



## Latin America and the Caribbean

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### Andes

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➔ **Colombia** Following dialogue with govt, National Liberation Army (ELN) killed nine soldiers in setback to talks, and Petro suspended ceasefire with Gulf Clan amid accusations it took advantage of miners' protests to carry out attacks.

*Weeks after concluding second round of talks with govt, ELN killed nine soldiers.* Govt and ELN 10 March concluded second round of peace talks with announcement of new, six-point agenda. Points agreed upon include building participatory civic process, end to armed conflict, reparations for victims and structural reforms to reduce poverty. Document also outlined roles of guarantor states as well as observers, UN and Catholic Church. Next round of dialogue scheduled for mid-April in Cuba. However, govt 29 March reported that ELN had killed nine soldiers in Norte de Santander province; President Petro same day condemned violence while chief govt negotiator said priority at talks must now be to broker ceasefire and cessation of hostilities. Meanwhile, Petro 13 March announced govt's readiness to begin negotiations with dissident faction of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) known as FARC-EP; statement followed attorney general's decision earlier that day to lift arrest warrants for 18 of 19 FARC-EP commanders, an action Petro had requested to facilitate talks.

*Govt suspended ceasefire with Gulf Clan.* Criminal group Gulf Clan 6 March announced it had hired lawyer to represent group in talks with govt. Yet mining strikes in north-western Antioquia and Córdoba departments complicated govt's formal outreach plans. Small-scale miners 2 March went on strike and blocked roads in several municipalities. Situation quickly escalated amid accusations Gulf Clan had compelled rural residents to join protests, and then used those mobilisations as smokescreen for attacks. Gulf Clan 11 March issued pamphlet stating they "neither supported nor incentivised" strike, though another pamphlet dated 13 March demanded all local businesses and miners support strikes. Petro same day accused group of violating ceasefire, saying talks were therefore impossible, 19 March suspended ceasefire with Gulf Clan.

*In other important developments.* Petro 28 March announced govt will host international conference in capital Bogotá to support dialogue between "Venezuelan opposition, civil society [...] and the Venezuelan government".

➔ **Venezuela** Several candidates announced bids for opposition primaries as debate about involving govt-controlled Electoral Council continued; corruption case revealed factional fighting in ruling party.

*Opposition parties ramped up their campaigns ahead of Oct primaries.* After winning landslide victory in Primero Justicia party's internal elections late Feb, Henrique Capriles 10 March launched candidacy for opposition primaries scheduled for Oct 2023 in bid to become opposition's candidate in 2024 presidential race; Capriles is barred from standing for elected office and it is unclear what would become of his candidacy should he win primaries. Another leading contender, Maria Corina Machado, also barred from running for office, has already begun campaigning on a stridently anti-socialist ticket. Notably, Machado 5 March said public companies, including state-owned oil company PDVSA, should be privatised; Capriles 10 March criticised Machado's comments. Meanwhile, Popular Will, party of ousted opposition leader Juan Guaidó, 7 March announced it had selected Guaidó to run in Oct.

*Disagreements around involving National Electoral Council in primaries persisted.* Independent Commission set up by opposition coalition Unitary Platform to organise primaries 8 March began talks with govt-controlled National Electoral Council to clarify what technical assistance council could provide. Some continued to oppose council's involvement, arguing state participation would limit number of people willing to vote and facilitate govt interference, but Commission sources told Crisis Group turnout could be cut in half without official polling stations.

*Factional fighting within ruling party surfaced.* Battles within ruling party came to light when authorities 17-19 March arrested around two dozen people, half of them officials reportedly linked to Oil Minister Tareck El Aissami. Arrests appear linked to disappearance of at least \$3bn in oil revenues, which VP Delcy Rodríguez and her brother Jorge Rodríguez, president of National Assembly and govt's chief negotiator, reportedly blame on Aissami, who is head of rival *chavista* faction. Aissami 20 March tendered his resignation, Maduro next day appointed PDVSA President Pedro Tellechea as oil minister.

*In other important developments.* Colombian President Petro 28 March announced govt will host international conference in Colombia's capital Bogotá to support dialogue between "Venezuelan opposition, civil society [...] and the Venezuelan government".

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## **Central America and Mexico**

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➡ **El Salvador** One year after govt first imposed 30-day state of exception, authorities renewed measure for 12th time amid widespread support; Legislative Assembly lifted electoral reform ban.

*One-year anniversary of state of exception passed.* 27 March marked one year since govt first imposed state of exception for 30 days to tackle gang violence. Twelve days prior, legislative assembly 15 March approved measure's 12th extension. Justice and Public Security Minister Gustavo Villatoro 27 March said authorities had arrested 66,417 people for gang affiliation since measure took effect. Complaints about human rights violations persisted. Notably, UN human rights office 28 March said 90 people have died in custody since March 2022, adding that "there is only limited information on how investigations of those deaths are proceeding". Despite human

rights concerns, state of exception continued to enjoy wide popular support and President Bukele maintained high approval ratings.

*Authorities repealed ban on reforms to electoral processes.* Legislative Assembly 15 March lifted ban on enacting changes to electoral system one year before elections. Opposition politician Claudia Ortiz condemned move, arguing measure will allow govt to modify rules up to one day before polls are held, which indicates ruling party may seek to make changes ahead of next presidential election in Feb 2024; Ortiz accused Bukele of seeking to “concentrate more power”.

➔ **Honduras Govt expressed doubt about state of exception’s utility amid continued violence and established diplomatic relations with China.**

*Although police claimed decrease in homicides, violence continued.* Amid state of exception, extended in Feb until April to tackle extortion but which so far has yielded few results, former President Porfirio Lobo 5 March called for “Bukele-style” policy to improve outcomes, referring to El Salvador’s heavy-handed tactics to tackle gangs. National police 17 March published graph showing decrease in homicides, allegedly due to measure. Violent incidents continued, however. Notably, unknown assailants 4 March killed six in Comayagüela city; armed men 6 March killed nine in Comayagua city. President Castro 7 March lashed out at high-ranking security officials, criticising their failure to prevent violence despite state of exception, signalling govt’s uncertainty about whether to rely on measure to tackle insecurity.

*Govt established diplomatic ties with China.* Castro 14 March instructed FM Reina to establish diplomatic relations with China, citing, among other things, hope for more aid; Taiwan same day warned that Honduras could fall into China’s debt trap, disguised as selfless aid. Honduras 25 March formally established diplomatic ties with China and severed them with Taiwan.

*In other important developments.* U.S. court 28 March sentenced Herlinda Bobadilla, leader of Montes Bobadilla trafficking clan, to 20 years in prison on drug trafficking charges.

➔ **Mexico Senate set up commission to monitor military’s public security role amid accusations of misconduct, violence persisted at high levels, and President López Obrador sparred with U.S. lawmakers.**

*Lawmakers established commission to oversee military’s role in public security.* Senate 15 March formed commission tasked with monitoring armed forces’ participation in public security tasks. Action comes after evidence of military wrongdoing surfaced. Notably, several media outlets 7 March published leaked military intelligence documents showing security forces illegally spied on human rights activists using Pegasus spyware; President López Obrador 10 March rejected accusations of espionage and spoke instead of “intelligence activities”. Interior ministry’s sub-secretary for human rights 15 March said five men killed late Feb by soldiers in Nuevo Laredo city, Tamaulipas state, were “executed”. Meanwhile, Supreme Court 24 March temporarily suspended parts of López Obrador’s electoral reform bill, including planned cuts to National Electoral Institute’s budget.

*Criminal violence remained rampant, fire at migrant detention centre killed scores.* In central Tamaulipas state, suspected members of Gulf Cartel 3 March kidnapped four U.S. citizens and killed two of them in Matamoros city; cartel 9 March handed over five men allegedly responsible and publicly apologised. In San Luis Potosí state, also in centre, shootout between security forces and members of local criminal group 9 March left one soldier and six criminals dead in Villa de Ramos municipality. Authorities 7-10 March reported disappearance of eight women in Celaya town. In central Mexico state, shootout between police and alleged members of Jalisco cartel 17 March left three police officers and one cartel member dead. In Ciudad Juárez city, fire 27 March in migrant detention centre killed 39; authorities 30 March arrested five for alleged role in incident.

*López Obrador clashed with U.S. senators over calls for military action.* Former U.S. Attorney General Bill Barr 2 March published op-ed in news outlet *The Wall Street Journal* calling for U.S. military action in Mexico, while U.S. Republican senators 8 March called for designation of Mexican criminal groups as foreign terrorist organisations, among other heavy-handed measures. López Obrador 9, 13 March condemned calls for foreign intervention and pointed out that U.S. bears some responsibility for violence in Mexico due to high demand for drugs.

➡ **Nicaragua Govt crackdown on civil society and religious institutions persisted, and Ortega suspended diplomatic relations with Vatican.**

*Govt continued to crackdown on NGOs, business associations and universities.* President Ortega 6 March revoked legal status of 18 business associations for “non-compliance with the law and lack of transparency”. Govt next day closed two private universities linked to Catholic Church and ordered seizure of assets, saying universities “obstructed the control and supervision of the General Directorate for the Registration and Control of Non-Profit Organisations”; authorities 14 March closed two more, bringing number of universities closed since Dec 2021 to 21. Interior ministry 8 March cancelled legal status of 20 NGOs, citing failure to comply with legislation, 15 March cancelled 22 more, bringing total number banned since Dec 2018 to 3,348.

*Authorities severed diplomatic ties with Vatican.* In move cementing Ortega regime’s anti-Catholic stance, govt 12 March suspended diplomatic relations with Vatican; move comes after Pope Francis 10 March described regime as “gross dictatorship” following Feb sentencing of Bishop Rolando Álvarez to more than 26 years in prison. Vatican 18 March said it had closed its embassy in Nicaragua. Meanwhile, Chilean President Boric 25 March criticised Ortega’s “family dictatorship” for revoking citizenship of dozens of political prisoners mid-Feb.

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## **Caribbean**

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↓ **Haiti Soaring gang violence killed hundreds and displaced 160,000 in capital Port-au-Prince, though international assistance remained limited.**

*Violent turf wars killed over 200 and displaced 160,000 people.* Fighting between rival gangs affiliated with G9 and G-Pèp coalitions, which erupted 28 Feb in downtown neighbourhoods of Port-au-Prince, grew fiercer throughout early March. NGO Doctors Without Borders 8 March announced temporary closure of their Cité Soleil centre due to “intolerable risks” wrought by gang violence, which kept spreading to new areas. UN humanitarian agency 21 March said clashes between gangs in first two weeks of March left at least 208 dead and 101 kidnapped and that, as of mid-March, at least 160,000 people have been displaced. PM Henry 17 March called on Haitian armed forces – which have played limited security support role – to fight gangs alongside Haitian National Police (HNP), arguing that special police units are no longer sufficient to tackle “national security problem”. Around 15 NGOs 27 March urged govt to declare state of emergency in areas most affected by violence.

*UN reiterated appeal for multinational security mission.* International partners remained reluctant to lead security mission, instead offering to help strengthen HNP. Notably, Canada’s Defence Minister Anita Anand 2 March announced arrival of Navy ships to patrol Haitian waters; Caribbean Community 6 March pledged support for police efforts to address insecurity. Head of UN mission to Haiti 15 March said assistance was insufficient and again appealed for deployment of international force to tackle violence, which UN human rights agency 21 March reiterated. Following meeting between U.S. President Biden and Canadian PM Trudeau, Canada 24 March pledged additional \$100mn to assist HNP; Biden said foreign military force “is not off the table” but “is not in play at the moment”. European Union High Representative Josep Borrell 27 March expressed support for “international intervention”.

*PM Henry advanced “21 December Accord” agenda.* Despite continued opposition to 21 December Accord – political agreement between Henry and some members of opposition forces – Henry pressed ahead with agenda, 7 March installing eight judges to country’s highest court, who will select members of Electoral Council to organise elections. Meanwhile, head of recently inaugurated High Council for Transition, Mirlande Manigat, 7 March said council faced budget constraints.