

# Latin America and the Caribbean

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## **Andes**

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### **► Colombia Territorial contests between armed groups continued to accelerate in Norte de Santander department bordering Venezuela, Bajo Cauca area of Antioquia department and along Pacific Coast.**

In Norte de Santander, military and National Liberation Army (ELN) early Feb exchanged fire in Hacarí municipality, leaving one ELN combatant dead and forcing at least 50 people to flee. Paramilitary groups' escalating threats on local population triggered mass displacement of farming communities around Ituango hydroelectric dam, Antioquia; over 500 people mid-Feb fled toward urban centres, while UN 16 Feb estimated 2,000 people forcefully confined due to fighting. Demonstrations 5 Feb erupted in Buenaventura city, Valle del Cauca department (south west along Pacific coast), against mounting insecurity as a result of feud between local criminal organisation's rival factions. Two drug trafficking groups 20-21 Feb clashed in Nariño department (also south west), leaving at least 11 dead. Under rising political pressure surrounding social leader killings, govt 5 Feb said Attorney General's Office and govt ombudsman would work to create unified register of social leader violence;—civil society watchdogs same day released letter which said move is intended to minimise gravity of risk toward social leaders. Meanwhile, President Duque 1 Feb appointed Diego Molano new defence minister to replace Carlos Holmes Trujillo, who died from COVID-19 in Jan; in following days, Molano took hardline stance on security, especially counter-narcotics, emphasising need to restart aerial fumigation of coca crops as soon as April. Cuban ambassador to Colombia 8 Feb alerted Colombian authorities to risk of ELN attack in capital Bogotá in coming days; ELN 10 Feb denied claim. Following Special Jurisdiction of Peace (JEP, established under peace deal between govt and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to handle cases deriving from conflict) accusations in Jan, former FARC commander and current head of FARC political party Rodrigo Londoño 18 Feb acknowledged responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity, saying he and seven co-accused were committed to recounting truth for victims. JEP same day said Colombian military committed 6,400 extrajudicial killings between 2002 and 2008, significantly more than previously counted.

### **► Ecuador Deadliest prison riots in country's history broke out between rival gang members, while post-electoral tensions emerged.**

Violence overnight 22-23 Feb erupted between rival gangs in Guayaquil, Cuenca and Latacunga prisons, leaving 79 inmates dead and a dozen injured; riots reportedly part of gangs' battle for leadership within prison system since killing of most powerful gang's leader Jorge Luis Zambrano in Dec 2020. In response, authorities 23 Feb deployed hundreds of police officers and military personnel inside prison system and in following days reportedly regained control of all three facilities. President Moreno 24 Feb said violence was "orchestrated by those who are in dispute over leadership and drug trafficking across our national territory", acknowledged prison overcrowding and announced that govt would seek international help to combat organised crime. Meanwhile, tensions mounted

following 7 Feb presidential election. Preliminary results next day showed left-wing candidate Andrés Arauz, protégé of former socialist President Rafael Correa, leading with 32.7% of vote, but conservative candidate Guillermo Lasso and environmentalist indigenous candidate Yaku Pérez neck and neck in race for second round. National Electoral Council 16 Feb said it would not conduct partial recount of votes requested 12 Feb by both candidates; 21 Feb confirmed Arauz and Lasso will contest run-off vote scheduled for 11 April. Hundreds of indigenous protesters 23 Feb converged on capital Quito in support of Pérez and to demand recount.

➔ **Venezuela Amid enduring political crisis, civil society created coalition to address tensions and mainstream opposition remained divided over strategy.** Large group of civil society organisations, including NGOs, religious bodies, trade unions and country's main business union Fedecámaras 5 Feb launched platform Foro Cívico Nacional (FCN) in bid to establish counterweight to both govt and opposition, and contribute to solving social and political crisis. FCN's intention to seek partial, sectoral agreements with govt on economic and humanitarian relief sparked heated debate in opposition circles, with some arguing that approach undermines possibility of full-scale negotiation on "re-institutionalisation". Mainstream opposition leader Juan Guaidó 3 Feb rejected idea of participating in regional elections due this year, even as some parties that compose mainstream opposition prepared to take part; National Assembly next day set up committee in charge of processing applications for new National Electoral Council, expected to be appointed in early April. In positive step, govt and Guaidó-led opposition, in collaboration with Pan American Health Organization and UN children's fund (UNICEF), 11 Feb agreed to cooperate to purchase and distribute COVID-19 vaccines for 6mn people; opposition health policy advisers and govt representatives subsequently met to discuss distribution and oversight, and created joint technical team. Following two-week visit to Venezuela, UN special rapporteur on unilateral coercive measures and human rights, Alena Douhan, 12 Feb urged U.S., EU and other states to drop sanctions, citing "dramatic" effects on population. Guaidó-led opposition same day accused Douhan of falling into President Maduro's "propaganda", said economic collapse began before imposition of economic sanctions. EU Council 22 Feb imposed sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes, on 19 high-level officials accused of undermining democracy or violating human rights; in response, govt 24 Feb declared head of EU delegation in Caracas Isabel Brilhante "persona non grata", giving her 72 hours to leave country. EU next day responded with reciprocal measure. Colombian President Duque 8 Feb granted ten-year protection statute to about 1mn undocumented Venezuelan migrants, allowing them to work and to access health and education services.

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## **Central America and Mexico**

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➔ **El Salvador Political tensions continued to run high as President Bukele accused electoral authorities of fraud ahead of 28 Feb elections.** Bukele 7 Feb accused Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) magistrate of orchestrating fraud in upcoming legislative and local elections, after vote

simulation using new vote-counting system experienced some glitches that day. Right-wing opposition party Nationalist Republican Alliance lawmaker Ricardo Velásquez Parker 9 Feb filed motion to remove Bukele from office by declaring him mentally unfit, accusing him of sowing division and citing his recurrent attacks on Legislative Assembly. Bukele immediately decried initiative as “coup attempt”. Assembly’s Political Committee 15 Feb started to discuss motion, also called for destitution of health minister for alleged irregularities and conflicts of interest in management of COVID-19 pandemic; move comes after NGO Funde late Jan accused govt of involvement in up to 20 corruption cases, notably in relation to COVID-19. After Attorney General’s Office 3 Feb confirmed arrest of three health ministry employees for suspected involvement in late Jan killing of two members of left-wing opposition party Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, police same day said attack was two-sided and accused Attorney General’s Office of releasing partial evidence. Two U.S. Congress members 7 Feb urged Bukele “to fully cooperate with the Attorney General’s independent investigation” and refrain from “stoking divisions in the interest of political gain”. Associated Press 9 Feb reported new U.S. administration refused to meet with Bukele when he was in Washington D.C. in early Feb, allegedly to prevent him from using meeting as show of support before elections. On election day, TSE 28 Feb accused Bukele of violating electoral silence by giving press conference, and announced possible sanctions against him.

➔ **Honduras Death of female student in police custody sparked protests, while tensions mounted over drug trafficking accusations against President Hernández.** Nursing student Keyla Martínez overnight 6-7 Feb died in police custody hours after police arrested her in Intibucá department’s capital La Esperanza (west) for allegedly breaching COVID-19 curfew; police initially said Martínez had committed suicide but Attorney General’s Office 9 Feb said forensic tests found “strong indications” of homicide. Protests against police brutality and gender-based violence, and calling for justice, 8-10 Feb erupted in several cities; in capital Tegucigalpa, police reportedly detained five protesters, and in La Esperanza, protesters set police station’s main gate on fire and clashed with police. In joint statement, EU delegation and UN Office in Honduras 11 Feb called for immediate investigation into Martínez’s death. Meanwhile, U.S. prosecutors 5 Feb confirmed Hernández under U.S. investigation for allegedly using Honduran security forces to protect drug traffickers as part of plan “to use drug trafficking to help assert power”; Hernández 8 Feb denied accusations. Eight U.S. Congress members 23 Feb introduced bill to sanction Hernández and cut military aid to Honduras in light of accusations. Several civil society, private sector and lawyers associations, as well as opposition representatives, next day asked Hernández to resign and called for protests 26 Feb; police that day fired tear gas to disperse hundreds of protesters in capital Tegucigalpa. Ahead of primary elections set for 14 March and general elections in Nov, Congress by month’s end had not yet approved new electoral law setting rules and guidelines for electoral process. Appeals Court 17 Feb authorised Attorney General’s Office to press embezzlement of public funds and money laundering charges against Tegucigalpa mayor and presidential precandidate Nasry ‘Tito’ Asfura.

➔ **Mexico Political violence ran high in lead-up to legislative, gubernatorial and municipal elections set for 6 June, as several candidates killed.** Unidentified assailants killed Leobardo Ramos Lázaro, mayor

of Santa María Chahuites town, Oaxaca state (south) 4 Feb; Juan Gilberto Ortiz Parra, ruling party National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) precandidate for mayor of Úrsulo Galván town, Veracruz state (south) 11 Feb; Gladys Merlín Castro, former mayor of Cosoleacaque town, also Veracruz state, and her daughter, Karla Merlín, MORENA precandidate for Cosoleacaque mayor 15 Feb. Amid growing anger over President Obrador's backing of ruling party candidate for southern Guerrero state governor, Mariano Salgado, who is accused of rape, protesters for and against Salgado's candidacy 24 Feb clashed in Iguala city, leaving at least one injured. Other criminal violence also high. In Jalisco state (centre), police 11 Feb found 18 plastic bags containing human remains on outskirts of state capital Guadalajara; unidentified gunmen 27 Feb opened fire on home in Tonalá municipality near Guadalajara, killing at least 11. In Veracruz state, unidentified gunmen 12 Feb attacked municipal police patrol in Córdoba city, killing three. In Chihuahua state (north), unidentified assailants 14 Feb ambushed alleged members of criminal group in Villa Coronado town, killing five. Tamaulipas state (north) Attorney General 2 Feb said 12 officers belonging to elite police unit had been arrested and charged with homicide of 19 mostly Guatemalan migrants whose bodies were found late Jan near U.S. border. Attorney General's Office 23 Feb asked Congress to strip Tamaulipas governor Francisco Garcia Cabeza de Vaca of immunity to prosecute him for alleged ties to organised crime and money laundering. U.S. authorities late Feb detained wife of jailed Mexican drug lord Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán on suspicion of drug trafficking. U.S. administration mid-Feb said it will gradually allow into U.S. tens of thousands of asylum seekers currently forced to wait in Mexico for their immigration court hearings as a result of former U.S. President Trump's immigration policy; 19 Feb admitted first group of asylum seekers into U.S.

➡ **Nicaragua Authorities continued to clamp down on dissent, hamper work of NGOs and restrict civil liberties ahead of Nov presidential election.** Govt-controlled National Assembly 2 Feb passed bill to amend Penal Procedure Code, extending maximum pre-charge detention from 48 hours to 90 days. Assembly next day approved "customer protection" law prohibiting banks from denying services to anyone, including state officials under international sanction and their relatives, in violation of international standards; business organisation COSEP immediately said law heightens risk of Nicaragua landing on inter-governmental Financial Action Task Force's black list. After govt late Jan said all individuals and organisations receiving foreign funds had to register as "foreign agents" at interior ministry before 5 Feb or receive fines of up to \$500,000, NGOs Nicaragua Chapter of PEN International and Violeta Barrios de Chamorro Foundation 4-5 Feb announced they ceased operations; U.S. 8 Feb denounced govt's move, underpinned by Oct 2020 "foreign agents" law, said President "Ortega is driving Nicaragua toward dictatorship" and urged him to "change course"; Nicaraguan Platform of NGO Networks 15 Feb reiterated Dec call on Supreme Court of Justice to rule law unconstitutional. UN human rights chief Bachelet 25 Feb urged govt to "end arbitrary detentions, undue restrictions to free circulation, threats and other forms of intimidation" and adopt electoral reforms to guarantee "free, fair and transparent" election; also reiterated request to enter Nicaragua.

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## Caribbean

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↓ **Haiti Political crisis turned deadly as dispute over presidential term reached stalemate.** Tensions ran high as opposition continued to claim throughout month that President Moïse's mandate expired 7 Feb, while Moïse insisted he had another year in office. On 7 Feb, govt said authorities had foiled coup plot and murder attempt against Moïse and arrested 23 alleged coup plotters, including Supreme Court Justice Yvickel Dieujuste Dabresil; opposition had previously approached Dabresil and two other Supreme Court justices as possible interim president to take over from Moïse until presidential election. Govt 8 Feb issued decree ordering retirement of all three; U.S. embassy in Haiti next day expressed concern "about any actions that risk damaging Haiti's democratic institutions". Dabresil released 10 Feb. Meanwhile, opposition 8 Feb created parallel govt, appointing Supreme Court Justice Joseph Mécène Jean-Louis as interim president. UN same day validated electoral calendar put forward by govt, and Organization of American States next day confirmed Moïse's term ends in 2022. Amid constitutional crisis, security forces cracked down on anti-Moïse protesters: police 7, 8 and 10 Feb violently cleared demonstrations in capital Port-au-Prince, using tear gas and rubber bullets and reportedly wounding several journalists. NGO Committee to Protect Journalists 9 Feb called for investigation into previous day shooting of two journalists covering protest, and regional bloc Caribbean Community 11 Feb expressed anguish over security situation, urged "all stakeholders to be guided by the Constitution, respect for the rule of law and the electoral process". Thousands of anti-Moïse protesters 14 and 21 Feb took to streets in Port-au-Prince, Cap-Haitien, Les Cayes and Mirebalais; police 14 Feb fired rubber bullets to disperse demonstrators who erected barricades in Port-au-Prince, leaving at least one dead and several injured. Thousands 28 Feb marched again in Port-au-Prince in peaceful protest. In country's biggest prison break in ten years, gang leader and former most wanted fugitive Arnel Joseph 25 Feb escaped Croix-des-Bouquets prison on outskirts of capital with over 400 inmates; authorities 25-26 Feb reportedly killed 25, including Joseph. Hardline police organisation Fantom 509 and elite police unit early Feb clashed in Port-au-Prince, reportedly leaving five dead.