

Latin America and the Caribbean

Andes

➔ **Colombia** Despite COVID-19 restrictions, armed groups' violence continued unabated in south west, while military conducted operations against National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas. Violence remained high in Cauca department (south west) as three Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia dissident fronts attempted to take advantage of COVID-19 mobility restrictions to expand and consolidate territory, leaving five social leaders killed 1-15 May. Military conducted several operations against ELN guerrillas throughout country. Notably, army 13 May killed at least five ELN members during operations in south of Bolívar department (north), including Alejandro Montoya alias "Gallero", commander of Darío Ramírez Castro War Front and member of national leadership. After President Duque late April signed decree authorising creation of demobilisation scheme for individual members of armed groups, military reported 37 ELN members sought to demobilise 29 April-2 May in Cauca; ELN chief negotiator Pablo Beltrán 18 May rejected decree as non-starter. Beltrán 29 May said ELN would back UN's call for three-month global ceasefire to address COVID-19 pandemic. Small-scale demonstrations against hunger continued almost daily in several major cities, while World Food Programme 19 May said 1mn people need urgent food support throughout country. Govt 11 May relaxed COVID-19 restrictions for several core economic sectors and 22 May extended mandatory isolation until 31 May. Amid high rates of COVID-19 transmission notably in Amazonas department along Brazilian border, govt and Brazil 15 May agreed to establish joint committee of ministers of health, defence and foreign affairs, while govt mid-month deployed at least 1,000 additional troops to border. UN refugee agency 19 May said COVID-19-related school closure increased risk of child recruitment by armed groups in Colombia.

↓ **Venezuela** Following foiled armed incursion by sea, reportedly attempting to topple President Maduro, authorities detained dozens suspected of involvement and further suppressed opposition. Govt 3 May said it had prevented group of former soldiers planning to capture Maduro from landing at seaside town of Macuto near capital Caracas same day, killing eight and arresting two; within hours, former National Guard Captain Javier Nieto and Jordan Goudreau, ex-U.S. special forces and head of U.S. private security company Silvercorp, claimed responsibility; Goudreau said he had obtained initial contract for operation signed by two members of strategic committee established by opposition leader Juan Guaidó in 2019; opposition leadership next day said meetings with Silvercorp were exploratory and soon dropped. In following days, security forces detained dozens for alleged involvement in plot, including two U.S. nationals; U.S. Sec State Pompeo 6 May denied "direct" U.S. involvement. Authorities late month moved to crack down further on opposition. Attorney general 25 May asked Supreme Court to declare Guaidó's Voluntad Popular party "terrorist organisation". Supreme Court 27 May formally recognised MP and President Maduro ally Luis Parra, who pro-govt lawmakers declared head of National Assembly (AN) during Jan session which security forces prevented opposition from attending, as AN chair instead of Guaidó;

next day, AN defied ruling and ratified Guaidó as head. Authorities reportedly arrested more than two dozen opposition supporters 18-24 May. Amid COVID-19 crisis, riot 1 May erupted in Llanos prison near Guanare city (west) over ban on outside visits, leaving over 40 prisoners dead. Maduro 12 May announced 30-day extension of countrywide lockdown as widespread protests over petrol, water and food shortages continued. Despite U.S. warning against Iranian assistance and shipments of fuel to Venezuela, first of five Iranian tankers arrived in Venezuelan waters 24 May. In virtual meeting of external actors including U.S. and Russia convened by Sweden 13 May, broad consensus reportedly emerged on need for negotiated solution to political crisis using basis of Norwegian-facilitated opposition-govt talks suspended in Aug 2019, though no formal agreement reached.

Central America and Mexico

➤ **El Salvador** Power struggle continued between, on one hand, President Bukele, and on the other, Legislative Assembly and Supreme Court, over terms of COVID-19 restrictions. Bukele 16 May bypassed Legislative Assembly and signed executive decree extending COVID-19 state of emergency for 30 days; two days later, Supreme Court however suspended decree following request from attorney general, and later that day, assembly passed renewed, more lenient version of state of emergency lasting another fifteen days; Supreme Court 22 May announced suspension of Bukele's decree permanent. Legislative Assembly 30 May passed new version of state of emergency bill establishing calendar to reopen economy in June; Bukele immediately announced he would veto it. Tensions also rose between govt and private sector; govt 12 May suspended talks with businesses over measures to reopen economy, with Bukele accusing representatives of sabotaging govt. Detention in containment centres of people accused of defying COVID-19 quarantine continued to spark controversy. Anti-riot police 4 May dissolved protests of detainees in two containment centres in capital San Salvador. Human rights NGOs 5 May said centres had turned into hotspots for contagion and Human Rights Ombudsman 8 May reported that some detainees were threatened and wounded by gang members inside centres. Following late April spike in homicides, security forces 27 April-3 May detained at least three MS-13 gang leaders and violence early May reportedly went back down to historical lows, with 56 homicides reported 1-29 May. Legislative Assembly 7 May voted against lifting immunity of its former head and presidential candidate Norman Quijano; request made by attorney general's office to investigate Quijano's alleged negotiations with gangs for electoral gain in 2014.

➤ **Guatemala** Govt continued to face allegations of corruption in handling of COVID-19 crisis, while rising levels of malnutrition sparked concerns and tensions with U.S. persisted over continued deportation of migrants. Amid surge in COVID-19 cases, Congress 11 May voted to extend state of emergency into June, and President Giammattei declared total nationwide lockdown 15-17 May and 23-24 May. Police reportedly arrested 19,000 people for violating curfew 22 March-14 May. Human Rights Ombudsman 23 May recommended Giammattei remove health minister for mismanagement of COVID-19 funds. Lawmakers 27 May accused health ministry of overpaying advisers, while failing to provide adequate

protective equipment to health facilities and workers. Concerns persisted over COVID-19-related malnutrition, particularly in rural areas; World Food Programme 8 May said 921,000 households were at risk of food insecurity due to pandemic, while govt 11 May said 13,000 children were facing acute malnutrition. Amid ongoing social unrest, residents of Quixayá town (south) 2 May blocked roads to denounce high cost of electricity. Tensions with U.S. remained high over continued deportation flights despite COVID-19 pandemic; Guatemalan govt announced several pauses in flights throughout month and accused U.S. of not testing deportees, saying many returnees tested positive upon arrival. Giammattei 21 May said U.S. is not treating Guatemala like an ally; U.S. embassy immediately denied accusation.

➤ **Honduras** Govt faced accusations of using COVID-19 crisis to embezzle funds and remain in power, while outrage over new penal code forced authorities to delay implementation. Amid accusations of govt corruption in handling COVID-19 crisis, notably embezzlement of funds, National Anti-Corruption Council 12 May said corrupt practices, such as overpricing of ventilators, cost govt HNL20mn (\$800,000) since crisis started. President of opposition Liberal Party 3 May accused govt of planning to use COVID-19 crisis to call off general elections scheduled for 2022 and remain in power by cancelling primaries; President Hernández 5 May denied allegations. Congress 9 May delayed application of new penal code, planned for 10 May, until 25 June to allow for debates with opposition, civil society and private sector, after UN Human Rights Office 7 May called for revision of code, citing threat to freedom of expression and press. Govt 24 May extended COVID-19 emergency measures until 31 May despite ongoing protests by taxi drivers and street vendors demanding to resume work. Allegations of President Hernández's ties to organised crime re-emerged. Local media including Criterio digital newspaper 12 May revealed recorded conversation between Fabio Lobo (former president's son, arrested in 2015 for trafficking drugs into U.S.) and Hernández's brother (found guilty of drug smuggling by U.S. court in Oct 2019) in which they apparently referred to Hernández as "boss" behind drug-trafficking operations. NGO Expediente Público 6 May accused Congress President Mauricio Olivia of having ties to Los Cachiros criminal group. U.S. continued to deport migrants to Honduras despite COVID-19 pandemic with 3,339 reportedly deported 1 April-10 May.

➤ **Mexico** Criminal violence continued to reach record levels, while civil society voiced concern over militarisation of public security. High homicide rates persisted in particular in central states of Guanajuato, Mexico state and Michoacán: notably, unknown assailants 18 May killed eight in armed attack on gas station in Guanajuato and police 23 May found twelve bodies in abandoned vehicle in Michoacán. In Sonora state (north), unidentified gunmen 16 May killed journalist Jorge Armenta and police officer in Cajeme municipality. Presidential decree 12 May allowed use of armed forces in wide array of public security tasks until May 2024; civil society groups condemned increasing militarisation, while National Human Rights Commission doubted decree's legality for not specifying circumstances in which military could take charge of public security. President López Obrador 15 May criticised international media as "famous but unethical" following series of articles accusing govt of downplaying COVID-19 spread in country. Prison riot erupted 12 May in Colima city (centre) over COVID-19 ban on

outside visits, leaving three prisoners dead. Amid significant increase in cases of domestic violence in context of COVID-19 restrictions, López Obrador 15 May claimed 90% of calls made by women to seek assistance were “false”, triggering heavy criticism by media and civil society. Govt 7 May signed agreement with Inter-American Human Rights Commission for expert group to resume investigations and technical assistance in case of disappearance of 43 Ayotzinapa teaching college students in Guerrero state (south) in 2014; expert group finished previous investigation in 2016 having found evidence of federal and state security forces complicity. In media interview, former U.S. Ambassador Roberta Jacobson 2 May said former President Calderon’s gov’t had information on alleged ties between then Security Minister Genaro García Luna – currently under trial in U.S. on charges of money laundering and involvement in organised crime – and Sinaloa Cartel.

➔ **Nicaragua** Opposition and civil society continued to voice concern over President Ortega’s management of COVID-19 crisis, while gov’t faced mounting international pressure over human rights abuses and money laundering. Media and NGOs, notably Citizen Observatory whose members include health workers, repeatedly questioned gov’t’s account of low number of COVID-19 cases and deaths; in Confidential newspaper mid-May, ministerial source said gov’t was lying about figures. In response, Ortega gov’t accused opposition of spreading fake news, with VP and first lady Murillo calling opposition “hate promoters” 13 May. Relatives of 38 political prisoners showing COVID-19 symptoms 14 May urged gov’t to release them. Opposition attempts to create cohesive front suffered new setback: several student organisations 13 May withdrew request to join opposition platform National Coalition created in Feb, accusing it of excluding student voices. EU and U.S. increased pressure on Ortega over accusations of human rights violations, including repression of opposition and civil society since political crisis erupted in 2019, and money laundering. EU 4 May imposed sanctions on six high-level officials, including four police commissioners and presidential adviser Nestor Moncada Lau, and 7 May added country to money-laundering blacklist; U.S. 22 May placed army top commander and finance minister on sanctions blacklist.

Caribbean

➔ **Haiti** Police protests resumed and gov’t extended COVID-19 state of emergency amid growing concerns over food shortages. Following violent incidents late April involving armed police protesters demanding back pay, police 11 May arrested seven members of hard-line police organisation Fantom 509, who were protesting near National Police General Inspectorate in capital Port-au-Prince; justice minister same day threatened to designate Fantom 509 as “terrorist organisation”. Fantom 509 blocked roads in Port-au-Prince 15 May to demand release of group member arrested 8 May on murder charges. Amid widespread concern over risk of food shortages, exacerbated by COVID-19 pandemic, agriculture minister 7 May said gov’t focus was on rapid production of crops and 14 May pledged to support farmers and regenerate abandoned agricultural land. Gov’t 20 May extended state of health emergency for two months. In response to COVID-19 concerns, Dominican Republic 8 May deployed additional troops along border with Haiti to prevent Haitians from crossing border into its territory. Deportation

of migrants from U.S. continued despite risk of some being infected with coronavirus; 50 Haitian nationals flown home 11 May.