



Latin America and the Caribbean

Andes

➔ **Colombia** Govt renewed ceasefire with FARC dissident faction and resumed talks with ELN, with latter discussions focused on continuation of six-month ceasefire; confrontations between armed groups persisted.

Govt renewed ceasefire with FARC dissident group. Providing important continuity for Petro’s “total peace” policy, gov’t and dissident Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) faction known as FARC-EP Estado Mayor Central (FARC-EMC) 14 Jan agreed on six-month extension of bilateral ceasefire. During negotiations in capital Bogotá, parties reiterated commitments to protect civilians, release kidnapped persons and end kidnap-for-ransom, work toward environmental protection, increase community participation in talks and create joint agenda, though specifics remained unclear. In further positive step, gov’t and rebels 4 Jan inaugurated joint monitoring mechanism that will eventually have national as well as regional chapters, and is intended to receive information about possible ceasefire infractions and prevent or de-escalate clashes.

Govt and ELN resumed talks but did not agree on six-month ceasefire renewal. Gov’t negotiations with National Liberation Army (ELN) 22 Jan resumed in Cuban capital Havana; group said it would end kidnappings if ceasefire is renewed, but conditioned on gov’t filling gap in financing that lack of ransom payments would incur for rebels; sides 29 Jan said they would extend bilateral ceasefire for seven days while they determine if and under what terms to continue truce for another six months. UN 11 Jan presented report to Security Council detailing 170 possible incidents of ceasefire violation from both sides since 30 Nov, though none officially adjudicated. Meanwhile, gov’t and country’s largest armed organisation, Gaitanista Self Defense Forces, 21 Jan expressed willingness to enter dialogue, though lack of mutual trust could hinder prospects for talks.

Armed violence between rival groups continued in several regions. ELN and FARC dissident group Segunda Marquetalia 13 Jan announced alliance in Nariño department in apparent attempt to stem advance of FARC-EMC; fighting between these groups in south west displaced at least 3,000 people in first two weeks of Jan. ELN mid Jan clashed with Jaime Martínez faction of FARC-EMC on southern outskirts of Colombia’s largest port city, Buenaventura, Valle del Cauca department, displacing and confining hundreds. Fighting between Gaitanistas and ELN in Chocó confined 9,000 families.

↓ Ecuador President Noboa declared first-ever “internal armed conflict” in country’s history after criminal groups unleashed wave of violence in prisons and cities nationwide.

Violence spiked following disappearance of crime boss. Police in Guayaquil city 7 Jan reported disappearance of Adolfo ‘Fito’ Macías, imprisoned boss of Los Choneros gang, who was due for transfer to high-security jail. As authorities commenced hunt involving 3,000 police and army officers, rival criminal factions capitalised on chaos. Prison riots erupted across country, with inmates from seven prisons taking 178 staff hostage, while at least 30 prisoners 9 Jan escaped from Riobamba facility, including leader of “Los Lobos” group Fabricio Colón Pico, who authorities 5 Jan arrested over kidnapping and alleged plot to murder Attorney General Diana Salazar. Meanwhile, violence escalated mostly in capital Quito and Guayaquil as criminal groups looted stores and detonated explosives; gunmen 9 Jan stormed television studio in Guayaquil during live broadcast, though police quickly regained control. Gang members 21 Jan attempted to take over hospital in Yaguachi town (Guayas province) where one of their members was receiving treatment; police same day arrested 68 suspects involved. Over 200 violent deaths reported since 9 Jan, including prosecutor leading investigation into television studio attack.

President Noboa declared first-ever “internal armed conflict”. Noboa 8 Jan declared 60-day state of emergency, facilitating military and police interventions in prisons nationwide. But amid spiralling violence and worldwide media coverage of television studio raid, Noboa 9 Jan declared Ecuador’s first ever “internal armed conflict” and announced use of lethal force and military assets to combat 22 criminal groups, now labelled terrorists. Move raised fears that intensified security operations could prompt violent backlash from criminal groups.

International partners offered support to embattled nation. Peru 9 Jan and Colombia 10 Jan bolstered troop presence along border, while around 40 countries offered military assistance to Quito, including Argentina, U.S. and Brazil. U.S. 11 Jan announced it would send officials to assist Ecuador with criminal investigations. Govt 21 Jan signed security cooperation agreement with fellow members of regional bloc Andean Community, aimed at tackling transnational criminal networks.

↓ Venezuela In blow to prospects for competitive election, Supreme Court upheld decision banning opposition’s candidate María Corina Machado from standing for office, while authorities cracked down on armed forces and civil society.

Supreme Court reaffirmed opposition candidate’s ban from running for office. Despite govt-opposition agreement in Barbados in Oct 2023 to improve electoral conditions, govt-controlled Supreme Court 26 Jan upheld ban on opposition leader María Corina Machado’s candidacy, meaning she cannot run in 2024 presidential poll. Opposition coalition Unitary Platform dismissed decision as illegal and in breach of Barbados deal, while platform’s chief negotiator Gerardo Blyde appealed to presidents of France, Brazil and Colombia to convince Maduro to reverse it. EU and U.S. expressed deep concern, along with many of Venezuela’s neighbours; U.S. 29 Jan announced it will begin reinstating sanctions, having eased them following Barbados; govt next day called decision “blackmail”.

Govt clamped down on security forces and civil society. Police 17 Jan raided office of teachers' union in Barinas state (west) and arrested union leader Victor Venegas for alleged involvement in anti-govt conspiracy. Attorney General Tarek Saab 22 Jan announced authorities had arrested at least 32 civilians and former military personnel and issued warrants against eleven others for allegedly conspiring against govt in several different plots; govt claimed plans were backed by U.S. and implicated Machado. National Assembly 23 Jan approved law that could severely curtail activity and, in some instances, lead to closure of NGOs, sparking condemnation from civil society and human rights groups.

Opposition prepared for 2024 elections despite uncertainty. Ahead of Supreme Court announcement, Machado 23 Jan announced alliance of political parties and civil society groups to organise electoral campaign and called on govt to announce exact date of poll.

Caracas-Georgetown talks continued over disputed region. Govt and Guyana 25 Jan agreed to continue diplomatic efforts over contested Essequibo area, oil-rich region currently administered by Guyana, during talks in Brazilian capital Brasília.

Central America and Mexico

➡ **El Salvador President Bukele looked set for re-election in February; Minister of Justice announced start of trials against gang leadership as authorities again renewed state of exception.**

Poll suggested Bukele poised for victory in Feb election. Salvadorans will head to polls on 4 Feb to elect president, vice-president and legislative assembly, with possible runoff in March if no presidential candidate secures over 50% of vote. This appeared unlikely, however, after Francisco Gavidia University Centre for Citizen Studies 16 Jan presented their final poll prior to election day, which gave Bukele (who is constitutionally banned from seeking immediate re-election) 71% lead over his nearest rivals.

Authorities renewed state of exception as trials of gang leadership began. Congress 9 Jan extended state of exception until 10 Feb amid continued criticism from human rights groups. Minister of Justice Gustavo Villatoro 4 Jan declared that El Salvador's 2023 homicide rate was lowest in Latin America; he added that authorities had arrested 75,163 "terrorists" under measure and that approximately 18,000-20,000 gang members are still at large. Trial to prosecute 494 gang leaders 22 Jan commenced. Meanwhile, Legislative Assembly 3 Jan approved reform granting Attorney General capacity to declare persons or entities "national terrorists", and to petition for their inclusion on UN Security Council terrorist list.

⬆ **Guatemala Country saw transfer of power as planned, with Bernardo Arévalo assuming presidency after months of tireless efforts to block August election result and turbulent inauguration.**

Arévalo assumed office after last-ditch attempt by opposition to stall proceedings. Following months of relentless attempts to overturn election result, Bernardo Arévalo and Karin Herrera 15 Jan were sworn in as President and VP. Inauguration started nine hours later than scheduled after outgoing Congress 14 Jan tried to stall

swearing in of new members of legislature; it also decided that, due to ongoing legal cases, incoming deputies from Arévalo's Movimiento Semilla party would be considered "independent", leading to confrontations among lawmakers. Legislative body eventually sworn in after hours of delays, however, with Semilla's Samuel Pérez selected as President of Congress; Pérez immediately reinstated deputies into party, while Arévalo was sworn in to presidency. Thousands of supporters celebrated in capital Guatemala City as Arévalo thanked Ancestral Authorities for leadership during transition; Indigenous leaders ended 106-day-long strike. Constitutional Court next day invalidated election of Congress' leadership and in new vote 19 Jan Partido Azul's Nery Abilio was elected its president.

International community signalled support for Arévalo. Representatives from countries across the world attended swearing in ceremony, including heads of state from Colombia, Honduras, Chile and Paraguay, exerting pressure on Congress to allow transfer of power. Following inauguration, U.S. aid agency chief Samantha Powers 15 Jan announced \$6mn for program to develop rural areas while U.S. State Department 17 Jan sanctioned former President Giammattei for corruption. EU High Representative Josep Borrel 16 Jan announced €50mn investment to support Indigenous communities and cooperation with Arévalo administration on strengthening democracy, and combating climate change and corruption.

➔ **Honduras Govt extended state of exception and political crisis eased.**

Authorities again renewed tough security measures. Executive 1 Jan renewed state of exception for ninth time until 15 Feb amid continued concern about measure's impact. Violence against women remained particularly acute. Notably, human rights secretary Natalia Roque and UN Coordinator in Honduras Alice Shackelford 10 Jan expressed particular concern over impunity in femicide cases following discovery previous day of bodies of three women on Honduran island, Roatán. Meanwhile, Colonel Ramiro Muñoz 16 Jan announced closure of three prisons – La Esperanza, Trujillo and Cortés – due to "deplorable conditions", said inmates would be transferred to other prisons.

Political crisis eased. Following months of congressional paralysis, lawmakers 16 Jan elected 2024-2026 Board of Directors for Congress in extraordinary session; five political parties have representation but ruling LIBRE party has majority. Congress next day approved budget for next fiscal year, 30 Jan resumed deliberations to appoint officials to vacant posts such as Institute of Access to Public Information and magistrates for Superior Court of Accounts.

➔ **Mexico Criminal violence remained high, with LGBTQ community notably targeted; opposition accused President López Obrador of using govt powers to strengthen ruling party's electoral campaign.**

Criminal violence persisted. Shootout between Jalisco and Sinaloa Cartels in Chicomuselo municipality, Chiapas state (south), 4 Jan killed twenty; fighting between groups during month displaced hundreds. Alleged members of La Familia Michoacana crime group 4 Jan attacked rival group Los Tlacos in desert area of Buenavista de los Hurtado, Guerrero state (south west), using drones and killing unconfirmed number. Gunmen 15 Jan abducted activist searching for her disappeared son and killed two of her family members at her house in Salamanca

city, Guanajuato state (centre). Meanwhile, concerns grew over stepped-up violence in run up to 2024 elections as rival groups jockey for influence.

Month saw number of attacks targeting LGBTQ+ community. Four transwomen were assassinated in first two weeks of 2024: attacks include 11 Jan killing of activist and Movimiento Ciudadano politician Miriam Noemí Ríos in Zamora municipality, Michoacán state (centre) and 14 Jan murder of activist and ruling MORENA party candidate for Senate Samantha Gómez Fonseca in Mexico City. Activists following day protested in capital Mexico City, calling on govt to take action.

Critics accused govt of using state functions for campaigning. As 2024 presidential election edged closer, López Obrador 8 Jan announced doubling of pension payments and urged senior citizens to vote for party for benefits to continue. Use of state bodies and resources to campaign for MORENA is banned by constitution, and 47 such complaints against both govt and opposition are pending before National Electoral Institute (INE). Meanwhile, former head of recently dissolved state news agency NOTIMEX 9 Jan accused Labour Secretary of asking channel to divert 20% of employee payouts into campaign of MORENA presidential candidate Claudia Sheinbaum in return for kickback. López Obrador next day denied accusations, while opposition candidate Xóchitl Gálvez 11 Jan filed complaint with INE to investigate.

➡ **Nicaragua** **Govt released nineteen members of Catholic Church and handed them to Vatican; opposition leader suffered assassination attempt.**

Managua handed over nineteen religious leaders to Vatican. Pope Francis 1 Jan used New Year's Day address to express concern about Ortega regime's targeting of Catholic Church, saying he was "following with concern what is happening in Nicaragua, where bishops and priests have been deprived of their freedom", and expressed hope for "dialogue to overcome difficulties". Govt 14 Jan released nineteen jailed religious leaders, including Bishop Rolando Álvarez, following negotiations and handed them over to Vatican. Meanwhile, govt 16 Jan cancelled legal status of sixteen NGOs, some of them Catholic organisations.

Opposition leader suffered assassination attempt. Unknown gunmen 10 Jan shot and wounded opposition leader Joao Ismael Maldonado Bermúdez, who has lived in Costa Rica since 2018 govt crackdown, and his partner; attack marked second assassination attempt on Maldonado since his exile. Members of Exiled Nicaraguans in Unity in Costa Rica 12 Jan attributed attack to "hired assassins" of regime.

Caribbean

➡ **Haiti** **Former rebel leader rallied support for protests to topple acting PM Henry, raising risk of instability in coming weeks.**

Former rebel leader sought to oust PM. With acting PM Henry due to step down on 7 Feb but unlikely to stick to his pledge, supporters of former rebel leader Guy Philippe 15 Jan launched protests in several cities demanding Henry's resignation. Philippe, meanwhile, expanded alliances with security forces and political actors as he called on "all sectors" to join "revolution" to transform Haiti. Most notably, he

forged alliance with several units of Brigade for the Security of Protected Areas (BSAP), armed body attached to National Agency for Protected Areas led by his close friend Jeantel Joseph. Joseph took part in several anti-govt demonstrations and promised to bring protests to capital Port-au-Prince to oust Henry, prompting govt 23 Jan to sack him; move angered BSAP members, who 24 Jan clashed with police in north east Ouanaminthe commune. Govt 29 Jan ordered all BSAP workers to report to nearest Ministry of Environment office for registration. Philippe's movement could gain steam in coming weeks, especially if gangs join alliance, raising risk of clashes in Port-au-Prince and other cities.

Gang-related insecurity persisted in capital and in south. In Mariani village south west of Port-au-Prince, police operations failed to oust gang led by alias Bout ba, whose members throughout Jan kidnapped dozens along National Route 2 and attacked people travelling by boat to avoid route. In Port-au-Prince, members of Bel-Air gang led by Kempès Sanon 16 Jan launched several days' attack on Solino neighbourhood, trapping residents in their homes and killing unconfirmed number. Clashes between G9 coalition and at least two gangs that defected from coalition 28 Jan broke out in capital.

Kenyan court prohibited police deployment to Haiti. Kenya's High Court 26 Jan prohibited deployment of police officers to Haiti, saying National Security Council lacked authority to dispatch police beyond Kenya's borders and that no "reciprocal agreement" exists between two nations; Kenyan President William Ruto 30 Jan, however, said mission "is on course" and could go ahead "as soon as next week".