

Latin America and the Caribbean

Andes

➔ **Bolivia** Govt increasingly relied on security forces to enforce COVID-19 quarantine and political tensions continued between interim gov't and Movement toward Socialism (MAS) party of former President Morales. Defence Minister Luis Fernando López 4 April announced wider use of military to control compliance with COVID-19 quarantine; Interim President Áñez 14 April extended quarantine until 30 April. After Áñez closed all borders in March in attempt to curb spread of virus, thousands of Bolivians remained stranded in border towns in Chile awaiting authorisation to enter Bolivia; military 8 April fired tear gas to repel at least 300 people trying to cross border near Chilean border village of Colchane. As police tried to return to their post in Chapare province (after having left area in late-2019 following confrontation with coca growers in aftermath of Morales' resignation), residents in Shinahota town 16 April violently expelled them; interim gov't next day accused Morales of masterminding attacks. Attorney General 15 April ordered preventive detention of MAS figure Faustino Yucra for alleged terrorism and sedition. Electoral tribunal 25 April asked Congress to choose date between 28 June and 27 September for general elections rerun.

➔ **Colombia** Amid continued armed groups' violence, National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas announced it will not extend one-month COVID-19 ceasefire. After ELN 1 April began unilateral ceasefire as "humanitarian gesture" amid COVID-19, gov't's High Commissioner for Peace Miguel Ceballos immediately called ceasefire insufficient, said ELN should "extend [its] terms indefinitely" and release hostages as pre-conditions to any ELN-gov't talks; in statement, ELN 27 April said it will not extend ceasefire into May, citing gov't's failure to reciprocate with good-will gesture. Despite ceasefire, ELN throughout month clashed with other armed groups in Chocó (west) and Cauca (south west) provinces. Notably, violence between Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC, one of country's main drug trafficking groups) and ELN led to displacement in Chocó, including early-April clashes causing 37 indigenous families to flee Guayabal town. Clashes between Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissident group Columna Mobil Carlos Patiño, ELN and army in Argelia and Tambo municipalities, Cauca, killed at least eight 14 April. Gov't 10 April announced capture of FARC dissident group member reportedly responsible for several murders of social leaders in Putumayo province (south). Amid gov't's efforts to eradicate coca cultivation across country, allegedly including restarting of aerial spraying to destroy crops, coca cultivators and armed forces 22 April reportedly clashed in Putumayo and Norte de Santander (north east) provinces. Isolated protests erupted over gov't's handling of COVID-19 crisis. In capital Bogotá and second-largest city Medellín, protesters from mid-April demonstrated almost daily against movement restriction, delays in distribution of food aid, and alleged corruption in management of aid; attempts at looting food were reported in Medellín 14-15 April.

➔ **Venezuela** Amid COVID-19 crisis, protests and looting erupted over lack of food and fuel, several journalists critical of gov't response arrested, and U.S.

pressure on President Maduro to force him to leave office continued. Maduro 11 April extended countrywide COVID-19 lockdown for further 30 days. Security forces throughout month reportedly detained several medical personnel and journalists who questioned govt's claim it had "contained" spread of virus, charging some with "spreading hate". Notably, press association 18 April reported seven arbitrary arrests of journalists 1-15 April. Isolated protests and lootings erupted in several areas, especially in east, over lack of food and fuel amid COVID-19 pandemic and collapse of oil industry; notably, man was reportedly shot dead 23 April during looting in Upata town. Opposition leader Juan Guaidó 21 April denied media report of secret exploratory talks between his and Maduro's allies. Lack of clarity persisted over whether parliamentary elections, due this year, could take place in light of COVID-19 crisis; Maduro mid-April said he was unsure if vote would proceed. Despite FM Jorge Arreaza's 31 March rejection of U.S. offer to lift sanctions in exchange for political transition – whereby Maduro and Guaidó would step aside and executive power be held by "Council of State", nominated by govt and opposition, until presidential election – govt in subsequent days reportedly showed willingness to consider proposal. Following March indictment of Maduro and others on drugs-related charges, U.S. continued to escalate pressure on govt. U.S. 1 April said that its forthcoming, large-scale anti-drugs operation in southern Caribbean, which will double its naval presence in region, will also serve declared aim of cutting off resources to Maduro govt; govt immediately accused Washington of "slander and threats". UN Security Council (UNSC) 22 April debated Venezuela at virtual "closed door" session, for first time in a year, at request of Russia, which criticised U.S. policy; UNSC met again 28 April to discuss humanitarian crisis in country.

Central America and Mexico

↓ **El Salvador** President Bukele defied Supreme Court's rulings deeming some measures taken amid COVID-19 pandemic unconstitutional, opening institutional crisis, and sudden spike in homicides late-April after months of improvement in security situation prompted govt to reverse prison policy. Bukele early April authorised security forces to toughen measures against those defying COVID-19 quarantine, including detaining and transferring them to containment centres. Supreme Court 8 April ruled detention of citizens for breaching quarantine unconstitutional and 15 April ordered Bukele to comply with decision; Bukele immediately said he would not abide by rulings, opening institutional crisis. Legislative Assembly (LA) 16 April approved extension of state of emergency until 1 May. Inter American Press Association 15 April expressed concern over alleged increase in violations of press freedom in context of COVID-19, while NGO Human Rights Watch same day denounced holding of 4,236 people in 87 containment centres and said Bukele "encouraged excessive use of force". After months of low homicide rates, police reported 23 homicides in one day 24 April, allegedly highest daily toll since Bukele took office last June; violence continued 25-27 April with another 54 homicides. In response, Bukele 24 April imposed total lockdown in jails housing gang members, arguing orders to kill came from imprisoned gang leaders; 26 April ordered members of different gangs be mixed in same cell, reversing long-standing prison policy, and offered legal support to security officials involved in

killing of gang members. Amid continued focus on migration, U.S. Sec State Pompeo 13 April said migratory flow from Central America dropped by 76% since May 2019 and announced restoral of some aid – cut in 2019 – to help country further tackle migration.

➔ **Guatemala** Govt continued to take strong security measures to address COVID-19, while deportation flights from U.S. sparked tensions. Govt repeatedly extended COVID-19 state of emergency and related curfew imposed late March; 19 April relaxed internal travel restrictions, introduced 4 April, for all but four departments. Mayors and social leaders 3 April said money transfers to poorest, put in place by govt late-March in context of COVID-19, often end up in hands of wealthier households due to flawed data gathering. Govt 5 April subcontracted delivery of 3mn masks to company run by former colleague of President Giammattei's wife, raising concerns over corruption; Giammattei 20 April dismissed two health vice-ministers and six other officials for alleged wrongdoing in purchase of medical equipment. Fearing social unrest, authorities as of 2 April reportedly trained 200 policemen to break up protests; police 22 March-17 April reportedly arrested more than 10,000 people for allegedly violating COVID-19 curfew. Deportation flights from U.S. sparked controversy; after health minister 14 April said deportations from U.S. contributed to COVID-19 spread in country, govt 16 April announced pause in flights. Residents fearing contagion in city of Quetzaltenango (west) 15 April staged protest against confinement centre hosting 80 Guatemalans deported from Mexico, throwing stones at them and threatening to set centre on fire. U.S. Sec State Pompeo 13 April said migratory flow from Central America dropped by 76% since May 2019 and announced restoral of some aid – cut in 2019 – to help country further tackle migration.

➔ **Honduras** Amid protests over food shortages, govt faced allegations of corruption in management of COVID-19 crisis. Govt late March and early April took steps to alleviate economic hardship caused by COVID-19, and President Hernández 12 April declared production of food national priority, but measures failed to prevent protests over lack of food, particularly in capital Tegucigalpa and northern department of Cortés with near-daily demonstrations and roadblocks. Reports of misuse of funds to tackle virus emerged, including 13 April allegation by businessman that govt inflated prices of protective equipment in attempt to embezzle funds. In report released 27 April, govt agency National Anticorruption Council identified \$2.3mn overpricing in govt purchase of face masks. Criminal groups remained active despite reduction of extortion opportunities due to COVID-19 restrictions; in Tegucigalpa, police 7 April arrested two Barrio 18 members who had reportedly stolen ambulance to smuggle drugs into capital and 10 April arrested two MS-13 members allegedly trafficking narcotics disguised as engineers. Sentencing of President Hernández's brother, found guilty in U.S. of drug smuggling in Oct, was delayed until 29 June; U.S. prosecutors 30 April charged former national police chief Juan Carlos Bonilla Valladares with trafficking drugs into U.S. and related weapons offenses, claiming Bonilla worked on behalf of president Hernández and his brother. U.S. and Mexico continued to deport migrants to Honduras despite COVID-19 pandemic; U.S. Sec State Pompeo 13 April said migratory flow from Central America dropped by 76% since May 2019 and announced restoral of some aid – cut in 2019 – to help country further tackle migration.

➡ **Mexico** Criminal violence remained high while govt's soft response to COVID-19 crisis continued to spark controversy. Following highest monthly number of homicides on record in March with 2,585 cases, violence and armed clashes continued at high levels, notably in centre. In series of murders in Guanajuato state (centre) 10 April, unidentified assailants killed at least thirteen people in León and Salamanca cities. In neighbouring Michoacán state, suspected members of criminal group Jalisco Cartel New Generation 26 April killed 21 alleged combatants of rival group Los Viagras in Aguililla city. Several violent incidents also took place in north. Notably, state police clashed with criminal group in Nuevo Laredo city, Tamaulipas state 2 April, number of casualties unknown; and shootout between Sinaloa Cartel and Juárez Cartel in Chihuahua state killed nineteen suspected gang members 4 April. Targeted killings of journalists and civil society activists continued. Journalist Víctor Álvarez, who disappeared 2 April after having received threats from criminal group, was found dead 8 April in Acapulco city, Guerrero (south); same day, unknown assailants shot dead environmental activist and mining opponent Adán Vez Lira in Actopan city, Veracruz state (Gulf Coast in east). Several state governors throughout month criticised govt's reliance on voluntary measures to curb spread of COVID-19 – including 16 April extension of social isolation recommendations until late-May – and refusal to pursue large stimulus package to mitigate economic impact of pandemic. Sonora state (north) governor 13 April and Michoacán and Jalisco states (both centre) governors 20 April implemented mandatory state-wide lockdowns. Organised crime appeared set on capitalising on crisis to increase penetration into local communities and boost recruitment; various criminal groups 4 April began posting online videos and images of handout of aid packages in Tamaulipas, Veracruz, Michoacán and Jalisco states.

➡ **Nicaragua** Govt faced mounting international and domestic pressure to take action against COVID-19, and continued to harass opposition. After business associations 1 April called for cross-party action to tackle virus, head of National Assembly Gustavo Porras next day ruled out possibility of taking strong confinement measures. International agency Pan American Health Organization 7 April expressed concern over govt's handling of crisis, citing “inadequate” prevention and control. In televised speech 15 April, President Ortega reiterated lockdown would prompt economic collapse. Opposition movements repeatedly called on population to self-quarantine; joint opposition platform National Coalition 19 April condemned govt's “lack of willingness” to address emergency. Govt repression of opposition continued unabated. Notably, police 19 April reportedly detained at least three people in town of Moyogalpa in south who were peacefully commemorating anniversary of 2018 uprising, prompting residents to capture police officer; next day, police allegedly raided community, freed officer and arrested two other people; police denied sequence of events. After govt 8 April announced release of 1,700 prisoners ahead of Easter celebrations, NGO Amnesty International 16 April called on govt to also release “those detained solely for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly”.

Caribbean

➔ **Guyana** Political standoff that arose from 2 March general elections persisted as electoral commission (GECOM) failed to finalise modalities of national recount process. After country's Supreme Court late March authorised national recount of votes, Court of Appeal 5 April ruled GECOM rather than regional bloc Caribbean Community (CARICOM) must supervise process. GECOM 29 April said electoral recount would start when CARICOM electoral observer team arrives in capital Georgetown in coming days.

➔ **Haiti** Opposition challenged govt's handling of COVID-19 crisis, citing criminal groups' interference in distribution of aid. After govt late March announced cash transfers to large families, distribution of food kits and bonuses for healthcare workers and police amid fears COVID-19 could worsen dire humanitarian situation, opposition denounced govt's management of aid distribution. Opposition leader André Michel 3 April said police delivered food kits under supervision of local gang leader in Delmas commune near capital Port-au-Prince. Opposition platform Democratic and Popular Sector 7 April said release of emergency funds did not follow proper procedure, and called for audit and investigation by High Court of Auditors. President Moïse 19 April extended state of health emergency until 20 May. Govt attempts to enforce COVID-19 lockdown and curfew met resistance. Notably, police clashed with bus drivers while trying to prevent public transport from operating between Les Cayes and Port-au-Prince 10 April; no casualties reported. Amid ongoing insecurity, including late March abduction of hospital director, defence minister 9 April announced soldiers would secure medical convoys. Deportation of Haitian nationals from U.S. continued despite risk of contagion; 68 Haitians flown home 7 April and 129 others 30 April.