

Latin America and the Caribbean

➔ **Colombia** Violence remained high with security forces clashing with Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissidents, while govt's continued suspension of talks with second guerrilla group National Liberation Army (ELN) prompted fears over future of that peace process. In Nariño (south west), army 6 Sept killed alias "David", leader of most powerful dissident group United Pacific Guerrillas, and defence ministry 15 Sept reported army wounded alias "Guacho", leader of dissident Oliver Sinisterra front, although he evaded capture, leading to further fighting in area as security forces pursued him. Oliver Sinisterra front 17 Sept began series of attacks on police and armed forces in Tumaco (south west). Six former FARC commanders went missing during month including main negotiator Iván Márquez and aliases "el Paisa" and "Romaña", two senior military commanders, leading to speculation they may have joined dissident groups. Govt 7 Sept announced continued suspension of peace talks with ELN, leading to fears talks could fall apart completely in Oct; Spanish PM Sánchez offered to host future talks on Spanish territory. ELN freed nine hostages in "humanitarian gesture" to further peace talks with govt, including three in Arauca (east) 5 Sept and six in Chocó (west) 12 Sept, but two days later kidnapped teenage girl in Chocó, claiming she was army spy. UN Office on Drugs and Crime 19 Sept announced Colombia had 171,000 hectares of coca under cultivation and produced over 1,300 tonnes of cocaine in 2017, highest levels since records began; govt continued to proclaim crop destruction through fumigation as best policy against coca. Political killings of community activists remained high with nine killed during Sept in Nariño, Meta (centre), Antioquia (north west), Putumayo and Cauca (both south west) and Norte de Santander (north east) provinces; over 300 social leaders killed since FARC peace agreement in Dec 2016.

➔ **El Salvador** Govt launched unprecedented number of anti-gang operations in centre and south with police 2-4 Sept tackling both factions of 18th Street Gang for first time, leading to capture of nearly 200 gang members across country. Attorney General's Office 29 Aug launched Operation Pacific Harpoon against MS-13 finances, arresting 357 gang members. Month saw continued progress in fight against corruption with court sentencing former President Saca to ten years' imprisonment 13 Sept for embezzlement and money laundering; attorney general 14 Sept requested judicial approval for extradition request for former President Funes from Nicaragua on corruption charges.

⚡ **Guatemala** President Morales early Sept renewed his campaign to dismantle International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG, which has been preparing case and possible charges against him for illicit electoral financing), prompting political and constitutional crisis. Following Morales' 31 Aug announcement he would not renew CICIG mandate when it ends in Sept 2019, military vehicles same day surrounded CICIG's main building. Morales 4 Sept banned Colombian judge and CICIG chief Iván Velásquez from re-entering country, requesting UN appoint replacement. Constitutional Court (CC) 16 Sept ordered govt allow Velásquez's entry and called for dialogue with UN; Interior Minister Enrique Degenhart and Foreign Minister Sandra Jovel next day defied ruling and confirmed ban. As of 25 Sept, the presidency, three ministries, national police and two lawyers

had filed eight appeals to CC to revoke its ruling. Move drew widespread domestic and international criticism. Civil society network Convergence for Human Rights 18 Sept filed criminal complaint against govt for disobeying CC ruling, while ombudsman for human rights Jordán Rojas 19 Sept filed appeal to CC demanding Degenhart and Jovel's dismissal. Activists 10 Sept began staging peaceful protests in support of CICIG. Govt deployed thousands of military and police to contain peaceful protests and impede access to centre of Guatemala City; civil society organisations 13 Sept denounced "remilitarisation" of country. International partners also condemned Morales' action, although U.S. took milder stance and advocated for "reformed CICIG" and for respecting Guatemala's sovereignty. Congressional committee of inquiry established late Aug to assess whether to lift Morales' immunity from prosecution (as requested by attorney general's office and CICIG) 18 Sept requested Morales to appear before congress in mid-Oct.

➔ **Haiti** Protests continued against President Moïse's govt over alleged corruption including misuse of funds from PetroCaribe (alliance giving Caribbean states access to cheap Venezuelan oil) involving alleged \$2bn embezzlement. Two demonstrators shot dead by unidentified gunmen in Arcahaie city (centre) 11 Sept; death toll over twenty since demonstrations over increase in fuel prices began in July. UN Assistant-Secretary General of Peacekeeping Operations Bintou Keita 6 Sept warned of "high risk" of "major unrest" in country. Haitians continue to leave country en masse while others face deportation from Dominican Republic and U.S. due to ending of migration schemes.

➔ **Honduras** UN-backed political dialogue between govt and opposition which began 28 Aug continued but made little progress; main opposition group left-wing Libre party remained absent while President Hernández govt maintained scepticism toward talks, which cover four themes: events of 2017 election, human rights, constitutional reforms/rule of law, and electoral reforms. Political tension remained high; police and protesters clashed during anti-govt march in capital Tegucigalpa (centre) 15 Sept. Liberal Party left dialogue table 26 Sept citing govt's lack of commitment to democratic reforms. As part of "Pandora Case" investigation into diversion of \$11.7mn of public funds to finance election campaigns, attorney general (AG) late Aug ordered seizure of assets of members of ruling National Party and centre-left Liberal party and issued search warrants for parties' headquarters. In new security operations, recently-created Anti-Maras Unit arrested at least 50 alleged gang leaders 3 and 8 Sept. Autonomous University of Honduras 9 Sept reported 108 people killed in 33 massacres Jan-Aug 2018, predominately in Francisco Morazán, Cortés and Olancho departments in centre and north west, representing increase in number of mass killings although homicide rate has fallen.

➔ **Mexico** New govt passed its first laws including measures cutting privileges for previous legislators such as subsidised fuel, and other measures reflecting campaign promises for "republican austerity"; however President-elect López Obrador, who will be sworn into power 1 Dec, apparently backing away from key campaign promises to swiftly end drug war and remove armed forces from public security duties. Govt 19 Sept cancelled National Pacification and Reconciliation Forum in Veracruz state capital Xalapa (Gulf coast) planned for Oct due to security concerns; other forums went ahead including in Baja California state (north west) 11 Sept and Mexico City 14 Sept. Record levels of violence continued with 2018 on track to

surpass 2017 as deadliest year; authorities reported 3,017 homicides in July, highest of any month on record and 40% increase in comparison with same month in 2017. Attacks on state forces continued in Tonalá, Jalisco state, just outside Guadalajara (west), operational centre of Cartel Jalisco New Generation (CJNG); govt data made public in Sept showed no member of CJNG was convicted between Sept 2017 and June 2018, despite it growing more than any other criminal group in previous five years. In other violence, three gunmen 14 Sept killed six at popular tourist site Garibaldi Plaza in Mexico City (centre) while three marines and two alleged criminal group members were killed in clash in Buenavista, Michoacán (west). In same region, heavy fighting between armed groups forced some people to leave their homes. Direct attacks on state forces, allegedly by criminal groups, continued with four police killed in ambush in Tonalá, Jalisco state 3 Sept, and military convoy attacked in Reynosa, Tamaulipas state (north) 6 Sept, shortly before visit of President Peña Nieto. Authorities 26 Sept placed entire police force under investigation in resort of Acapulco, Guerrero state (south), claiming drug traffickers had infiltrated force.

➔ **Nicaragua** Although violence declined overall, situation remained unstable as govt crackdown on peaceful protests continued. Opposition Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy (ACJD) in 1 Sept open letter called on govt to resume dialogue, echoed by Catholic Church; President Ortega claimed dialogue process could not restart under current conditions. ACJD 7 Sept held national strike. Peaceful protests demanding release of political prisoners continued under heavy police presence; govt continued repressive policies with reports of arbitrary detentions, “kidnapping” and unfair trials of opposition supporters. Human rights organisations estimate 309 people remain imprisoned for political activities as of 18 Sept, 136 facing terrorism charges and awaiting trial in Managua. Two protesters died from wounds after months in hospital 18 Sept. Groups of armed civilians shot participants in anti-govt marches in Managua on 2, 16, and 23 Sept, killing one and injuring four, bringing number killed since April to 325 according to Inter-American Commission on Human Rights figures. Media groups reported security forces harassing Nicaraguan and international press. International pressure on govt continued: EU suspended cooperation project with national police, U.S. 5 Sept raised Nicaraguan crisis at UN Security Council, where most members reiterated call for resumption of dialogue; echoed in letter signed by 36 countries 12 Sept. Ortega 10 Sept declared he would be willing to discuss issue directly with U.S. President Trump, who rejected offer 18 Sept. Organization of American States (OAS) Permanent Council 12 Sept issued resolution calling for resumption of dialogue and agreement on electoral timetable; govt 17 Sept demanded OAS Sec Gen Almagro’s resignation. Central American Integration System (SICA) 18 Sept declared it was working with govt to restore dialogue. Economic impact of crisis continued; financial system reported to have lost \$974.8mn since April, Nicaraguan Foundation for Economic and Social Development 18 Sept estimated 143,000 Nicaraguans had fallen into poverty since April and GDP would contract by 2-4%.

➔ **Venezuela** Amid acute regional concern over political impasse and humanitarian situation inside Venezuela, President Maduro 13-16 Sept visited China in search of fresh loans to relieve govt’s financial crisis, but reportedly failed to secure them. Among agreements signed, Maduro ceded further 9.9% share in joint Sinovensa oil project, and signed up for “active participation” in construction of

China's Belt and Road initiative; new Chinese assistance will come in form of investments in oil, gas and gold, rather than loans to govt. Venezuela already owes China \$20bn and has had to ask for repayment terms to be relaxed. Official Chinese statements expressed confidence in Maduro's Aug economic reforms, but hyperinflation reported at around 220% per month. Economic crisis left shops struggling to stock basic goods; producers face spiralling costs, increased crime, power cuts and govt-backed land seizures, particularly in border regions. With Venezuelans continuing to flee country, eleven regional govts 3-4 Sept met in Ecuadoran capital Quito to discuss crisis, stressing need for regional solution and agreeing to accept expired Venezuelan passports as valid; Venezuelan govt declined to attend meeting and continued to deny existence of mass exodus, saying it is helping repatriate many "repentant" migrants. Political impasse and worsening humanitarian crisis fuelled talk of possible internationally-led or -backed military intervention. Speaking at Colombian-Venezuelan border, Organization of American States (OAS) Sec Gen Almagro 14 Sept said no option should be excluded, later clarifying he meant humanitarian intervention; ten members of Lima Group of govts issued statement rejecting use of force, but U.S. President Trump speaking at UN General Assembly 26 Sept reiterated that all options were open; also said would be willing to meet Maduro, but although Maduro flew to New York no meeting took place. In unprecedented move, six regional countries 26 Sept called on International Criminal Court to investigate Maduro govt for crimes against humanity. UN Human Rights Council next day passed resolution deploring situation in Venezuela, calling on govt to allow in humanitarian assistance and on UN human rights chief to investigate and report.