



## Latin America and the Caribbean

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### Andes

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➔ **Colombia** Petro administration’s “total peace” policy moved forward as fresh talks with ELN took place, but high levels of violence continued.

*Authorities advanced peace efforts with two armed groups.* Govt and National Liberation Army (ELN) 13 Feb began second round of peace talks in Mexico City, focusing on ceasefire and humanitarian access to conflict-afflicted areas. Justice Minister Néstor Osuna 22 Feb joined negotiations to address ELN concerns about conditions of imprisoned members. Delegations 25 Feb said they are working on agenda to advance process. Talks between govt and FARC-EP, dissident faction of former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), also progressed. Sides 8 Feb signed ceasefire protocols, which crucially provide for multiparty monitoring system including govt, military, FARC-EP, Catholic Church, Organization of American State’s mission in Colombia and local activists, though mechanism is not yet active. Top peace official Danilo Rueda 21 Feb said govt expects “dialogue phase” with FARC-EP to begin in “coming weeks”. Yet in apparent breach of ceasefire, front belonging to FARC-EP same day killed one soldier in Cauca department.

*Govt proposed new legislation to facilitate talks with criminal groups.* Following legal crisis in Jan over ceasefires and talks with criminal outfits, govt 15 Feb presented draft law to Congress intended to address dispute over legality of ceasefire and proposal to lift arrest warrants for criminal group negotiators. Law sets out possible conditions for large-scale criminal demobilisation, such as reduced prison terms and option for individuals to retain up to 6% of ill-gotten gains.

*Civilians bore brunt of continued armed and criminal group violence.* Confrontations among armed and criminal groups continued unabated along Pacific coast throughout Feb, hurting civilians. Notably, UN 3 Feb said over 2,100 people in Chocó department were forcibly confined amid armed group incursion in Alto Baudó municipality; 17 Feb reported multiple mass displacements 8-13 Feb along coast of Nariño department, where two rival FARC dissident fronts are battling for control. In Guaviare department, roughly 2,000 people continued to face movement restrictions amid recent arrival of FARC dissident faction Segunda Marquetalia in area under FARC-EP control.

➔ **Venezuela** Preparation for opposition primaries in October continued, but internal divisions persisted; Mexico talks remained stalled.

*Opposition announced schedule for primaries amid internal disputes.* Independent commission, set up by opposition coalition Unitary Platform to organise election for

single candidate to run in 2024 poll, 15 Feb announced timetable for process, which will culminate in vote 22 Oct. Unresolved issues remain, however. Notably, opposition is divided over whether to request logistical support from govt-controlled National Electoral Council. Some potential candidates reject its involvement, including front runner María Corina Machado, who 15 Feb claimed it was an “instrument” President Maduro could use to sabotage process; commission’s president, Jesús María Casal, 16 Feb reiterated that eschewing use of official polling stations would vastly increase cost of election and reduce voter participation. Controversy also persisted over diaspora vote. Of around 3mn Venezuelans living abroad, just over 100,000 are registered to vote; hardliners claim they are essential to process, but govt has little incentive to register them since most are likely opposition voters, and commission has limited capacity to do so.

*Mexico talks between govt and opposition remained stalled.* Despite Maduro govt’s refusal to schedule another official round of talks with Unitary Platform in Mexico, informal discussions continued early month in capital Caracas. In televised comments, however, Maduro 15 Feb accused opposition of failing to fulfil its commitment under Nov humanitarian agreement to transfer frozen funds to UN for infrastructural and other projects in Venezuela, claiming govt has no motive “to sit down again with that group”. Informal talks have not resumed since.

*In other important developments.* U.S. 6 Feb assumed control of Venezuelan diplomatic properties in Washington and New York in response to mainstream opposition’s decision to dissolve “interim presidency” of Juan Guaidó; opposition envoys 8 Feb were denied entry. Colombian President Petro and Maduro 16 Feb met at shared border to sign trade agreement.

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## **Central America and Mexico**

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➡ **El Salvador** Authorities extended state of exception for 11th time, and International Monetary Fund (IMF) published findings on state of economy and outlook.

*State of exception renewed once again amid continued concern about human rights.* Following Legislative Assembly’s 11th renewal of state of exception on 14 Feb, Minister of Justice and Public Security Gustavo Villatoro 22 Feb said 64,512 people had been arrested for gang affiliation since measure began. Concerns about human rights violations continued as state of exception’s one-year anniversary neared. Notably, online news outlet *El Faro* 3 Feb said measure had broken gangs’ hold on communities but also resulted in systematic violation of human rights and slide into authoritarianism. According to NGO Cristosal, as of 15 Feb there had been at least 107 in-custody deaths since March 2022. Meanwhile, authorities 24 Feb transferred 2,000 prisoners to new mega-prison of Tecoluca, which will house 40,000 prisoners; NGO Human Rights Watch 26 Feb said “packing tens of thousands of detainees is unlikely to bring security for Salvadorans in a sustainable manner”.

*International Monetary Fund released statement on economic situation.* Following its latest mission to El Salvador, IMF 10 Feb presented final statement amid concerns about economic situation, saying country must bring its debt “back to a sustainable

path”; statement also highlighted increased vulnerabilities, including account deficit, low international reserves and high stock of short-term domestic debt.

➔ **Honduras Congress elected new Supreme Court magistrates, and govt extended state of emergency until April.**

*Lawmakers elected new Supreme Court judges.* After four failed attempts, Congress 16 Feb elected 15 magistrates who will comprise Supreme Court for next seven years. As in previous elections, lawmakers voted for judges politically aligned with their own party; ruling Libre party secured six seats, National Party five and Liberal Party four. With no party able to secure majority of justices, process marked step toward creation of checks and balances. UN and international mission sent to observe selection 17 Feb praised it as step forward compared with previous processes, but expressed concerns about imposition of political quotas. Honduras’ Saviour Party, which played crucial role in President Castro’s electoral victory, 16 Feb dismissed election as “partisan-driven” amid deepening divide with govt.

*Govt extended state of emergency.* Head of Police Gustavo Sánchez 7 Feb said state of emergency, first imposed in Dec 2022 to tackle extortion, had reduced average number of homicides per day from nine in 2022 to seven so far in 2023. Authorities 21 Feb confirmed its extension by 45 days and expansion to 48 other municipalities across country.

*U.S. prosecutors revealed details in corruption case of former president.* Following first anniversary of former President Hernández’s detention, U.S. prosecutors 10 Feb said Honduras’ powerful Rosenthal family had bribed him to facilitate their money-laundering and drug-trafficking activities.

➔ **Mexico Lawmakers passed controversial electoral reform bill, criminal violence remained high and U.S. court convicted former security secretary for accepting cartel bribes.**

*Lawmakers voted in favour of controversial electoral reform.* National Electoral Institute (INE) 1 Feb filed constitutional challenge to govt’s “Plan B” electoral reform before Supreme Court, saying it will prevent INE from fulfilling its role as election watchdog by reducing its budget and size, softening penalties for electoral wrongdoing and allowing candidates to use public funds in election campaigns. Opposition parties PAN, PRI and PRD have also filed constitutional complaints since ruling Morena party approved reform in Dec 2022. Senate 22 Feb voted 72-50 in favour, however; thousands 26 Feb took to streets in Mexico City to protest reform.

*Criminal violence, particularly targeting state officials, remained high.* In central Michoacán state, soldiers 4 Feb killed two men in shootout in San Juan Parangaricutiro municipality. In north-eastern Nuevo León state, unknown gunmen 9 Feb shot dead three police officers in Salinas Victoria municipality; 66 police officers have been killed in 2023 so far, 61 per cent more than same period in 2022. In southern Quintana Roo state, authorities 11 Feb found bodies of four employees from Solidaridad municipality’s prosecutor’s office; victims had been tortured and killed in Playas del Carmen town. In north-western Baja California state, unknown gunmen 21 Feb shot dead journalist Araujo Ochoa in Encenada municipality. Meanwhile, in Tamaulipas state, security forces 26 Feb reportedly killed five

unarmed civilians in Nuevo Laredo city; local human rights group next day called killings extrajudicial executions and filed complaint with Office of Attorney General.

*U.S. court convicted García Luna of accepting bribes from Sinaloa cartel.* U.S. court 21 Feb convicted former Public Security Secretary and war-on-drugs architect Genaro García Luna for accepting millions of dollars in bribes from Sinaloa Cartel to help shield group from capture.

➔ **Nicaragua Govt deported and revoked nationality of hundreds of political prisoners, tightening Ortega's grip on power; crackdown on Catholic Church continued.**

*Ortega deported political prisoners and revoked their citizenship.* Govt 9 Feb unilaterally released 222 of country's 257 political prisoners, same day deported them to U.S. capital Washington, saying prisoners had "undermined the independence, sovereignty and self-determination of the nation" and incited "violence, terrorism and economic destabilisation". National Assembly same day reformed Article 21 of Political Constitution in order to revoke citizenship of those deported and other opposition members already in exile; move prevents them from returning to Nicaragua, in effect leaving Ortega without an internal opposition and tightening his hold on power.

*Repression of Catholic Church continued.* Court 5 Feb sentenced six religious figures to ten years in prison on conspiracy charges. Court 10 Feb sentenced Bishop Rolando Álvarez, who refused deportation to Washington, to 26 years in prison; authorities also stripped Álvarez of his Nicaraguan nationality. Authorities 25 Feb shut down Catholic radio station Radio Metro Stereo Rosa, same day banned Catholic processions during Lent and Easter week.

*Relations with Iran deepened.* Iranian delegation led by FM Hossien Amir-Abdollahián 1 Feb arrived in capital Managua and signed memorandum of understanding on mechanism aimed at strengthening bilateral relations.

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## **Caribbean**

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➔ **Haiti Security crisis compounded dire humanitarian situation, while international community continued to weigh sending specialised armed force.**

*Gang violence persisted at high levels, notably hampering medical care provision.* Gunmen 4 Feb intercepted two buses in Liancourt commune, taking driver and 50 passengers hostage. Kraze Baryè gang same day kidnapped National Centre of Equipment Director Kineton Louis in Pétionville commune. Kokorat San Ras gang 22 Feb invaded Estère commune, forcing police out of area temporarily. Gang activities restricted provision of medical care. Notably, Gheskio medical centre 9 Feb suspended activities amid kidnapping of several staff members in capital Port-au-Prince. Albert Schweitzer hospital in Deschapelles town 15 Feb suspended operations after police officers, angered by scarce resources for tackling violence, abandoned nearby stations, enabling expanded gang activities in area. Médecins Sans Frontières 24 Feb said violence and threats "are jeopardising the safety of staff and patients... [and] threaten the continuity of our activities". Meanwhile, police

spokesman Garry Desrosiers 15 Feb announced Operation Tornado had led to 369 arrests and 16 deaths of alleged gang members since 27 Jan; National Network for Defence of Human Rights Director Pierre Espérance next day said operation had achieved little.

*“21 December Accord” between PM Henry and some opposition forces advanced.* Official inauguration of Transitional High Council, charged with assisting PM Henry in 2023 election preparations as per 21 December agreement, 6 Feb took place. Yet internal opposition to agreement, including among members of civil society and political groups, persisted.

*Discussions to send multinational security mission yielded few results.* UN human rights chief Volker Türk 10 Feb urged international community to consider deploying specialised armed force to country, as did Organization of American States. Foreign partners remained hesitant, however, particularly in absence of broad political consensus within Haiti. Notably, Canada’s Ambassador to UN Bob Rae 16 Feb stressed that Canada “believe[s] very strongly that Haitian institutions themselves have to play the leadership role”. Still, Canada stepped up intelligence activities: Canadian patrol aircraft 4-7 Feb conducted intelligence-gathering flights, while Canadian PM Justin Trudeau 16 Feb said Canada will deploy two vessels to Haitian waters, especially around Port-au-Prince, for surveillance purposes.