



Latin America and the Caribbean

Andes

↑ **Colombia** Govt's landmark ceasefire with National Liberation Army (ELN) took effect, marking important step forward in President Petro's "total peace" efforts; govt announced negotiations with FARC dissidents will begin in Sept.

Bilateral ceasefire with ELN commenced. 180-day ceasefire between ELN and state security forces – longest bilateral ceasefire ever concluded with guerrilla group – 3 Aug got under way, marked by ceremony in capital Bogotá. Parties same day inaugurated public participation mechanism with 81 national delegates who are meant to organise several dozen regional consultations; purpose of consultations unclear. Govt and ELN negotiators 14 Aug began fourth round of talks in Venezuelan capital Caracas. Despite progress, Attorney General Francisco Barbosa 8 Aug alleged guerrillas planned to assassinate him, which ELN next day denied. UN Security Council 2 Aug expanded UN mission mandate to include monitoring of ELN ceasefire and expressed willingness to consider covering potential future agreement with Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissidents.

String of attacks by FARC dissident faction threatened progress toward talks. Petro administration 12 Aug announced it would begin formal peace negotiations with dissident FARC faction known as FARC-EP Estado Mayor Central (FARC-EMC) on 17 Sept, likely in Caquetá department (south). Group launched series of attacks in Cauca department (west). Notably, FARC-EMC 12 Aug killed three police officers in Morales town; several car bombs 13 Aug killed police officer in Buenos Aires town; local Indigenous communities reported at least five assassinations 12-13 Aug; and attack 24 Aug on police station in Santander de Quilichao town wounded four. Attacks follow 1 Aug video circulated by group naming ceasefire with military as first priority in talks and saying it would not consider wider cessation of hostilities; Petro 14 Aug stated that govt would seek cessation of hostilities against civilian population before agreeing to ceasefire.

In other important developments. Official campaigning for Oct local elections began amid concerns poll may escalate political tensions in conflict-affected regions as armed and criminal groups seek to assert influence. Petro's son, charged with money laundering, 3 Aug reportedly said some of these dubious funds financed president's 2022 election campaign.

↓ **Ecuador** Spate of political assassinations in lead-up to elections prompted President Lasso to declare nationwide state of emergency; first-round voting in poll failed to produce clear winner.

Gunmen shot dead prominent electoral candidate. Ahead of presidential poll on 20 Aug, gunmen 9 Aug killed Construye party candidate Fernando Villavicencio and injured nine others at campaign rally in capital Quito. Security forces shot dead one suspect and arrested six others – all Colombian nationals. Villavicencio had advocated for tough approaches to drug trafficking, corruption and other illicit activity, as well as alleged links between politicians and organised crime. President Lasso same day declared 60-day national emergency. Govt 12 Aug deployed 4,000 armed guards to Prison 8 in Guayaquil city and transferred Jose Adolfo Macias, head of Los Choneros gang, to maximum security prison; Villavicencio had previously mentioned receiving threats from Macias. Just five days after Villavicencio's murder, gunmen 14 Aug shot dead local leader of left-wing Citizen Revolution Movement Pedro Briones near his home in Esmeraldas province.

Election produced no clear winner, leading to runoff in Oct. Ecuadoreans 20 Aug cast their ballots in poll overshadowed by Villavicencio's assassination. Voters chose among eight presidential candidates, all of whom named security as their top priority. With no candidate able to secure absolute majority, Citizen Revolution Movement candidate Luisa González will face businessman Daniel Noboa in Oct runoff.

Inmates took dozens of law enforcement officers hostage. Authorities 31 Aug announced over 50 law enforcement officers had been taken captive by inmates from six prisons; hostage-taking followed explosion of two car bombs in capital Quito 30-31 Aug reportedly targeting country's prisons authority; authorities said actions may be in response to recent security measures inside penitentiaries.

➡ **Venezuela** **Opposition candidates competing in Oct primary kicked off their campaigns as authorities announced new National Electoral Council; govt saw progress and setbacks in court rulings on foreign assets.**

Campaigning for opposition primary kicked off. Candidates 22 Aug began campaigning for opposition primary on 22 Oct to select single nominee for 2024 presidential election. Primary process continued to encounter obstacles, however, with no clarity from govt about location of voting centres opposition will be able to use, raising concerns about voters' ability to cast ballots. Opposition candidates also faced threats. Notably, Attorney General Tarek Saab 13 Aug launched investigation into death threats against primary candidate Delsa Solórzano, including one that referenced murdered Ecuadorean presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio (see Ecuador); and reported govt supporters 15 Aug violently dispersed campaign event of Henrique Capriles in Apure state (west), injuring ten. Meanwhile, National Assembly 24 Aug appointed new National Electoral Council headed by govt loyalist Elvis Amoroso, which signalled govt's unwillingness to allow competitive presidential race.

Govt won lawsuit to recover frozen assets from Portuguese bank. Govt 9 Aug announced it had won legal battle to release \$1.5bn in state assets from Portuguese bank, which were frozen in 2019 following imposition by U.S. and other countries of sanctions on govt; Venezuela 16 Aug petitioned U.S. Supreme Court to overturn U.S. judge's late July ruling, criticised by govt and opposition, which set Oct start date for

auction of shares of Venezuela-owned refiner Citgo Petroleum's parent company to pay off creditors.

Dismissal of Red Cross chief in Venezuela sparked condemnation. Supreme Court 4 Aug dismissed President of Venezuelan Red Cross Mario Enrique Villarroel and ordered organisational restructuring after VP of ruling United Socialist Party accused Villarroel of "mafia activity" and conspiring against govt; international and domestic NGOs criticised move while Red Cross 9 Aug said "any state intervention in our National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies raises serious concerns regarding their independence". Meanwhile, rights group Amnesty International 29 Aug published report accusing govt of using arbitrary detentions as tool of repression.

Central America and Mexico

➡ El Salvador Govt's hardline security policies continued to fuel concern among rights groups.

Authorities carried out massive security operation amid anti-gang efforts. In one of biggest military operations since President Bukele first declared state of exception in March 2022, govt 1 Aug deployed 7,000 soldiers and 1,000 police officers to Cabañas department (north) to tackle "terrorist cells". While previous raids had focused on particular communities, Cabañas became first full department to be placed under siege as authorities arrested scores and seized dozens of weapons. Meanwhile, Legislative Assembly 9 Aug approved state of exception's 17th extension until 13 Sept. Authorities 22 Aug announced 7,000 of 72,000 people detained under measure had been released.

Rights groups kept condemning security measures. Civil society organisations, including Movimiento de Víctimas del Regimen and Institute of Human Rights of the University of Central America, continued to denounce persecution, harassment and abuses under state of exception. Former Supreme Court of Justice magistrate Sidney Blando 1 Aug said no judicial independence existed in El Salvador. Andrés Guzman, appointed to Commission for Human Rights and Freedom of Expression by Bukele, 7 Aug defended administration.

↑ Guatemala Despite judicial and other interference, presidential election went ahead, resulting in landslide victory for centre-left candidate Bernardo Arévalo; President Giammattei endorsed result.

Surprise candidate won presidential election. Bernardo Arévalo of centre-left Movimiento Semilla won landslide victory in presidential runoff on 20 Aug, securing 60.9% of vote compared with 37.2% for Sandra Torres of right-wing Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza; Arévalo, who takes office on 14 Jan, promised to fight corruption after victory. President Giammattei 21 Aug congratulated Arévalo, inviting him to launch transition. Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) 28 Aug confirmed result.

Attempts to undermine Arévalo and his party persisted. Torres, who had not conceded by end of month, repeatedly claimed election may be stolen and 18 Aug

alleged fraud in first round; hours later, director of Special Prosecutor's Office Against Impunity (accused of corruption) echoed Torres' accusations, implying possible international interference and claiming advances in investigations into Semilla party. TSE 18 Aug criticised comments so close to second-round vote, but 28 Aug provisionally suspended Semilla after Judge Orellana, at request of Special Prosecutor's Office Against Impunity, issued order. Organization of American States (OAS) 28 Aug called decision an "abusive interpretation of the law". Ruling unlikely to affect Arévalo but for now leaves him without party.

International community kept close eye on proceedings. Amid concern about efforts to alter electoral process, external actors including U.S., OAS and Inter-American Commission on Human Rights called for transparent elections with no interference. OAS 10 Aug extended observation mission until Jan transition upon request from outgoing president and others. OAS 24 Aug asked govt to provide Arévalo and running mate Karin Herrera with protection amid death threats.

➡ **Honduras Govt renewed state of emergency for sixth time, while Congress continued work toward establishment of anti-corruption body.**

Stringent anti-gang measures remained in place. After enforcing night-time curfew in San Pedro Sula city (Cortés department) early July, authorities 10 Aug implemented further security measures, deploying 500 police officers throughout city as well as plainclothes unit and unmarked cars. Authorities took similar measures in other areas, including Olancho department (centre). Military police, meanwhile, 4 Aug announced its *mano dura* approach in penitentiary system would continue despite concerns about rights violations. Authorities 7 Aug claimed national homicide rate had decreased by 44% since state of exception came into effect Dec 2022 and 20 Aug extended measure for sixth time.

Efforts to enable creation of anti-corruption commission continued. Congress 2 Aug repealed further decrees that protected its members from prosecution for corruption; Secretary of Parliament Carlos Zelaya 6 Aug said Congress had completed all necessary steps for establishment of International Commission Against Corruption and Impunity.

Constitutional crisis loomed over blocked vote for new Attorney General. National Party, main opposition group in Congress, 22 Aug prevented vote to replace incumbent Attorney General Oscar Chinchilla, whose mandate ended 31 Aug; move was in response to passing of controversial amnesty law that National Party claim benefits members of ruling party while persecuting the opposition; President Castro 11 Aug and 29 Aug organised national protest to demand Congress proceed with vote.

➡ **Mexico Criminal violence continued at high levels amid rising discontent over govt handling of disappearances; tensions with U.S. simmered over fentanyl crisis.**

Growing number of disappearances raised concerns. Though National Institute of Statistics and Geography report late July said 2022 marked lowest homicide rate in Mexico since 2017, rising number of disappearances underscored persistently high levels of insecurity. Notably, five youths 11 Aug disappeared from Lagos de Moreno city in Jalisco state (centre). Four days later, video surfaced in media allegedly showing victims being forced to kill one another; video reportedly attributed to MZ

faction of Sinaloa Cartel, which is in competition with Jalisco Cartel New Generation for control of drug trafficking and fuel theft in area. Case triggered alarm, with opposition presidential candidate Xochitl Galvez 16 Aug announcing suspension of campaign activities for 24 hours. Head of National Search Commission 23 Aug resigned amid growing frustration with govt's handling of disappearances, further underscored by late July decision of independent investigators to end probe into 2014 disappearance of students from Ayotzinapa college due to lack of collaboration from authorities. Some 200 protesters 30 Aug took to streets in Mexico City to mark International Day of the Disappeared, chanting "Where are our children" and calling for more concerted govt efforts to locate missing persons.

Attacks on state forces and civilians continued. Coahuila's Prosecutor's Office 1 Aug announced detention of "criminal leader" who could be responsible for series of late July attacks on police checkpoints in Coahuila state (north). Army 22 Aug said cartels are increasingly deploying roadside bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), with 42 soldiers, police and suspects wounded by IEDs in 2023, up from 16 in 2022. Cartels in Michoacán state (centre) late Aug burnt trucks and shops and blocked roads, prompting govt 28 Aug to send 1,200 troops to quell uptick in violence.

Frictions with U.S. over fentanyl crisis simmered. Tensions between Mexico and U.S. over responsibility for fentanyl drug crisis continued to rise; U.S. officials blame Jalisco Cartel New Generation and Sinaloa Cartel for production and trafficking of fentanyl, while Mexican govt claim country is only transit route.

➡ **Nicaragua Govt crackdown on Catholic Church, political opposition and media persisted.**

Authorities targeted Jesuit order amid crackdown on Catholic Church. Govt 9 Aug froze bank accounts and 16 Aug seized assets of Jesuit-run Central American University in capital Managua, accusing institution of being "centre of terrorism"; UN rights office and Jesuit movement same day criticised move. Govt 23 Aug declared Jesuit order illegal and ordered confiscation of all its property over alleged tax reporting issues. U.S. 19 Aug announced sanctions on 100 municipal officials for role in suppression of Catholic Church.

Repression of opposition and independent media continued. Police 2 Aug arrested opposition leader Juan Carlos Baquedano Castro upon his return from exile in Mexico, next day apprehended opposition activist Lester Macolla Solís when he returned from U.S. Court 8 Aug found political prisoner and VP of April 19 University Movement Jasson Salazar Rugama guilty of "undermining national integrity and spreading false news". Meanwhile, govt 4 Aug expelled Honduran journalist Kenya Volkanoe from country for publishing pro-Christian posts. Collective of media outlets known as Digital Mercenaries 6 Aug said regime used 1,400 social media accounts to serve as disinformation network.

Caribbean

➡ **Haiti Gangs sought to capture new territory in capital Port-au-Prince as discussions on deployment of multinational police force moved forward amid calls for broad political consensus.**

Gangs mounted assaults aimed at expanding presence in capital. Gangs stepped up operations in various parts of Port-au-Prince in attempt to expand foothold toward centre of capital. Notably, alleged members of Kraze Baryè gang 8 Aug carried out attacks in Tabarre district in push toward main airport where large companies are located. Alleged members of Grand Ravine gang 5 Aug attempted to invade Carrefour-Feuilles district from their Martissant stronghold and several days later took control of local power plant, leaving several districts without electricity and killing police officer in clash; alleged Grand Ravine gang 25 Aug resumed assaults on Carrefour-Feuilles, forcing around 9,000 people to flee. Alleged members of Canaan gang 26 Aug opened fire on hundreds of parishioners armed with machetes and sticks attempting to confront gang leader in Canaan suburbs, which left at least seven dead. Meanwhile, UN humanitarian office 14 Aug reported number of internally displaced persons had reached nearly 195,000.

Discussions on multinational force moved forward. U.S. 1 Aug praised Kenya's late July offer to consider leading multinational force and urged Haitian stakeholders to "urgently broaden the political consensus". CARICOM (body of Caribbean nations) 4 Aug welcomed announcements by the Bahamas and Jamaica to commit troops to mission. Following 20-23 Aug security assessment mission to Haiti, Kenya 25 Aug agreed to lead force. Given history of misconduct by external missions in Haiti, NGO Human Rights Watch 14 Aug called for safeguards to prevent abuses. Leader of G9 gang coalition, Jimmy Chérizier aka Barbecue, 16 Aug threatened violence if multinational force commits abuses in poor neighbourhoods.

Dialogue to resolve political crisis made tentative progress. Media outlets reported series of meetings from late July continuing into Aug between main Haitian political groups involved in negotiations to resolve political crisis; CARICOM 14 Aug said its facilitation team had made progress with various stakeholders during virtual meetings.