicidios intencionales a nivel nacional", press release, Ecuadorian Ministry of Interior, 3 December 2024.

¹⁵⁵ Noboa secured the presidency in the second round of voting, receiving 55.63 per cent of the valid votes, while his opponent González got 44.37 per cent. His party won 66 of the 151 seats in the National Assembly.

¹⁵⁶ A former gang member told Crisis Group that clashes between Los Lobos and Los Choneros are driving violence, especially in Manabí, as Los Lobos is trying to seize territory from Los Choneros so it can take charge of exit routes for drug

Meanwhile, the fall in prison violence was only momentary. Deep-rooted problems persist. Though troops are deployed in at least one third of the country's 36 prisons, at least 455 prisoners died between January 2024 and April 2025.¹⁵⁷ While there is no official information as to the causes, reports claim that some prisoners have died after being tortured or because of lack of access to health care.¹⁵⁸ Gang rule remains largely unchallenged, and the militarisation of prisons has not been able to quell turf wars.¹⁵⁹ Illicit activity continues with little impediment, with criminal groups extorting inmates for essentials, charging up to \$500 for a cell phone and up to \$50 per call, while weapons, drugs and other contraband continue to be readily available in jails.¹⁶⁰

Nor is there any sign that the military-led campaign has staunched the flow of drugs out of Ecuador. After authorities strengthened port security by installing scanners at key terminals and soldiers began more visible patrols at ports and along roads, criminal networks adapted by hiding drugs in shipping containers before they reached the docks or smuggling them aboard ships on the high seas.¹⁶¹ "With scanners, opportunities to contaminate [introduce drugs in containers] have fallen, but contamination occurs before and after [a container goes through port security]", a military officer explained.¹⁶² Criminal organisations are also increasingly using smaller, non-commercial

shipments headed to Central America. Crisis Group interview, July 2025. See also "Los homicidios aumentaron en casi el 50% de los cantones de Ecuador", *Plan V*, 1 August 2025.

¹⁵⁷ "Operación sin rumbo. Una guerra improvisada hunde a Ecuador en abusos militares", Tierra de Nadie and Connectas, August 2025. "Al menos 15 muertos en un motín en la cárcel más peligrosa de Ecuador", 12 November 2024. "Masacres en serie en cárceles de Ecuador, un nuevo signo del reacomodo de poder y de fragmentación criminal", *Primicias*, 26 September 2025.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, human rights activist, Guayaquil, May 2024.

"395 personas privadas de libertad han fallecido en la Penitenciaría del Litoral, entre enero y agosto del 2025", Llamas: Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Conflictos, 22 October 2025.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, military officer, Quito, July 2025. "Las fuerzas armadas se apartaron del control de ocho de las 19 cárceles en las que estuvieron durante más de un año", *Ecuavisa*, 16 August 2025.

¹⁶⁰ "The military controls the courtyards [social areas], but not the cell yards [where prisoners sleep]. Troops do not enter those areas ... inside, illicit economies continue to thrive", a human rights advocate from Guayaquil who regularly visits prisons explained. Crisis Group interview, Guayaquil, July 2025. Crisis Group interviews, Guayaquil, May 2024.

¹⁶¹ "Estudios de Caso de Narcotráfico Marítimo. ECN 15-2024: Análisis comparativo de las incautaciones de cocaína y conexiones internacionales del narcotráfico global desde Ecuador", Centro Internacional de Investigación y Análisis contra Narcotráfico Marítimo, 2024. Crisis Group interview, naval officer, Guayaquil July 2025.

¹⁶² Crisis Group interview, naval officer, Guayaquil, July 2025.

ports, coercing local fisherfolk to cooperate under threat of death while exposing them to the risk of arrest for abetting drug traffickers.¹⁶³

Fears are also rising that sustained use of the military in public safety will end up driving collusion with criminal groups.¹⁶⁴ Army officers are apprehensive about deploying soldiers to prisons for long periods, which would expose them to members of criminal organisations and increase the risk they could be compromised.¹⁶⁵ A striking example came in June, when the Prosecutor's Office accused nineteen military officers of aiding in the escape of alias Fede, a leader of the Los Águilas gang, from the country's largest prison in Guayaquil.¹⁶⁶

D. The Shortcomings of Noboa's Crackdown

Evidence suggests that Noboa's strategy as it stands is unlikely to deal a decisive blow to organised crime in Ecuador. The criminal groups, which are much more flexible than state institutions, are quick to adapt under pressure.¹⁶⁷ Just as the sudden rise of violence in Ecuador came as a result of a shift in drug trafficking routes from Colombia, a crackdown along the Pacific coast might serve only to displace illegal outfits elsewhere in the country or abroad.¹⁶⁸ Such an eventuality appears not to be part of the government's planning, as its efforts have largely focused on areas suffering the highest levels of violence.

Quito's strategy also falls short in addressing the dilemmas of communities in the grip of organised crime. Surgical policing, whereby officers are sent into a locality following a spike of violent crime, only to leave after a short time with little follow-up, have a poor track record elsewhere in Latin America.¹⁶⁹ Judging by its operations, the Security Bloc seems to have learned little from these experiences. Forces withdraw soon after making arrests and seizures, without stationing anyone permanently in the place in question. Former and current military personnel and government officials told Crisis Group

¹⁶³ Crisis Group interview, former gang member, July 2025.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, former prison director and prison guard, Quito, October 2024. See also "La Fiscalía llamó a juicio a dos militares por ingresar artículos prohibidos a la Penitenciaría", *Ecuavisa*, 19 March 2025.

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, military officers, Quito, July 2025.

¹⁶⁶ "Un jefe narco se escapa vestido de militar de la cárcel más vigilada de Ecuador", *El País*, 24 June 2025. "19 militares procesados por fuga de alias 'Fede' quedan libres, dos guías mantienen prisión preventiva", *El Nacional*, 31 July 2025.

¹⁶⁷ Crisis Group Report, *Curbing Violence in Latin America's Drug Trafficking Hotspots*, op. cit.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. See also Bruce Bagley, "The Evolution of Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime in Latin America", *Sociología: Problemas y Prácticas*, no. 71 (2013).

¹⁶⁹ See, for example, Crisis Group Latin America Report N°95, *Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia*, 27 September 2022.

that violence thus often resurges following the Bloc's departure.¹⁷⁰ "People are more afraid of what happens after the operations", a youth leader said. Once state forces leave, he noted, criminals often pursue community leaders whom they presume to be informants or collaborators.¹⁷¹

Perhaps surprisingly, some of the strongest criticisms of Noboa's strategy come from members of the security forces themselves, who told Crisis Group that these measures are little more than band-aids that fail to fix systemic problems.¹⁷² They worry that the extent of military involvement in public safety is unsustainable, and that its role has strained its resources, meaning that its core responsibilities could be compromised.¹⁷³ As an officer noted, "[The military] cannot secure the borders because they are everywhere else. Not only in prisons, but also in oil wells [and] hydroelectric plants. It makes it difficult to cover essential parts of the border".¹⁷⁴ There is concern that spreading the military so thin will wear it down. "There is a profound exhaustion [military personnel] find themselves in a job they are not prepared for", a former senior military officer told Crisis Group.¹⁷⁵

Signs also abound that the military-led campaign has given rise to human rights abuses. Security forces face accusations of arbitrary detentions, at least 30 enforced disappearances (including of minors) and at least twelve extrajudicial killings.¹⁷⁶ In a case that shocked the country, sixteen military officers were arrested for their alleged role in the disappearance of four children, aged eleven to fifteen, who were found dead in Guayaquil in December 2024.¹⁷⁷ Despite the scandal,

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, former and current government officials, former and current military and police officers, Quito and Guayaquil, October 2024 and July 2025.

¹⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, youth leader, Guayaquil, May 2024.

¹⁷² Crisis Group interviews, Guayaquil and Quito, May and October 2024.

¹⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Quito, July 2025.

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, intelligence official, October 2024.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, former senior military officer, Quito, October 2024.

¹⁷⁶ "Informe de seguimiento de cumplimiento de los dictámenes constitucionales no. 7-24-ee/24, 8-24-ee/24, 9-24-ee/24", Ombudsman Office of Ecuador, March 2015. Crisis Group interviews, Guayaquil and Quito, May and October 2024.

"Desapariciones forzadas en contexto de la militarización en la costa en Ecuador", Comité Permanente por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, January 2025.

"Desaparecidos: Los niños perdidos en la guerra interna de Ecuador", op. cit.

¹⁷⁷ During a fact-finding hearing in the "Las Malvinas" case in Guayaquil at the end of April, four of the sixteen military officers charged with the forced disappearances admitted that their victims had suffered beatings and a mock execution before being left naked in Taura, a rural parish south of Guayaquil. During the pre-trial evaluation, held on 7 October, after six postponements, the Prosecutor's Office formally indicted seventeen officers on charges of forced disappearance. Sixteen were alleged to be direct perpetrators, while another high-ranking officer was named as an alleged accomplice. "Fue un viacrucis de torturas": militares ecuatorianos confiesan que golpearon a cuatro niños asesinados en Guayaquil", *El País*, 2 May 2025. "Caso Malvinas: Fiscalía formula cargos contra los

a human rights activist told Crisis Group that “people assume it to be inevitable collateral damage, evidence of the success of the military’s actions”.¹⁷⁸

16 militares involucrados”, press release, State Attorney General’s Office, 31 December 2024. “Caso Las Malvinas | Juez llama a juicio a militares por desaparición forzada y ratifica prisión para 16 imputados”, *Primicias*, 8 October 2025.

¹⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, human rights activist, March 2025.

VI. Tackling the Drivers of Criminal Growth

There is no denying that President Noboa and like-minded leaders throughout Latin America have struck a chord with the public with their uncompromising approach to fighting crime. Surgical military and police interventions in violent neighbourhoods may go far in sating the demand for a strong response. But the effects of these operations tend to be short-lived unless they prepare the ground for a permanent state presence in communities most affected by violence, with the aim of protecting civilians, weakening the grip of criminal groups, deterring their further encroachment and preventing them from recruiting.

Even then, the long history of the war on drugs in the region is lined with frustration, showing how difficult it is to dislodge organised crime once it has taken hold. Early results from Noboa's crackdown indicate that it is likely to suffer many of the same flaws, displacing rather than reducing crime, reinforcing rather than weakening corruption, and doing little to alter the incentives ensuring that criminal groups' ranks are constantly renewed. Quito will struggle to cut the country entirely out from its newfound role as a staging post in the drug supply chain, but that does not mean it cannot step up efforts to address the engines that have driven Ecuador's breakneck criminal growth and surge in violence: the use of seaports as drug export hubs, gang control of prisons and state corruption.

A. Civilian Protection and Exit Ramps

Bringing peace to poor neighbourhoods wracked by violence, above all along the Pacific coast, will be essential if Ecuador is to arrest its wave of violence. Establishing a permanent state presence beyond law enforcement bodies in crime-hit neighbourhoods is a vital part of this process. "We need state presence in vulnerable areas", a military officer told Crisis Group. "With only the military and the army, not much happens".¹⁷⁹ The case of Durán reveals the extent of the state's neglect. The mayor fled the country in 2024, amid police investigations of illicit activity, and now administers the area from abroad.¹⁸⁰ On the ground, the situation is dire: streets remain unpaved, and over half of the homes lack access to a sewage system.¹⁸¹ Though there is a police station, as well as sporadic military intervention, criminals run the town and extortion has driven many businesses to shut down.

¹⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, military officer, Quito, July 2025.

¹⁸⁰ "El alcalde Luis Chonillo salió del país el día de los allanamientos en Durán", *Ecuavisa*, 15 August 2024.

¹⁸¹ "Durán: Radiografía de una ciudad paralizada", Unidad de Investigación Tierra de Nadie, 13 September 2023. "Durán, 38 años sin alcantarillado", *GK*, 25 September 2024.

Community policing can play an important role by restoring public trust and reinforcing state authority.¹⁸² Military interventions that manage to reduce violent crime in a given community should be followed by the deployment of civilian security units, marking a transition to police-led public safety. For this shift to be successful, it should be accompanied by thorough vetting of police officers and introduction of social services to support long-term community development.¹⁸³ Ecuador already has a network of Community Police Units, but they have undergone a steep decline in recent years. The state should reinvest in these bodies and allocate money to strengthening crime prevention units.¹⁸⁴ Reviving them could complement the Security Bloc's operation by focusing on local security needs and enhancing popular confidence in law enforcement.¹⁸⁵

Curbing gang recruitment in poor neighbourhoods is also essential, as Noboa himself has observed.¹⁸⁶ Successes in this respect have been notched by the Batucadas Populares, a Guayaquil grassroots group that uses music to empower young people and prevent violence in deprived neighbourhoods. Likewise, Mangle Inc., spearheaded by the Guayaquil Chamber of Industries, aims to provide employment and

¹⁸² Community policing is a law enforcement approach designed to build trust and foster cooperation between police and local communities, while addressing neighbourhood-level security concerns. As Crisis Group has written previously, community-oriented policing that leads to a permanent local presence has had moderate success in Latin America. Crisis Group Report, *Curbing Violence in Latin America's Drug Trafficking Hotspots*, op. cit.

¹⁸³ A notable example of homicide reduction policies in Latin America and the Caribbean is the Pacifying Police Units introduced in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, starting in 2008. Designed to help authorities reclaim territory from criminal groups, the Units are associated with an overall decline in homicides, including those committed by police and those resulting from conflict among criminal groups. Ignacio Cano, Emiliano Rojido and Doriam Borges, "¿Qué funciona para reducir homicidios en América Latina y el Caribe? Una revisión sistemática de las evaluaciones de impacto", Laboratório de Análise da Violência, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, September 2024.

¹⁸⁴ The number of active units dropped from 1,600 in 2020 to 1,282 by the end of 2023. "Informe de rendición de cuentas Ministerio del Interior 2023", Ecuadorian Interior Ministry, 2023.

¹⁸⁵ Many Community Police Units are abandoned or operate in precarious conditions, hampered by staffing shortages and underfunding. In Guayaquil, for example, the deterioration of the Units has fuelled public frustration, while in Quito, 40 per cent of the city's 300 Units are either closed or fail to provide round-the-clock service, leaving people unprotected. "El Municipio de Quito entregó la mitad de las UPC que ofreció a la Policía", *Primicias*, 4 March 2024. In Guayaquil, the municipal security agency launched new Safe Action Stations as part of an initiative designed for prevention and rapid response. Five stations have been installed in various parts of the city. Crisis Group interview, community leader, Guayaquil, May 2024. "Municipio de Guayaquil inaugura dos nuevas estaciones de seguridad e incorpora, por primera vez, presencia policial", *Primicias*, 18 June 2025.

¹⁸⁶ "Noboa declara como prioridad nacional la prevención del reclutamiento de menores en grupos delincuenciales", *Primicias*, 5 June 2025.

entrepreneurship opportunities.¹⁸⁷ Noboa's recently created committee on recruitment should include young leaders from poor communities to discuss how best to tackle criminal recruitment and involve them in running these programs.¹⁸⁸ Foreign partners such as the UN and EU could also share expertise and help fund violence prevention initiatives.

Although addressing deep-rooted grievances such as lack of formal jobs, deficient public services and weak social safety nets is a costly long-term goal, investments in education and employment for vulnerable populations – especially children, young people and women – should not be put off for more prosperous times. With just over 30 per cent of Ecuador's population enjoying full employment, the country faces an urgent need to broaden economic opportunities.¹⁸⁹ Job programs delivered through public-private partnerships, particularly in poor communities, can offer young people meaningful alternatives to lives of crime.¹⁹⁰ The authorities should also try to establish exit ramps for minors currently in criminal groups' ranks.¹⁹¹

B. *Reforming Prisons*

Prison building is in vogue throughout Latin America. But in Ecuador's case, the imperative for the state is to regain full control of its jails. Modernising infrastructure and security systems – including by installing metal detectors, technology to control access and surveillance cameras – could help curtail contraband, including cell phones and firearms, both of which enable criminal groups to

¹⁸⁷ "Mangle inc.: Una iniciativa para la seguridad y la convivencia ciudadana en Guayaquil", *Revista Industrias*, 19 September 2024. Crisis Group interviews, human rights activist, humanitarian worker, youth leader, Guayaquil, July 2025. "Batucada Popular: tambores que protegen a 150 chicas de Guayaquil contra las mafias", *Plan V*, 10 December 2024.

¹⁸⁸ "Daniel Noboa declara como prioridad la prevención y erradicación del reclutamiento de menores por parte de grupos delincuenciales", *El Universal*, 5 June 2025. Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, Guayaquil, July 2025.

¹⁸⁹ Full employment refers to working 40 hours or more per week and earning a wage equal to or above the national minimum. "Estadísticas Laborales – agosto 2025", National Institute for Statistics in Ecuador.

¹⁹⁰ For example, the Centros de Atención Municipal Integral centres in Guayaquil, supported by the municipality, offer training and recreational spaces for women, young people and children. Residents argue, however, that these centres fall short of delivering genuine economic inclusion. They view private-sector involvement as essential to transforming training programs into viable sources of income. Crisis Group interviews, youth leader, humanitarian worker and human rights activist, Guayaquil, July 2025.

¹⁹¹ While imperfect, an initiative in neighbouring Colombia could provide something of a model: it offers temporary shelter, psychosocial care and protection services to minors who have quit criminal outfits. See "Víctimas del reclutamiento ilícito", *Bienestar Familiar*, undated.

continue their operations from behind bars. That said, a dose of caution is required regarding the benefits that new technology can bring unless it is supervised and well maintained.¹⁹² The system for the placement of inmates should also be revamped. Currently, authorities tend to group prisoners in correctional facilities based on their criminal group affiliation, an approach that reinforces these organisations' command structures and ability to coordinate rackets. Establishing an inmate classification system anchored instead in the risk a prisoner poses – based in part on the severity of their offence – could help loosen criminal organisations' hold on jails.¹⁹³

Effective rehabilitation programs and alternative sentencing programs could also play a role in turning prisons from crime dens into spaces that allow individuals a second chance. Currently, there are few options for inmates seeking education, job training or drug treatment.¹⁹⁴ As part of the prisons overhaul, the Noboa administration should also develop a plan for gradually withdrawing military personnel from prisons and replacing them with a corps of well-trained civilians.

Foreign partners, notably the EU, should continue to provide both expertise and financial assistance to support Ecuador in restoring state control of its prison system. Through its Security, Hope, and Resilience for Peace in Ecuador program, Brussels can help fund training, protocol development, crisis management and a restorative justice approach.¹⁹⁵ Future EU funding could contribute to the devel-

¹⁹² During the Lasso administration, the government allocated \$1.2 million to instal facial recognition and artificial intelligence-based camera systems to monitor the country's prisons. At the time, authorities reported that of 1,934 cameras placed in these facilities, only 135 were functioning, 1,238 were out of service and 561 had technical issues, meaning that just 7 per cent of the system was operational. There is no more up-to-date information on this project. "¿Qué pasó con el sistema de cámaras de vigilancia en las cárceles?", *Expreso*, 22 November 2024.

¹⁹³ According to prison experts and officials, classifying inmates based on their level of danger rather than group affiliation could help reduce the risk of violent clashes and undermine the control these outfits exert in certain parts of the prison. As a prison guard put it: "Disloyalty [of members of a criminal group] is actually a good thing. If you put them all together [from different groups], they won't kill each other. There's no loyalty, no honour, no codes anymore. They think they're strong because they're given their own turf". Crisis Group interviews, former high-level prison official, prison guard, Quito, October 2024. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime also outlines several benefits of classifying inmates according to their level of risk or danger. See "Handbook on the Classification of Prisoners", UNODC, 2020.

¹⁹⁴ "Política Pública de Rehabilitación Social 2022-2025", February 2022. Crisis Group interviews, former gang member, youth leader, former high-level prison authority and former senior government official, Quito and Guayaquil, May and October 2024.

¹⁹⁵ "Ecuador y la Unión Europea presentan SERPAZ, alianza por la paz, la seguridad y el fortalecimiento institucional", press release, Delegation of the European Union to Ecuador, 8 July 2025.

opment of law enforcement-assisted diversion programs for non-violent drug offences, offering alternatives to imprisonment and prosecution by requiring offenders to participate in community-based social service programs, thus mitigating the risk of recruitment in jails.¹⁹⁶

C. *Port Security*

Tackling criminal complicity and vulnerabilities in seaports is vital if Ecuador is to reduce its attraction as a hub for drug traffickers that continues to be a source for record-breaking drug shipments to European ports such as Antwerp, Rotterdam and Hamburg.¹⁹⁷ Government efforts so far have focused mainly on upgrading infrastructure, falling short of what is necessary to improve port security.¹⁹⁸ While necessary, material improvements on their own will not be enough to loosen criminal groups' grip. The government should work with private companies, foreign partners like the EU and port authorities to expand technological protection systems, tighten perimeter controls and put in place uniform protocols to protect cargo, particularly shipments of bananas and other perishables, from criminal groups.¹⁹⁹

Port security should also include efforts to address the needs of nearby communities, particularly in Guayas and El Oro provinces, where the terminals and surrounding neighbourhoods are highly vulnerable to organised crime. Authorities should not focus solely on law enforcement but also undertake initiatives that foster social development close to ports.

D. *Addressing Corruption*

Corruption and collusion within state institutions, particularly the judiciary and police force, foster impunity and violence. Graft in the judicial system makes it harder to address violence and insecurity, while Noboa's offensive against the judiciary is increasingly seen as a pretext for weakening checks and balances.²⁰⁰ International support

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ These efforts should not be limited to Guayas and El Oro provinces, where terminals and surrounding communities are highly vulnerable to organised crime – but also take place in violence-afflicted areas such as Manta and Esmeraldas, which are home to small fishing piers. “Tres puertos marítimos de Ecuador registran niveles de riesgo ‘muy altos’ frente al narcotráfico”, *Primicias*, 1 November 2024.

¹⁹⁸ “Este fue el discurso de Daniel Noboa en su posesión presidencial 2025”, *GK*, 24 May 2025.

¹⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, naval officer, Guayaquil, July 2025. “Alliance against international drug-related crime”, press release, Port of Hamburg, 31 January 2024; “Tres puertos de Europa anuncian cooperación para combatir narcotráfico desde Ecuador”, *Primicias*, 1 February 2024.

²⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, legal expert, July 2025.

for the Attorney General's Office, which has led several landmark investigations into high-level corruption, could play a crucial role in strengthening investigations of organised crime and its ties to the state, as well as rebuilding public trust in judicial impartiality and guiding legal reforms. Over time, greater emphasis should be given to developing strong oversight mechanisms in Ecuador's institutions.²⁰¹

In the meantime, the Interior Ministry, the Council of the Judiciary and the Attorney General's Office have announced the formation of a task force to coordinate anti-corruption efforts.²⁰² The initiative is promising, but it should be accompanied by measures to address staffing shortages.²⁰³ Judicial officials handling organised crime and corruption should also receive adequate security guarantees to ensure they can perform their duties without risk.

Tackling money laundering is also of paramount importance in the campaign against corruption. Ecuador's Financial Intelligence Unit, responsible for detecting and preventing money laundering, terrorist financing and other financial crimes, faces challenges such as a lack of staff and investigative capacity. The government must strengthen the unit's operations so it can disrupt the financial flows that fuel the drug trade and associated violence.

E. Strategic Coordination

Responsibility for public security remains fragmented in the Ecuadorian government, leading institutions to operate in isolation and weakening joint responses to urgent security challenges. In February 2025, the Constitutional Court ordered the establishment of a commission composed of representatives from various state institutions to develop and apply security policies in a coordinated fashion.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ The UN-backed International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) offers a valuable precedent. CICIG played a pivotal role in high-profile criminal investigations, targeting drug trafficking, judicial corruption and illicit networks embedded in the state. It contributed to reducing violence, proposed legal and institutional reforms in the justice and security sectors, and provided specialised training to prosecutors and police officers in scientific criminal investigation techniques. Even if a full-fledged commission is not a viable proposition at this time, with sustained international backing Ecuador could adapt elements of this model to fortify its institutions and strengthen their independence. "Fact Sheet: The CICIG's Legacy in Fighting Corruption in Guatemala", Washington Office on Latin America, 27 August 2019.

²⁰² "Interior, Judicatura y Fiscalía conformarán mesa de seguridad para frenar liberación de criminales", *Primicias*, 9 June 2025.

²⁰³ Crisis Group interviews, government official and human rights defender, Quito, October 2024.

²⁰⁴ "La Corte Constitucional ordenó la creación de un comité para enfrentar la violencia en Ecuador", *Ecuavisa*, 2 March 2025.

Implementation of this initiative has been delayed by the political fight between Noboa and the Constitutional Court, but the president should give the commission the government's full backing.

Greater coordination should be encouraged across all levels of government, and Quito should support constant dialogue between national institutions and local governments to develop shared local agendas, priorities and objectives. Ensuring that the security forces and the justice system are adequately staffed, trained and equipped will also be vital. Meanwhile, Ecuador should keep working with other South American governments, such as those in Peru, Colombia and Brazil, to cooperate better in the response to organised crime, arms trafficking and other illicit activity. Where possible, partners such as the EU should encourage regional countries to share this responsibility.

VII. Conclusion

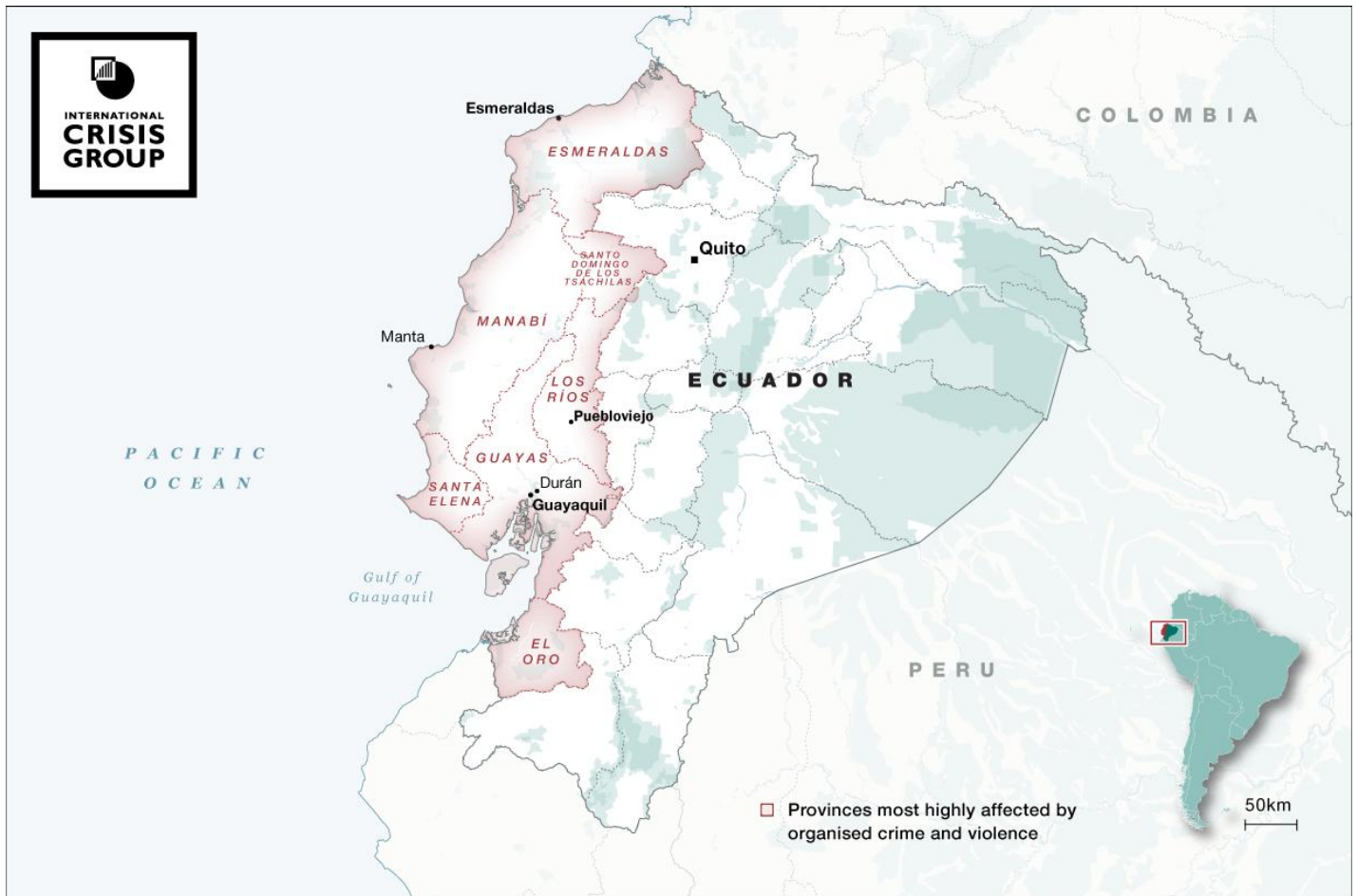
Faced with a dizzying rise in violence over the last five years, Ecuador is the latest Latin American country to redeploy its military to fight drug-related crime. *Mano dura* policies are understandably popular in communities besieged by lawlessness and fear, but their track record falls some way short of success. Shows of strength by the armed forces, whether in violence-affected communities or prisons, did spur an initial fall in homicides. But over time that has stalled and gone into reverse, while the crackdown has done little to undermine drug trafficking and seemingly fostered a spate of human rights abuses.

As experience in Mexico and other countries shows, illegal groups adapt quickly to law enforcement campaigns, shifting to new localities and adopting novel ways of working to protect revenue streams. Time and again, the same failings tend to dog reliance on military force and firepower. A limited commitment from state institutions to support poor and vulnerable communities; a prison system that continues to fuel violence and allows criminal groups to consolidate; and deeply entrenched state collusion enable crime and violence to persist – and often to worsen.

Though its budding partnership with the U.S. augurs continued faith in the use of military force to combat crime, Ecuador is likely to shed its status as South America's most violent nation only if it recalibrates its strategy. Lasting solutions will require the involvement of a wider array of state institutions beyond security forces in the most unsafe neighbourhoods, as well as much stronger social safety nets, particularly for young people who risk being drawn into organised crime and see no viable alternatives to earn a living. Cooling the engines that have driven the boom in organised crime is also essential. Workable policies that seek to reduce the exploitation of commercial seaports by drug traffickers, free prisons from the grip of criminal groups and bolster the state's capacity to resist corruption are all essential. Without these efforts, Ecuador is at serious risk of finding that the criminal outfits it seeks to defeat are extending their reach across country and state.

Quito/Bogotá/New York/Brussels, 12 November 2025

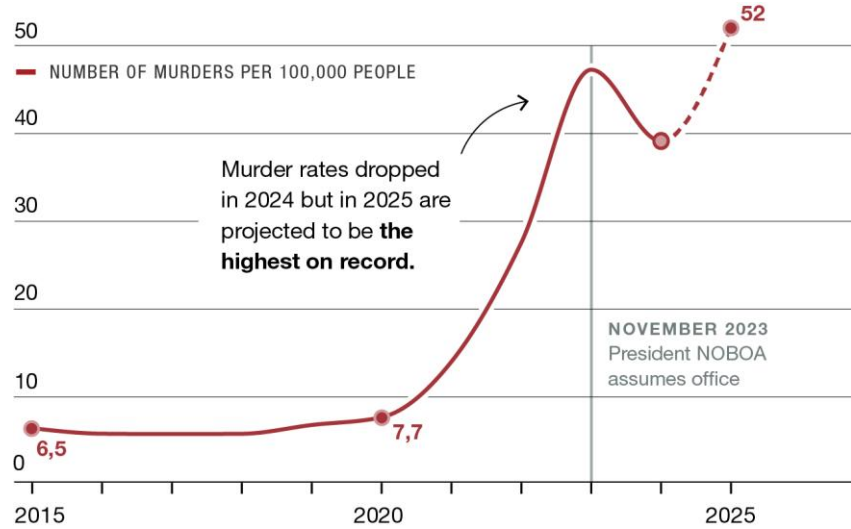
Appendix A: Map of Ecuador



The Pacific coast is the region of Ecuador most affected by violence – the nerve centre of drug trafficking and other organised crime.

Source: OpenStreetMap, November 2025. CRISIS GROUP

Appendix B: Ecuador's Soaring Violence



President Noboa's iron-fist approach after his 2023 election brought murder rates down by 17 per cent, but in 2025 violence has soared again.

Sources: Ministry of Government, Ministry of the Interior; projections from the Ecuadorian Organized Crime Observatory.

Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes CrisisWatch, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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George Mitchell – Chairman Emeritus

Gareth Evans – President Emeritus

Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown – Founder and Chairman Emeritus

Thomas R. Pickering – Chairman Emeritus