



Latin America and the Caribbean

Andes

➔ **Colombia** Petro administration's total peace policy saw progress and setbacks as govt and FARC dissident group geared up for negotiations in May and deadly attack on security forces complicated talks with ELN.

ELN-govt talks faced setbacks, outreach to FARC dissident group progressed. Efforts to advance peace with National Liberation Army (ELN) faced challenges following late March attack that killed nine soldiers. ELN 3 April issued pamphlet justifying attack and promising more strikes until sides agreed to ceasefire, 10 April left explosives and threatening pamphlets in five major cities, including capital Bogotá and Medellín (Antioquia department). New round of talks will begin 2 May in Cuba's capital Havana. Govt outreach to dissident faction of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) known as FARC-EP saw progress, with ceasefire monitoring mechanism 24 April activating and talks due to start mid-May. Dissidents mid-April released pamphlet alleging govt had violated ceasefire, however, raising doubts about agreement's durability.

Gulf Clan claimed it held discussions with authorities, criminal groups clashed in Buenaventura. After govt suspended ceasefire with criminal group Gulf Clan in March, group 13 April released communiqué claiming it held discussions with govt in presence of foreign diplomats but that it rejects draft law, presented in Feb, intended to make judicial concessions in return for collective criminal demobilisation. Meanwhile, fragile truce in port city of Buenaventura (Valle de Cauca department) – considered early success of govt's "total peace" policy – showed signs of strain early April. Two negotiators for Los Shotas criminal group, in talks with rival Los Esparteros, disappeared; clashes resumed early April, triggering displacement. Though peace commissioner's office 11 April said it was working to calm tensions, incident raised concerns about sustainability of ceasefires between illegal armed groups.

Govt hosted international conference on Venezuela. President Petro 25 April hosted international conference in capital Bogotá on Venezuela, aimed at reigniting talks between Venezuelan govt and opposition (see Venezuela).

⚡ **Ecuador** Govt declared terrorism a security threat amid surge of gang violence, enabling military deployment to confront these groups without instituting state of exception.

Govt implemented new measures to tackle rising criminal gang violence. Around 30 gunmen 11 April entered port of Esmeraldas city, opening fire and killing nine fishermen; Interior Minister Juan Zapata next day said attack was likely in retaliation for fishermen paying “protection money” to rival gang. In port city of Guayaquil, Ecuador’s murder capital, armed attack 30 April killed ten people; National Police Commander William Villaroel said authorities “believe that this has to do with a struggle between organised criminal groups over the fight for territorial control”. Authorities 28 April declared terrorism a threat to Ecuador’s security, enabling military to launch special operations to confront organised crime groups without declaring state of exception.

Spate of violent incidents occurred in Guayaquil prison. In latest wave of gang violence also plaguing Ecuador’s jails, prison guards 12 April found six inmates hanged in Litoral penitentiary, located in Guayaquil. One day later, four assailants killed three prison guards during hit-and-run operation. Clashes between incarcerated gang members 14 April killed 12 and wounded three. President Lasso 25 April appointed new national security adviser and replaced secretary of public and state security.

➡ **Venezuela Colombia hosted international summit to reactivate talks between govt and opposition, and Maduro floated prospect of early presidential poll without proposals to improve election conditions.**

Conference on Venezuela took place in Colombia. Colombian President Petro 25 April hosted international conference on Venezuela in Colombian capital Bogotá, aimed at prompting resumption of talks between Maduro govt and opposition. Representatives from 19 countries and EU attended. Petro did not invite Venezuelan parties, though his govt 17, 22 April held meetings with President Maduro and representatives of opposition alliance Unitary Platform; both endorsed initiative. U.S. President Biden 20 April also expressed cautious support during meeting with Petro in U.S. capital Washington, while insisting that only substantial steps to restore democracy would lead to lifting of sanctions.

Participants urged sides to resume talks and improve electoral conditions. Following conference, Colombian FM 25 April said participants had agreed on need for return to Mexico City negotiating process and steps toward free elections in return for gradual lifting of U.S. sanctions. Maduro same day reiterated his support for dialogue but conditioned on release of some \$3bn in Venezuelan state assets held abroad and lifting of sanctions; President of National Assembly Jorge Rodríguez same day also demanded that International Criminal Court suspend its investigation into alleged crimes against humanity in Venezuela and that U.S. release businessman and close govt ally Alex Saab.

Maduro dangled prospect of early polls amid concern about election conditions. At rally to celebrate 21st anniversary of Hugo Chávez’s return to power following coup, Maduro 13 April once again insisted that presidential election slated for 2024 could be brought forward to 2023, but has yet to announce timetable, adding to uncertainty regarding electoral process. Meanwhile, govt-controlled National Electoral Council 18 April announced it would not grant requests from opposition’s primary election Commission regarding conditions for October primary, which commission has been tasked with organising. In particular, council refused to eliminate use of

fingerprinting machines, which are likely to reduce voter turnout and exacerbate divisions within opposition over Electoral Council's involvement.

Central America and Mexico

➔ **El Salvador** Authorities renewed state of exception for 13th time as concerns about human rights violations persisted; U.S. arrested key MS-13 leader on terrorism charges.

State of exception extended amid continued concern over human rights violations. Legislative assembly 12 April once again approved state of exception's extension, while Justice and Public Security Minister Gustavo Villatoro 17 April said authorities had arrested 67,467 people for gang affiliation since introducing measure. Complaints of human rights violations continued. Notably, NGO Amnesty International 3 April published statement accusing authorities of "systematically" committing human rights violations; five local civil society organisations 11 April submitted report to UN regarding extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions in El Salvador's prisons. Meanwhile, trade union representatives 18 April condemned arrest of at least 16 trade unionists since Jan 2023 under state of exception framework; moves signal measure's expanding use against political actors, which may increase as elections edge closer.

MS-13 leader arrested on terrorism charges. U.S. 18 April arrested MS-13 gang leader Jose Wilfredo Ayala-Alcantara, also known as "Indio de Hollywood", upon his arrival in Texas state after Mexico deported him. He and 12 associates already in U.S. custody were detained on terrorism charges and now await trial; President Bukele's administration had previously released some of these leaders from Salvadoran prisons.

➔ **Honduras** Wave of violent incidents prompted govt assessment of prison conditions; NGO said Honduras and its neighbours faced "extreme" levels of violence.

Eruption of prison riots prompted govt to assess prison conditions. Riots 8 April broke out in four prisons, including in capital Tegucigalpa and Tamara National Penitentiary, injuring twelve inmates and killing one. Some reports suggested riots were motivated by poor conditions, including increased prison population, lack of food and limited hygiene supplies. Castro 11 April asked Undersecretary of Security Julissa Villanueva to create intervention plan for prisons, who 18 April set out ten key points intervention will address, including obtaining and digitising number of inmates, vetting prison staff, and separating sentenced inmates from pre-trial detainees. Following day, shooting at prison in Ilama municipality, Santa Barbara department wounded seven prisoners.

NGO decried region's "war-like" levels of violence. State of exception continued after President Castro late March renewed measure for additional six months, despite uncertainty within govt about its impact. Meanwhile, head of NGO Norwegian Refugee Council 24 April said Honduras and other Central American countries are experiencing "war-like" levels of violence. Inter-American Commission on Human

Rights 28 April expressed concern about high levels of violence, with criminals notably targeting women and environmentalists.

➔ **Mexico Supreme Court ruled National Guard's militarisation unconstitutional, criminal violence persisted, and Lopez Obrador protested U.S. "interference" in efforts to tackle fentanyl trafficking.**

Mexico's top court ruled law shifting National Guard to army unconstitutional. Supreme Court 18 April declared President López Obrador's 2022 transfer of National Guard to Ministry of Defence unconstitutional, saying 2019 constitutional reform defined National Guard as "civilian police body"; in plenary session two days later, Court gave govt until 1 Jan 2024 to reintegrate National Guard into Ministry of Public Security. López Obrador 19 April said ruling was politically motivated and vowed to present new constitutional reform in Sept 2024 allowing National Guard to operate under Ministry of Defence's command. Meanwhile, López Obrador 28 April backed proposal introduced day prior by Senate leader Alejandro Armenta to scrap Institute for Access to Information and Data Protection, responsible for processing public information requests.

Criminal violence continued, individuals detained over fire at migration centre. In Zacatecas state, shootout between security forces and alleged members of local criminal group 11 April left eight criminals dead in Pánuco municipality. In central Michoacán state, shootout between army and local criminal group 24 April left one soldier and six civilians dead in Ciudad Hidalgo municipality. In central Jalisco state, authorities 30 April arrested Rodrigo Páex Quintero, nephew of Sinaloa Cartel founder Caro Quintero. Meanwhile, authorities 16 April detained head of National Migratory Institute in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua state, in connection with fire at detention centre 27 March that killed 40 migrants; authorities 25 April charged head of immigration agency Francisco Garduño over incident.

28 Sinaloa cartel members indicted in U.S. fentanyl investigation. U.S. Justice Department 14 April announced indictments against 28 alleged members of Sinaloa Cartel's Chapitos faction, which is accused of fentanyl production and trafficking into U.S. U.S. said its Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) had infiltrated group without Mexican authorities' knowledge, despite 2020 law prohibiting foreign agents from operating on Mexican soil without govt's approval; López Obrador 17 April condemned DEA's "abusive and prepotent interference".

➔ **Nicaragua Repression of Catholic Church intensified around Easter celebrations, and opposition leaders called for unity to challenge regime.**

Govt crackdown continued. Authorities continued to persecute Catholic Church and its practitioners. Notably, police 3 April harassed youths trying to conduct religious procession in Nindirí municipality, Masaya department. Govt 11 April confiscated monastery of Trappist nuns in San Pedro de Lóvago municipality, Chontales department. Govt next day ordered expulsion of three nuns belonging to Dominican Congregation of the Annunciation, who ran nursing home and school in Rivas department. Civil society organisation Monitoreo Azul y Blanco 10 April denounced 71 cases of religious persecution during Easter week (1-9 April). Meanwhile, govt 24 April closed three private universities, bringing number closed since Dec 2021 to 24. Human rights group Nunca Más 28 April revealed that since 2018 protests, at least

158 people detained have been subjected to torture, 113 of whom were victims of sexual violence by prison guards and police officers.

Opposition leaders acknowledged need for unity to defeat regime. Exiled opposition politicians Violeta Granera, Felix Maradiaga, Ana Margarita Vijil and Lester Aleman 16 April participated in televised discussion of much-needed changes to opposition's strategy. Notably, they acknowledged need for "unity in action," vowing to set aside differences in order to counter regime more effectively.

Caribbean

➔ **Haiti Mob killed suspected gang members amid spiralling gang violence and concomitant rise of self-defence groups, govt efforts to organise elections continued, and UN ramped up aid.**

Local populations mobilised as gang violence soared. Gangs continued to target police and civilians, expanding their territory in capital Port-au-Prince and Artibonite department. Notably, in Port-au-Prince's Pétionville commune, Kraze Baryè group 5 April set fire to police station, Ti Makak gang 9 April killed three policemen; in Croix-des-Bouquets commune, 400 Mawozo gang 16 April killed one police officer. Two journalists also killed during month. UN 24 April said insecurity had "reached levels comparable to countries in armed conflict" and reiterated calls for multinational security mission. Following UN report late March about worrying emergence of self-defence groups, Canaan gang 5 April attacked Onaville town, allegedly targeting locals who had formed surveillance brigade; residents in Port-au-Prince 24 April burned to death 13 suspected gang members in what police described as "a lynching"; scores of men 25 April reportedly patrolled capital's Canape Vert neighbourhood, armed with machetes, saying "we are planning to fight and keep our neighbourhoods clean of [gangs]".

Govt pushed ahead with election planning. Interim govt moved forward with steps toward organising elections, but continued to forgo talks with political parties that refuse to join coalition, as stipulated in 21 December Accord – agreement between acting PM Henry and several opposition forces. Notably, Henry 12 April asked representatives from various sectors to designate potential candidates for Electoral Council, charged with organising vote; National Association of Haitian Media 24 April declined Henry's invitation to nominate two candidates for Electoral Council, arguing that organising elections amid so much violence is unrealistic.

In other important developments. UN 13 April presented \$720mn annual aid plan for Haiti, largest since 2010 earthquake, amid dire humanitarian situation. Dominican Republic President Abidaner 16 April issued decree preventing entry of 39 Haitians linked to gangs. Meanwhile, several media outlets early April reported that leaked classified U.S. documents indicated Russian paramilitary Wagner Group late Feb planned to assess potential contract with govt to fight gangs; *Washington Post* 10 April reported that officials denied local authorities had met with Wagner representatives.