



Latin America and the Caribbean

Andes

➔ **Colombia** Govt resumed peace talks with FARC dissident faction and ELN after Constitutional Court set limits on scope of President Petro’s “total peace” policy; confrontations between armed groups continued.

Govt negotiations with FARC dissident faction and ELN resumed. Petro administration and dissident Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) faction known as FARC-EP Estado Mayor Central (FARC-EMC) 7 Dec returned to talks in Popayán town, Cauca department (Pacific Coast); dissidents had temporarily withdrawn from talks mid Nov to reconfigure negotiating team to favour military factions, 2 Dec appointed three temporary advisers to process including senior commanders, elevating level of delegation. Parties 12 Dec announced series of agreements, including FARC-EMC pledge to stop kidnappings for ransom and inauguration of joint monitoring mechanism for ceasefire; talks to resume 8 Jan in capital Bogotá, with ceasefire due to expire 20 Jan. Govt negotiations with National Liberation Army (ELN) 4 Dec also resumed in Mexico. Insurgents 17 Dec agreed to request from gov’t new peace commissioner Otty Patiño to stop kidnappings but suggested gov’t needs to fill gap in financing this would incur for rebels. Sides said they hope to extend ceasefire, due to expire end of Jan.

Constitutional Court upheld, with limits, gov’t “total peace” policy. Patiño 6 Dec began role amid new limits on gov’t overall strategy after Constitutional Court late Nov ruled executive could still decide which armed groups to engage with, but found that congress should pass legal framework setting terms for any eventual demobilisation agreement with criminal groups. In immediate term, decision may impact urban dialogue processes in cities of Buenaventura, Medellín and Quibdó, where Petro administration has secured truces between gangs. Govt can still advance conversations with country’s largest armed organisation, Gaitanista Self Defense Forces, but discussions about demobilisation or judicial guarantees must wait until congress approves legal framework.

Armed organisation sought to expand territory, clashing with FARC dissidents. Gaitanistas continued to expand in trafficking corridor that stretches from Bajo Cauca subregion of Antioquia department (north) to south of Bolívar department (north east), facing resistance from temporary ELN-FARC-EMC alliance; clashes between group and FARC dissidents displaced almost 1,000 people in Briceño municipality, Antioquia, late Nov-9 Dec.

➔ **Venezuela Relations with Guyana remained tense after Caracas' December referendum on disputed territory; Maduro administration continued to stall full implementation of Barbados deal with opposition.**

Relations with Guyana remained tense despite agreement to avoid hostile acts. Maduro govt 3 Dec held referendum on policy toward contested Essequibo area, oil-rich region administered by Guyana, with voters answering affirmatively to all five questions on ballot, including whether they support non-recognition of International Court of Justice's jurisdiction and creation of new Venezuelan state in disputed territory. Govt subsequently claimed binding mandate resulting from poll, ratcheting up tensions with neighbour. Maduro and Guyanese President Irfaan Ali 14 Dec met in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines under auspices of CELAC and CARICOM regional bodies and with UN, Brazilian and Colombian representatives; parties agreed not to "threaten or use force" and to establish joint commission to mutually "address matters" and report within three months. UK 24 Dec announced its warship would visit Guyana 29-31 Dec, however, prompting Venezuela 28 Dec to hold military exercises near disputed waters.

Govt-opposition tensions simmered ahead of 2024 elections. Flare-up with Guyana distracted attention from govt's slow implementation of 17 Oct Barbados Agreement with opposition, with some progress but also attacks on opposition. Notably, Chief Prosecutor Tarek W. Saab 6 Dec announced arrest warrants for a dozen opposition activists; accused included three members of opposition presidential candidate María Corina Machado's team and Roberto Abdul, head of NGO that Machado founded and member of opposition Primary Commission; authorities reportedly held Abdul incommunicado. In attempt to compete in next year's polls, Machado 15 Dec appealed to govt-controlled Supreme Court to overturn ban from running for office, despite previously saying she would not.

Washington and Caracas agreed prisoner swap. U.S. official Brian Nichols 5 Dec said Washington continued to engage with Caracas and reiterated threat to reimpose sanctions if more prisoners were not released and Barbados conditions not fulfilled. Govt and U.S. 20 Dec announced prisoner swap, exchanging ten jailed Americans for Maduro ally Alex Saab, who was awaiting trial on money laundering charges; agreement also saw Abdul and twenty other Venezuelans released.

Central America and Mexico

➔ **El Salvador Claudia Rodríguez became interim president as 2024 election cycle kicked off, and govt again extended state of exception.**

Presidential designee appointed as Bukele stepped back for election campaign. President Bukele and VP Ulloa 1 Dec began leave of absence to focus on electoral campaign ahead of Feb 2024 presidential poll. Bukele ally Claudia Rodríguez, who independent media outlet *Gato Encerrado* previously accused of corruption, same day became interim president. At request of women candidates facing online harassment, Supreme Electoral Tribunal 5 Dec began investigating political violence against Nuestro Tiempo and ARENA political parties.

Emergency security measures extended amid human rights violations. Authorities 6 Dec extended state of exception for 21st time amid more concerns about human rights abuses under measures. Notably, NGOs Movement of Victims of the Regime and Humanitarian Legal Aid 3 Dec discovered four more people had died in prison, none of whom had been sentenced; according to NGOs, around 200 people have died in prison. Human rights monitor Amnesty International 5 Dec warned El Salvador “is experiencing an alarming regression in the respect for and protection of human rights”.

In other important developments. Bukele 1 Dec announced construction of National Stadium and Library with Chinese funding, signalling deepening ties. Court 22 Dec ordered arrest of former president Alfredo Cristiani for alleged cover-up in relation to 1981 El Mozote massacre during civil war.

➡ ⚡ 🗳️ **Guatemala Political volatility remained high amid relentless attempts to discredit election winner Bernardo Arévalo, due to take office on 14 Jan; ability for president-elect to assume office will be test case for country’s stability.**

Judiciary continued to interfere in electoral transition. Public Prosecutor’s Office 8 Dec argued elections should be annulled due to administrative irregularities, including falsified signatures used to create Arévalo’s party Movimiento Semilla, and accused Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) of complicity. TSE same day said results were “official” and “unalterable”, and warned that if Arévalo did not take office on 14 Jan it would “break institutional order”. Amid international and domestic scrutiny, outgoing President Giammattei 12 Dec promised transition of power would occur but criticised international pressure (see below). Constitutional Court 14 Dec declared all officials elected in 2023 elections must take office on 14 Jan, but allowed Prosecutor’s Office to continue investigations. Tensions also continued over late-Nov removal of TSE magistrates’ immunity, though they remained in post.

Continued assault on election result triggered more support for Arévalo. Washington 11 Dec restricted visas of almost 300 Guatemalans, including 100 Congress members and private sector actors suspected of supporting campaign against Arévalo. UN human right chief Volker Turk 9 Dec called “persistent and systematic” attempts to undermine election result “extremely disturbing”. Organization of American States 12 Dec gave its sec gen authority to conduct visits and make decisions to preserve democratic institutions. EU parliament 14 Dec called for asset freezes and travel bans of Attorney General Consuelo Porras, top prosecutor Rafael Curruchiche and judge Fredy Orellana, among others. Meanwhile, Arévalo 7 Dec organised march to “defend truth, justice and democracy”, attended by Indigenous groups, politicians from different parties and civil society organisations. Strike led by Indigenous leaders continued throughout month.

➡ **Honduras Institutional crisis persisted amid Congressional paralysis, and violence remained high despite state of exception.**

Legislature remained blocked amid divides over appointment of officials. Parliament closed 2023 amid four months of congressional paralysis, during which no laws were passed, including 2024 budget. Ruling Libre party took advantage of situation to appoint more officials through controversial Congressional Permanent

Commission, comprising eight pro-govt and one opposition legislator. Though opposition parties insisted govt's appointments were illegal, actions appeared to push former toward compromise: notably, opposition National Party 7 Dec announced it was close to agreement with Libre party over members of Supreme Chamber of Accounts, body that oversees public finances. Crisis continued to hinder progress on creation of UN-led anti-corruption commission (CICIH); govt and UN 18 Dec extended memorandum for CICIH's creation until June 2024.

Stringent security measures failed to slow violence. Despite state of emergency, new data showed that violence and crime still plague country. Notably, NGO Observatory of Violence 6 Dec reported 27% increase in multiple homicides in 2023 compared with 2022; Association for a Just Society 12 Dec reported 11% of citizens are victims of extortion; and violence against women remained acute, with UN body CEPAL 2 Dec reporting one woman is murdered every 21 hours.

➡ **Mexico Criminal violence continued at high levels, govt faced criticism over reported number of disappearances, and President López Obrador called for disbandment of autonomous federal bodies.**

Criminal violence remained rampant. Clash between La Familia Michoacan crime group and residents who reportedly resisted extortion attempt left four civilians and ten alleged criminals dead 8 Dec in Texcaltitlán town, State of Mexico (centre); at least fourteen people from area abducted by end of Dec in possible retaliation. Clash between Sinaloa and Jalisco Cartels in Boquilla del Carmen rural area, Zacatecas state (north), 12 Dec killed six. Efforts to tackle criminal activities continued. Notably, U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen 6 Dec announced Office of Foreign Assets Control had sanctioned fifteen members of Beltran Leyva crime group and two affiliated companies for drug trafficking. Govt 14 Dec arrested sister and nephew of Genaro García Luna, former public security official sentenced in U.S. for collusion with Sinaloa cartel, for alleged involvement in organised crime and money laundering.

Govt faced criticism for alleged deflation of number of disappearances. Govt 14 Dec announced it had identified whereabouts of around one third of 110,000 persons on national registry of disappeared persons through census conducted by Ministry of Wellbeing, claimed number of missing people is much lower than previously thought. Rights groups and community organisations searching for disappeared people criticised authorities for making neither methodology nor data public for independent verification, said Ministry is not mandated to do count and accused govt of reducing true number by not taking new cases into account and leaving some states out of census.

Critics accused López Obrador of removing checks and balances. President López Obrador 11 Dec said he would call on parliament to dissolve all autonomous federal bodies, including one that processes freedom of information requests; judges belonging to National Magistrates' Association 13 Dec submitted complaint before Inter-American Court of Human Rights against attacks on its independence. President next day designated member of ruling MORENA party a seat on Supreme Court after no candidate received required two-third majority of congressional votes, raising concerns about Supreme Court's independence.

➡ **Nicaragua Crackdown on church continued amid international condemnation over human rights violations, and Managua upgraded diplomatic ties with China.**

Authorities arrested senior bishop amid continued attacks on Catholic Church. Police 21 Dec arrested Bishop Isidoro Mora of Siuna diocese in north west; Mora day prior had spoken publicly about Bishop Rolando Álvarez, first major clerical figure detained by govt and sentenced in Feb 2023 to 26 years in prison for treason. Authorities 20-30 Dec arrested thirteen priests and two Seminarians.

Ortega regime rejected accusations of human rights violations. UN Human Rights Council 18 Dec held special session on Nicaragua, where Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights Nada Al-Nashif asked Ortega govt to engage with her office and address human rights violations; govt rejected concerns as misinformation and foreign interference in domestic affairs. Nicaragua same day expelled International Committee of the Red Cross.

Beijing and Managua deepened ties. Nicaragua and China upgraded diplomatic ties, with pair 20 Dec announcing new strategic partnership; Chinese President Xi Jinping same day described move as beginning of relationship modelled on “solidarity, cooperation and mutual benefit”. Ortega and Xi also announced China-Nicaragua Free Trade Agreement will take effect 1 Jan 2024. Earlier, govt 4 Dec recalled Ambassador to Argentina after Argentinian President Javier Milei called Nicaraguan rulers “dictators”.

Caribbean

➡ **Guyana Relations with Venezuela remained tense after latter’s December referendum on disputed territory, despite agreement to avoid hostile acts.**

Venezuelan govt 3 Dec held referendum on policy toward contested Essequibo area, oil-rich region currently administered by Guyana. Voters answered affirmatively to all five questions on ballot, with authorities saying 10.5mn people participated. Caracas claimed binding mandate for non-recognition of International Court of Justice’s jurisdiction and creation of new Venezuelan state in disputed territory, ratcheting up tensions with its neighbour. Venezuelan President Maduro and President Ali 14 Dec met in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines under auspices of CELAC and CARICOM regional bodies and in presence of UN, Brazilian and Colombian representatives; parties agreed not to “threaten or use force” and to establish joint commission to mutually “address matters” and report within three months. UK 24 Dec announced its warship would visit Guyana 29-31 Dec, however, prompting Venezuela 28 Dec to hold military exercises near disputed waters.

➡ **Haiti Security situation remained dire, with violence in capital Port-au-Prince and anti-gang operations in south; govt-opposition negotiations failed to secure deal; and preparations for multinational mission continued.**

Gang-related insecurity persisted in capital and in south. Gang violence continued to spread in capital; notably, NGO Doctors Without Borders 15 Dec indefinitely

suspended activities at emergency centre in Turgeau district after group of armed men 12 Dec stopped ambulance leaving facility and killed patient. Gunmen 25 Dec killed four members of family and kidnapped four others in Croix-des-Bouquet district. Meanwhile, public prosecutors in southern Haiti carried out operations against gangs amid concerns over legality. Notably, Minister of Justice Emmelie Prophète 15 Dec publicly criticised Miragoâne commune's public prosecutor Jean Ernest Muscadin for conducting illegal operation to drive out gang that had taken over Mariani village south west of Port-au-Prince in early Nov.

Negotiations between interim govt and opposition continued. CARICOM (body of Caribbean nations) experts 6-14 Dec visited Haiti for fifth round of negotiations between interim govt and opposition, but no agreement was reached. Spokesperson for civil society platform Montana Accord 8 Dec declined invitation to join talks, alleging disagreement over attendees and that acting PM Henry's resignation was not on agenda; next day, however, sixteen members of platform's leadership denounced spokesperson's unilateral decision and said they would continue negotiations. UN Sec Gen 7 Dec expressed concern over limited progress of dialogue.

Reciprocal visits took place in preparation for Kenyan-led multinational mission. Kenyan delegation 5 Dec visited Haiti and met with govt officials and U.S. diplomats. Head of police Frantz Elbé 13-15 Dec travelled to Kenya for fact-finding mission and bilateral discussions between security forces; media later suggested first batch of 300 officers may arrive in Feb 2024.

In other important developments. UN Security Council 8 Dec added four gang leaders to sanctions list, while UK and U.S. sanctioned various former officials for involvement in abuses and corruption. Judge in Miami 19 Dec sentenced former Haitian senator to life in prison for conspiring to kill President Moïse in 2021.