



## Latin America and the Caribbean

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### Andes

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➔ **Colombia** Govt and National Liberation Army (ELN) signed ceasefire agreement, FARC dissident violence persisted, and political scandal rocked Petro's administration.

*Govt and ELN struck ceasefire agreement.* Govt and ELN negotiators 9 June announced ceasefire agreement, which will take hold gradually over two-month period and then last for 180 days, with 3 Aug intended start date. Sides will discuss accord with respective forces until 6 July, and then conduct further bilateral talks to clarify ceasefire conditions until Aug implementation. Protocols announced so far include commitments to uphold humanitarian law, end offensive and intelligence operations on both sides, and ban attempts to demobilise ELN. Agreement marked important advance in President Petro's "total peace" efforts and, if successful, will be longest bilateral ceasefire ever concluded with guerrilla group. Deal remains fragile, however, with disputes emerging around prohibitions on kidnapping and extortion.

*Armed group violence continued to plague communities.* Joint military and indigenous guard team 9 June found four children lost for 40 days in jungle following plane crash; reports suggested children were fleeing forced recruitment by dissident faction of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) known as FARC-EP Estado Mayor, though group 14 June denied allegation. Estado Mayor stepped up intimidation of political leaders ahead of Oct local elections, 18 June releasing pamphlet threatening mayor of Tulúa, Valle de Cauca department (west); issue raised concern about freedom of campaign for local election, which formally began 29 June. Meanwhile, clashes between ELN and Gulf Clan starting early June displaced well over 100 families and confined 800 more in Chocó department (north west).

*Petro removed two key allies embroiled in political scandal.* President Petro 2 June removed two of his closest allies, Ambassador to Venezuela Armando Benedetti and Chief of Staff Laura Sarabia, from govt after right-wing magazine *Semana* published reports accusing both of ordering illegal polygraph of domestic worker and wiretapping; in days following, leaked audio messages appeared to show Benedetti discussing irregular financing during presidential campaign. Crisis galvanised opposition to govt and will likely weaken its support in congress, which 5 June halted debates of proposed social reforms to allow investigation into allegations. Benedetti was reinstated as ambassador 23 June until 19 July.

↓ **Venezuela** In major blow to prospects for competitive 2024 presidential poll, govt announced opposition frontrunner is barred from

**holding public office for 15 years, meaning she is unable to participate in election; govt also moved to replace national electoral council.**

*Key opposition figure banned from running in presidential election.* 14 candidates officially registered by 24 June deadline to enter race for opposition primary election, scheduled for Oct to select single candidate for 2024 presidential election. Yet in worrying challenge to free elections in Venezuela, govt-controlled Comptroller General's Office 30 June said sanction imposed against frontrunner María Corina Machado in 2015 prevents her from holding public office for 15 years, meaning she is banned from running in presidential election. In rare show of unity, opposition candidates immediately rejected Machado's disqualification, as did other govts such as Colombia and U.S., who said ban "deprives the Venezuelan people of basic political rights".

*Govt kickstarted process to appoint new electoral council.* Govt-controlled National Assembly 15 June voted to replace National Electoral Council's (CNE) 15-member board (five principal members and ten substitutes), claiming they had resigned en masse, even though the two independent principals did not step down until 19, 20 June. Despite its pro-govt majority, reports suggested govt did not trust CNE to do its bidding unconditionally in 2024 presidential poll. Legislators same day formed commission, most of whose 11 members belong to ruling party, to appoint new CNE. NGO Human Rights Watch 22 June said govt's decision "increases concerns for the prospect of free and fair presidential election" in 2024. In response, opposition Unitary Platform's National Primary Commission 16 June said it would not seek CNE assistance for primary election; commission had wanted assistance with voting centres and use of official polling machines to expand scale of vote and help bolster credibility of election outcome.

*In other important developments.* UN refugee agency 14 June announced Venezuelan asylum applications had increased 186% in 2022 to 264,000. International Criminal Court 27 June ruled prosecutors can resume investigation into potential crimes against humanity in Venezuela after concluding govt's enquiry was insufficient; prosecutor had paused initial investigation in April 2022, deferring to govt request to conduct its own probe.

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## **Central America and Mexico**

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➡ **El Salvador** **President Bukele slashed size of Congress and number of municipalities, raising fears govt is consolidating power ahead of 2024 polls; authorities put pressure on former officials accused of corruption.**

*Govt enacted number of administrative-political reforms.* During State of the Union address on 1 June, President Bukele announced reorganisation of govt: reduction of municipalities from 262 to 44; reduction of legislative assembly from 84 seats to 60; and "war on corruption". Following speech, govt 7 June passed law slimming Congress down to 60 deputies, 14 June reduced number of municipalities to 44. Opposition politicians warned move concentrates power in hands of ruling party Nuevas Ideas ahead of Feb 2024 presidential, legislative and local elections; Nuevas Ideas 26 June announced Bukele had registered to run for re-election, despite

constitutional ban on consecutive presidential re-election. Meanwhile, Legislative Assembly 14 June approved state of exception's fifteenth extension amid human rights concerns.

*Judicial proceedings against former officials accused of corruption continued.* Attorney General 6 June charged former President Alfredo Cristiani in connection with 1989 massacre of six Jesuit priests and two women. National Civilian Police director 6 June announced politicians and journalists involved in 2012 "gang truce" talks will face judicial proceedings. Attorney General 17 June announced money laundering charges against former Defence Minister David Munguía Payes, sentenced in May to 18 years in prison for having conducted truce negotiations with criminal groups in 2012.

➡ **Guatemala** In polls marred by controversy over banned candidates and violence, voters sent surprise contestant from centre-left and early frontrunner into August presidential runoff.

*Tensions ran high in lead up to polls that produced no clear winner.* Guatemalans 25 June cast ballots to choose new president and vice president, as well as 160 congressional deputies and hundreds of local mayors. In surprise presidential result, centre-left Bernardo Arévalo finished second with 12% of vote; he will face frontrunner Sandra Torres of Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza party, who won 15% of vote, in 20 Aug runoff. Tensions ran high ahead of elections amid widespread perception that political and business elites manipulated judicial system to bar politicians who could threaten their interests from running for office; judicial authorities prevented more than 1,200 candidates for president, vice president, mayor and congress from running. EU election monitoring mission 25 June said elections took place amid "serious deterioration of the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, together with severe restrictions on freedoms of expression and of the press".

*Election-related violence spiked.* Cabal Party presidential candidate Edmond Mulet 14 June said shooting took place at party headquarters in El Tejar town, Chimaltenango department (centre), and that six Cabal leaders had been murdered since June 2022. Unidentified gunmen 17 June killed National Unity of Hope party candidate Erlindo Rodríguez Samayoa in Concepción las Minas municipality, Chiquimula department (east). Think-tank Diálogos 21 June reported 15 people involved in election campaigns – including drivers and volunteers – were killed Jan-June 2023, while observer NGO 25 June reported 57 incidents of electoral violence.

↓ **Honduras** Fighting broke out between rival gangs at women's prison, leaving dozens dead and triggering military takeover; anti-corruption efforts continued.

*Armed forces seized control of prisons following deadly riot.* Riot 20 June at women's prison in Tamara town, Francisco Morazán department (centre), left at least 46 people dead; reports said prisoners belonging to Barrio 18 gang attacked cell block housing rival MS-13 gang, burning, hacking and shooting victims. President Castro said riot was planned by gangs with "knowledge and acquiescence of security authorities" and fired security minister, replacing him with National Police head Gustavo Sánchez. In step away from promises to put civilian police in charge of penal system, govt same day placed all prisons under control of military for one year.

Meanwhile, violence continued throughout country despite state of emergency, due to end or be extended on 5 July. Notably, unidentified gunmen 15 June killed environmental activist in Tocoa, Colón department (north); govt 25 June announced night-time curfews in Choloma and San Pedro Sula cities, both Cortés department (north west), following spate of violent incidents that killed 22 people previous day.

*Anti-corruption efforts continued despite concerns.* Govt and UN 16 June extended memorandum of understanding, aimed at supporting establishment of International Commission Against Corruption and Impunity (CICIH), until Dec 2023. Despite progress, experts and politicians continued to stress CICIH would prove futile unless Congress repeals decrees granting members of Congress immunity.

*In another important development.* After cutting diplomatic relations with Taiwan and formally establishing relations with China in March 2023, govt 11 June opened embassy in Chinese capital Beijing during Castro's 9-14 June state visit.

➔ **Mexico Criminal violence displaced thousands as rival groups vied for territory, authorities brought charges against soldiers accused of extrajudicial killing and ruling party began preparations for 2024 presidential poll.**

*Rampant insecurity displaced thousands.* After 1,500 security forces late May deployed to Chiapas state (south) amid fighting between groups associated with Sinaloa and Jalisco cartels, National Guard 1 June said situation was under control; activists, however, continued to warn that Chiapas is on brink of civil war as hostilities displaced hundreds. In Michoacán state (west), fighting from 9 June onward between Jalisco and Knights Templar criminal groups over territory in Apatzingán municipality displaced at least 1,000; gunmen 29 June killed former self-defence group leader Hipólita Mora in La Ruana town, with reports Jalisco cartel may be responsible. In Sinaloa state (west), supposed Sinaloa cartel members 11 June killed two soldiers during confrontation in Culiacán municipality. Insecurity expected to escalate as 2024 elections edge closer.

*Soldiers accused of extrajudicial killing in Tamaulipas.* Ministry of Defence 10 June announced charges against 16 soldiers after media outlets 6 June released video showing soldiers apparently extrajudicially killing five alleged unarmed gang members in Nuevo Laredo city, Tamaulipas state (north) in May. López Obrador 7 June said "apparent execution" and other such cases would no longer go unpunished under his govt. Govt 26 June announced arrest of former head of federal anti-kidnapping unit over 2014 disappearance of 43 students from Ayotzinapa teacher's college.

*Election preparations heated up.* Ruling MORENA party 11 June approved rules for process to select candidate for June 2024 presidential election. Six candidates have registered for participation and left their current posts for campaign 19 June-16 Aug; vote will take place 28 Aug-3 Sept. In what many considered test ahead of presidential poll, MORENA's candidate 4 June won governorship of State of Mexico (centre), which opposition PRI had controlled for 94 years; PRI defeated MORENA in Coahuila state (north). Meanwhile, Supreme Court 22 June overturned key part of MORENA's sweeping electoral bill.

➔ **Nicaragua Govt crackdown continued, notably targeting figures within Catholic Church; President Ortega strengthened ties with Iran.**

*Several figures from Catholic Church fled country, fearing persecution.* Amid crackdown on Catholic Church, presbyters Luis Masís Velásquez and Bayardo Antonio Rugama from Diocese of Bluefields 12 June fled country to avoid imprisonment. U.S. senators 8 June introduced bill to extend sanctions on Nicaragua until end of 2028, which includes proscriptions against those responsible for violations against religious believers. UN human rights office 21 June warned “persecution of members of the Catholic church has intensified” in recent months.

*Broader govt crackdown continued.* VP Murillo 2 June announced “citizen security” scheme whereby police are authorised to enter people’s homes, which critics denounced as a surveillance program. Ortega govt 9 June confiscated assets belonging to the 222 political prisoners exiled in Feb. After revoking legal status of Red Cross in May, Parliament 1-2 June approved creation of White Cross organisation, transferring all Red Cross assets to state and bringing new organisation under Ministry of Health’s administration.

*In other important developments.* Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi 13 June visited President Ortega in capital Managua, where both criticised U.S. sanctions. Parliament 15 June authorised entry of Russian, Cuban, U.S., Mexican and Venezuelan troops, ships and aircraft into country; govt said their presence is aimed at strengthening aid deliveries and combating organised crime.

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## **Caribbean**

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➔ **Haiti Self-defence groups continued operations to tackle dire gang violence, regional bloc facilitated talks between acting PM Henry and opposition groups, and international actors boosted support for police.**

*Civilian efforts to confront gangs continued.* Self-defence movement known as Bwa Kale continued anti-gang operations in capital Port-au-Prince and surrounding areas, helping curb criminal activities in some places. In Artibonite department, civilians allied with Jean-Denis gang to oust its rival Gran Grif gang; notably, civilians escorted by group 8 June burned several houses where Gran Grif members were staying. Violence continued elsewhere. Notably, armed men reportedly from Kraze Barye gang carried out several assaults in Tabarre neighbourhood of capital, including 7 June attacking private residence of former senator, 9 June setting fire to another senator’s house and 13 June ransacking Jamaican consulate, leading to suspension of consular services. Kraze Barye gang 13 June abducted journalist in Tabarre, released her hours later before 20 June kidnapping her husband, former head of Haiti’s provisional electoral council; dozens of other kidnappings reported.

*Dialogue between govt and opposition resumed without major breakthrough.* CARICOM, body of Caribbean nations, 11-13 June convened Haitian politicians and civil society leaders in Jamaica for talks aimed at resolving political crisis; High Transitional Council (HTC) members did not attend. Though rekindling dialogue marked positive step, sides made little progress toward creating more inclusive transitional govt. Most major opposition forces called for presidential council during

transitional period; acting PM Henry, however, said he is willing only to add more members to HTC. Henry 14 June said dialogue would continue in Port-au-Prince.

*International partners stepped up support to Haitian National Police (HNP).* U.S. VP Kamala Harris 8 June announced Washington would set up investigative unit with HNP to facilitate investigation and prosecution of transnational crimes; French police 13 June arrived in Port-au-Prince to train special police units; and Canadian FM Mélanie Joly 15 June announced launch of Ottawa-led “joint security coordination cell” based in Dominican Republic to work with HNP, though Dominican Republic denied agreeing to proposal. Henry’s calls for multinational force continued, reiterated by UN official 28 June following country visit, saying “the survival of an entire nation is at stake”.