

Latin America and the Caribbean

↓ 🇨🇴* **Colombia** Peace talks between govt and National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla group fell apart following deadly ELN car bomb, leading to fears of open conflict and worsening violence along border with Venezuela and Pacific coast. Car bomb struck police academy in Bogotá 17 Jan, killing 21 police officers (as well as driver) and injuring over 60, third deadliest attack in city's history and most deadly for fifteen years; President Duque next day announced reinstatement of arrest warrants against ELN delegation at peace talks in Havana, Cuba, effectively ending peace talks. ELN 21 Jan claimed responsibility for bomb, however hours later its leadership in Havana denied knowledge of the attack before it took place. Earlier in month, ELN increased rate of attacks following end of unilateral ceasefire 23 Dec-3 Jan, including shooting down helicopter that was transporting money in Norte de Santander province (north east) 13 Jan, stealing money and kidnapping crew. Following 21 Dec death of alias "Guacho", leader of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissident group Oliver Sinisterra front, alias "The Gringo" took over as group leader. Dissident violence eased after main armed groups in Tumaco (south west) 13 Dec agreed truce after high levels of violence hindered narco-trafficking in area; two reported homicides in Tumaco since truce came into effect. Deadline for country's largest drug trafficking group Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces (AGC) to state it was willing to surrender to govt ran out 9 Jan, although group respected unilateral ceasefire 8 Dec-10 Jan. Killings of community activists remained high with six murdered in first six days of Jan alone including Maritza Quiroz Leiva, Afro-Colombian leader and environmental activist, shot dead 6 Jan at her farm near Santa Marta, Magdalena department (north).

➡ **El Salvador** Ahead of Feb presidential elections, gangs put pressure on govt by stepping up killings; national police chief 20 Jan announced 210 people had been murdered since 1 Jan, including spike of 61 murders 12-14 Jan mainly in eastern departments of San Miguel, La Unión and Usulután. National police chief 2 Jan announced 2018 homicide rate was 50.3 homicides per 100,000, down from 60.8 in 2017, although attorney general reported disappearances had increased by 10% in 2018 to 3,514 cases; still no institutionally agreed methodology to count disappearances. San Salvador Mayor Nayib Bukele continued to lead polls ahead of first round of presidential elections 3 Feb. Judge 19 Jan ordered detention of former President Funes for divulging secret document involving corruption case of former President Flores.

↓ **Guatemala** Political turmoil worsened as govt intensified attacks on International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG, which has been preparing case and possible charges against President Morales and others for illicit electoral financing) and against Constitutional Court (CC), which has been defending CICIG. After CC early Jan intervened to release CICIG official detained at airport on entering country, Morales 7 Jan announced end of agreement with UN on CICIG, giving representatives 24 hours to leave country. Lawyers and civil society filed multiple appeals with CC, which 8 Jan ruled against govt's decision. CICIG chief Iván Velásquez – previously a target of govt anger for his work – 14 Jan stated he would resign if CICIG was allowed to function until planned end of its mandate in Sept. Foreign ministry 16 Jan defied CC ruling and withdrew diplomatic immunity and

privileges from all CICIG staff, while CICIG was excluded from tribunal hearing case against Morales' relatives 18 Jan. Thousands of protesters marched in Guatemala City 12 and 14 Jan in support of CICIG. Govt moves against CICIG caused international outcry: UN Sec-Gen Guterres rejected Morales' 7 Jan decision, while regional and international partners and UN human rights office called on govt to respect democratic institutions and reverse decision. Govt also targeted CC, with Supreme Court of Justice 9 Jan beginning proceedings against three CC judges; Congress 17 Jan created committee to study whether to lift immunity of CC judges. Seven people were injured in bomb explosion in bus in Guatemala City 21 Jan; investigations pointed to gang extortion racket, for which suspected attacker is being tried.

➡ **Haiti** At opening of parliament 14 Jan, PM Céant announced parliamentary elections to be held in Oct. President of Senate Joseph Lambert listed set of challenges that need to be resolved before elections, including establishment of a permanent electoral council, and strengthening capacity of national police. Fuel shortages continued with govt overdue on tens of millions of dollars in payments to U.S. energy suppliers; some citizens reportedly without electricity for two weeks following govt rationing. Gang-related insecurity continued; Associated Press 14 Jan reported mass killing in La Saline neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince in Nov 2018 that left some 21 dead was carried out by gangs in police uniform; gang leader and former policeman implicated in Nov attacks Grégory Antoine, alias "Ti Greg", was assassinated 9 Jan in Carrefour Feuilles area of Port-au-Prince, reportedly by members of rival gang. With Haitians continuing to leave in large numbers and facing deportation risks abroad, court in New York 7-10 Jan heard challenge to U.S. govt decision to end Temporary Protected Status for some 50,000 Haitians in U.S.; decision expected in March.

➡ **Honduras** Following end of UN-led National Dialogue process in Dec, Congress 11 Jan began debates on electoral reform and 25 Jan approved measures including creation and composition of Electoral Supreme Court; reformation of National Registry and establishment of second round for future elections. Political tensions high around 26 Jan anniversary of President Hernández's swearing-in ceremony; new opposition platform Citizen Action Against Dictatorships 20-26 Jan held protests in fourteen departments to demand Hernández's resignation, and in several cases were met by police repression. Eight mass killings 1-14 Jan left some 30 people dead across country, including in capital Tegucigalpa (centre) and Cortés and Yoro departments (north). Migrant "caravans" continued to set off on attempts to reach U.S. border, despite new U.S. legislation requiring asylum seekers wait in Mexico during processing of their applications; in apparent move to appease U.S., govt 2 Jan agreed to move its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

➡ **Mexico** Govt 9 Jan signed bill creating new 60,000-strong National Guard, main instrument of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO)'s National Peace and Security Plan to fight crime and violence, which reached record levels in 2018. New force will be heavily reliant on military commanders and officers; civil society and experts early Jan decried plans, which they warn threaten to cement militarisation of public security, during audiences before Congress. Amid ongoing high rates of violence, National Public Security System 21 Jan announced 33,341 homicides in 2018, 15% increase on 2017 and highest figure since records began in

1997. Govt moved to curb oil siphoning, estimated to cause yearly govt losses of \$3.3bn and fuel conflict between armed groups over its control and smuggling routes; govt late Dec deployed 7,000 officers, including military forces, to protect pipelines and shut worst affected ones, leading to gas shortages in eight states in north and centre of country, and take charge of facilities. Explosion at clandestine oil siphoning tap on pipeline in Tlahuelilpan, Hidalgo state (centre) killed some 114 people and injured 81 others; govt promised to clamp down further on siphoning. State oil company 29 Jan said fuel theft reduced by 65% since army deployed in Dec. Focus on oil siphoning also highlighted collusion between criminal groups and employees of state oil company PEMEX, with soldiers 7 Jan uncovering large pipeline supplying oil directly to gangs in Salamanca, Guanajuato state (centre). U.S. 24 Jan began implementation of policy forcing asylum seekers to wait in Mexico while applying for U.S. asylum; govt said it disagreed with U.S. “unilateral measure”.

➔ **Nicaragua** Govt shaken by series of defections of prominent allies, while repression of opposition and press continued, and clashes between security forces and armed groups re-emerged in south. Supreme Court judge 8 Jan resigned from court and ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) party, accusing President Ortega and his wife and VP Rosario Murillo of pushing country to civil war with repression of protests; National Assembly 17 Jan announced another Supreme Court judge had resigned and 15 Jan approved resignation of head of banking industry regulatory body, reportedly for health reasons. National Assembly 28 Jan received social security reform bill that resembles the one which triggered crisis in April 2018. Repression continued with flawed trials of opposition protesters and harassment of press. Permanent Commission on Human Rights announced it had received 40 complaints for unjust detentions or harassment 1-8 Jan. Nicaraguan Association Pro Human Rights 9 Jan raised to 561 and 4,578 the number of total dead and injured in relation to crisis since April 2018. Committee Pro Liberation of Political Prisoners said 767 people in prison for protesting against govt. Security situation worsened in south with clashes between security forces and armed civilians: in Río San Juan department, two civilians reported killed 12 Jan in clash between military and members of criminal organisations; illegal armed group “Los Atabales” claimed responsibility for 17 Jan attack killing four police. Regional and international pressure on govt to ease repression and engage with dialogue continued, including from Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Mexico, and Catholic Church. Organization of American States (OAS) Permanent Council 11 Jan gathered to assess possibility of applying Democratic Charter, which could see Nicaragua expelled from OAS. U.S. 9 Jan announced it was seeking ways to block Nicaraguan trade access to U.S. market.

⬇️🇻🇪* **Venezuela** Country thrown into turmoil as new opposition leader claimed role of acting president, backed by mass anti-govt protests and with support from foreign partners including U.S., setting up confrontation with govt of President Maduro and prompting fears of violent escalation in coming days and weeks. Opposition-controlled National Assembly (NA) 5 Jan elected relative unknown Juan Guaidó of Voluntad Popular party as its new chairman, five days before Maduro was sworn in for second six-year term as president in ceremony boycotted by U.S., EU and many Latin American nations who question legitimacy of his May 2018 re-election. National security police 13 Jan briefly arrested Guaidó, in incident which govt attributed to rogue agents acting in partnership with parts of opposition. Amid

growing opposition to Maduro, including dozens of small-scale protests against govt and rising prices in formerly pro-govt areas in Caracas 21 Jan, Guaidó 23 Jan declared himself “interim president”, citing Art. 233 of constitution, in move opposition hardliners and foreign supporters had been demanding. Hundreds of thousands protested across country against govt same day, with over 40 reportedly killed as security forces cracked down over succeeding days. U.S. immediately announced its recognition; Maduro accused U.S. of leading “coup attempt” and announced severing of diplomatic relations, ordering all U.S. diplomatic and consular staff to leave within 72 hours, though later backing down. International community divided with all major countries in the Americas except Mexico officially recognising Guaidó as acting president and many European countries saying they would follow unless free elections were called, but China, Turkey and Russia declaring support for Maduro. European parliament 30 Jan voted to recognise Guaidó as acting interim president. UN Security Council debated Venezuela 26 Jan without passing resolution. EU 31 Jan announced creation of international contact group “to help achieve a peaceful and democratic solution through fresh credible elections”. U.S. 28 Jan imposed sweeping oil sanctions, announcing it would divert any profits from Venezuelan oil sold in U.S. to accounts controlled by Guaidó and transfer control of U.S. refining network to interim govt; over half Venezuela’s oil income comes from U.S. sales.