

Latin America and the Caribbean

Andes

➔ **Colombia** **Presidential primary and legislative elections saw strong results for party of left-wing presidential candidate Gustavo Petro; rural violence, notably targeting activists, persisted.** Legislative and presidential primary elections 13 March took place without major security incidents; National Liberation Army (ELN) largely upheld 10-15 March ceasefire it had announced 4 March. Polls elevated former Bogotá Mayor Gustavo Petro, presidential hopeful for left-leaning Historical Pact coalition with 4.5 mn votes in primary elections, as strong contender for May presidential polls; during primary, Federico Gutiérrez gained 2.1 mn votes, making him chosen candidate for right-wing Team for Colombia coalition, while 723,000 voters chose Sergio Fajardo as candidate for Center Hope coalition. In Senate, final tally, which was confirmed in late March, allocated Historical Pact 20 seats and Liberal and Conservative Parties 15 seats each. EU electoral mission 15 March reported evidence of vote-buying and candidate intimidation in run-up to polls, particularly in case of 16 newly created congressional seats for victims, where a number of traditional parties were accused by civil society observers of providing illegal financing to capture seats. Organization of American States 20 March called on electoral authorities to investigate alleged fraud. According to civil society group Indepaz, nine massacres (murder of three or more persons) took place across country 1-28 March, killing 36 in total; Indepaz 29 March said at least 15 social leaders killed during March, including indigenous leader José Miller Correa, who was found dead outside of Popayán town, Cauca department. Meanwhile, several other violent incidents reported during month. Notably, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissidents 26 March attacked police station in capital Bogotá using explosives, killing two children and injuring 39 persons. Army 28 March killed 11 members of FARC dissident faction Segunda Marquetalia during clash in Puerto Leguizamo municipality (Putumayo province); according to rights groups, four civilians were among those killed, including Quechua Governor Pablo Panduro.

➔ **Venezuela** **Following Russia's late-Feb invasion of Ukraine, U.S. officials and President Maduro's govt held first bilateral talks in years; Mexico dialogue between authorities and opposition remained on hold.** In unexpected move and for first time since 2016, senior U.S. officials 5 March travelled to capital Caracas to meet President Maduro's govt as trip reportedly focused on assessing Maduro's willingness to resume negotiations and release U.S. prisoners in exchange for sanctions' relief. Following visit, Venezuelan authorities 8 March released two U.S. citizens, including one of six oil executives arrested in 2017. While some U.S. officials insisted visit was primarily about prisoners' release, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki 7 March said issue of "energy security" and need to find alternative energy sources ahead of U.S. 8 March ban on imports of Russian oil was raised. U.S. officials 10 March said any sanction relief would depend on release of more jailed U.S. citizens and setting firm date for resuming negotiations with opposition. Meanwhile, authorities signalled continued ties to key ally Russia during month: notably, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Maduro 1 March held call

during which they discussed increasing strategic partnership between two countries; VP Delcy Rodríguez and Russian FM Sergei Lavrov 10 March also met in Turkey to review countries' strategic alliance and discuss "complex" international situation. While dialogue with opposition remained on hold, govt 15 March said it was launching « inclusive » national dialogue and seeking meetings with political and business groups and unions so they could join negotiations alongside opposition politicians. Opposition leader Juan Guaidó throughout month continued to push for Mexico talks to resume, while Maduro's top negotiator, National Assembly President Jorge Rodríguez, 18 March said talks "had fulfilled their objectives". Rodríguez 18 March accused Guaidó and other members of Voluntad Popular party of links to an alleged drug trafficker, said govt would no longer talk to Guaidó. UN fact-finding mission on Venezuela 18 March submitted its latest report to UN Human Rights Council, concluding govt's effort to investigate and prosecute perpetrators of crimes remained insufficient.

Central America and Mexico

↓ **El Salvador** **Authorities declared state of emergency in response to most lethal killing spree since President Bukele took office; tensions with U.S. persisted.** Gang violence peaked during month: gangs 26 March killed 62 people in 24 hours, making it deadliest gang violence in a day in country's recent history. Govt same day declared state of emergency for 30 days and Bukele 27 March ordered to tighten liberties in jails, including by reducing meals. Authorities 28 March declared more than 1,000 suspected gang members had been arrested. Parliament 30 March approved tougher sentences for gang members, including sentences of between 40 and 45 years for "creators, organisers, chiefs, leaders, financiers or ringleaders" of gang groups. Meanwhile, amid elevated oil prices in part due to conflict in Ukraine, Bukele 10 March announced several measures to tackle economic impact on population, including temporary suspension of fuel taxes to address public transport cost. After Catalino Miranda, owner of almost 300 buses covering two routes, allegedly raised ticket prices, authorities 12 March detained him, and accused him of "aggressive resistance", and 18 March of overpricing; military officers subsequently started driving Miranda's buses, and minister of public works advertised hiring of new bus drivers. Business association ANEP 12 March expressed concern about act it considered expropriation; Bukele next day threatened to intervene further in case of strikes, including by taking over public services. As Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 16 March held hearing into alleged unlawful surveillance of Salvadoran journalists and activists using Pegasus spyware, authorities denied responsibility in reported case. After El Salvador 2 March abstained in UN General Assembly vote denouncing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, head of U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Bob Menéndez same day requested reconsidering El Salvador's participation in free trade agreement with U.S.. Court 11 March ordered capture of former President Alfredo Cristiano in relation to 1989 massacre of six Jesuit priests and two others. Some 3,000 women 6 March marched in capital San Salvador calling for legalising abortion and combatting femicides.

➡ **Honduras Authorities took several steps to address endemic corruption, including approval of request to extradite former President Juan Orlando Hernández to U.S.** National Congress 1 March approved repeal of 2013 “Law of Secrets”, which required classification of information on use of govt funds on grounds that, if disclosed, information could hinder country’s defence and national security. Congress 8 March appointed country’s first Anti-Corruption Committee; 16 March along with Anti-Corruption Committee agreed on institutional cooperation mechanism to increase transparency. Meanwhile, National Police 9 March arrested its former director, Juan Carlos “El Tigre”, who is wanted by U.S. court on drug-trafficking and weapons charges. Judge 16 March also approved U.S. request to extradite former President Hernández; defence next day said it would appeal decision; Supreme Court 28 March rejected demand, approved U.S. extradition request. Tribunal 17 March found former first lady, Rosa Elena Bonilla, guilty of fraud and embezzlement for second time, following trial repeat which had been requested in July 2020. Other moves however pointed to possible selective justice efforts as judiciary began implementing Feb amnesty law which paved way for dropping corruption charges against govt officials of Mel Zelaya administration. Meanwhile, President Xiomara Castro 1 March announced creation of penitentiary police and progressive public security demilitarisation; also said she would grant pardon to many inmates to reduce prisons’ overcrowding, although she has yet to specify who would benefit from relaxation measures. In unusual targeting of religious leaders, Rev José Enrique Vásquez was found dead 2 March in Morazán municipality (north), shot in head and chest; police 16-17 March detained three suspects for alleged role in killing.

➡ **Mexico High levels of criminal violence continued, notably targeting women and journalists; authorities held talks with U.S. on mass migration.** More than 75,000 women 8 March demonstrated on International Women’s Day to condemn pervasive gender-based violence. During month, suspected members of El Abuelo Cartel 8 March killed four women in Tepalcatepec in Michoacán state (centre); in first quarter of 2022, International NGO ACLED recorded over 90 attacks targeting women across country. Meanwhile, journalists faced targeted violence: unidentified gunman 4 March shot dead journalist Juan Carlos Muñoz in Fresnillo city, Zacatecas state (centre north), and unidentified attackers 15 March killed journalist Armando Linares in Zitácuaro city, Michoacán state. European Parliament 10 March passed resolution that condemned killings of journalists and urged President López Obrador “to ensure that human rights defenders and journalists can continue their activities without fear of reprisal and without restriction”; in response, López Obrador same day slammed resolution as “slanderous”. Other violence persisted. In Michoacán state (centre), unidentified gunman 10 March shot dead mayor of Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG)-controlled Aguililla city; shoot-out between CJNG and Carteles Unidos (CU) 10 March killed five in Nuevo San Juan Parangaricutiro village; gunmen 27 March attacked clandestine cockfighting venue, killing 20 in Las Tijanas locality. Following 13 March arrest of suspected leader of Northeast Cartel Juan Gerardo Treviño “El Huevo” in Nuevo Laredo city, Tamaulipas state (north near U.S. border), gang members 14 March launched armed attacks against military installations and blocked roads; authorities 15 March extradited El Huevo to U.S. on organised crime and drug-trafficking charges, with Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard labelling arrest as “one of the most important of the last decade”. Federal forces 13 March also

detained alleged leader of CJNG Aldrin Miguel Jarquín in Colima state (west). Mexican and U.S. officials 14 March discussed need to address “unprecedented flow” of migrants and its root causes at high-level meeting in Mexico City. Several thousand Ukrainians and anti-war Russians during month tried to enter U.S. via Mexico; in response, U.S. authorities granted one-year temporary “humanitarian parole” to Ukrainians despite Trump-era “Remain in Mexico” migration policy.

➡ **Nicaragua Crackdown on opposition leaders continued amid widespread international criticism over human rights record and state representatives abroad speaking out against govt’s moves.** Trials of opponents continued with over 35 sentenced during last two months, including court 1 March convicting Sandinista dissident Irving Larios of conspiracy to undermine national integrity, and 3 March sentencing seven opposition leaders to between eight and 13 years in prison on same charge. Court 11 March also sentenced for misappropriation and money laundering presidential hopeful Cristiana Chamorro and former lawmaker Pedro Joaquín Chamorro to eight and nine years’ imprisonment respectively. Political prisoners 28 March held protest from their cells in El Chipote prison, demanding better detention conditions and release. Meanwhile, crackdown on civil society persisted: National Assembly 17 March cancelled operating licences of 25 NGOs. Internationally, several voices raised the alarm. UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet 7 March identified “serious violations of civil and political rights” in 2021 Nicaragua report; EU 14 March warned sentencing of political prisoners in closed-door trials “violated due process and Nicaragua’s own penal code” and urged govt to “immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners”. International isolation also deepened. Notably, Vatican representative, Msgr Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag, who remained one of few diplomatic channels open, 6 March left country; Vatican 12 March said it regretted that Ortega’s govt had basically requested Sommertag to leave, qualifying it as a “grave and unjustified” decision. Govt 24 March also expelled representative of International Red Cross Committee. U.S. State Dept 9 March added nine Nicaraguan officials to list of “corrupt and anti-democratic actors”; Authorities 10 March withdrew Nicaraguan ambassador to Spain for alleged “pressure and interference threats”. Arturo McFields, Nicaragua’s ambassador to Organization of American States, 23 denounced in public forum Ortega govt for its unfair treatment of political prisoners; govt immediately argued McFields was not its representative, and proceeded to remove him one day after. Lawyer Paul Reichler, Nicaragua adviser before International Court of Justice for decades, 2 March also curbed ties with govt in letter published 27 March by news outlet Confidencial.

Caribbean

➡ **Haiti Political transitional arrangements remained precarious, gang-related violence persisted, and protesters denounced insecurity.** U.S. Assistant Sec State for Conflict and Stabilization Operations Anne Witowsky 7-9 March met interim PM Ariel Henry (who remained in office despite 7 Feb expiration of his term) and members of so-called Montana Accord (who have proposed two-year transitional plan that includes five-member presidential college and a prime minister); visit to country yielded no major progress. Haitian Senate President Joseph Lambert increasingly sought to reach agreement between key

political actors: 10 March met with Montana Accord members and 14 March met with representatives of National Agreement Protocol (collective of political parties and civil society in alliance with Montana Accord since Jan); Henry declined three offers during month to meet with Lambert. Meanwhile, armed men in police uniforms 2 March kidnapped and later released two doctors; Haitian Medical Association 14-16 March held strike to protest gang violence. Protesters 9 March demonstrated in capital Port-au-Prince to denounce police brutality against journalists following 23 Feb police shooting of journalist Maxihen Lazzare. Gang members 14 March stole seven buses and robbed their passengers on gang-controlled main road in capital's Martissant neighbourhood; in response, Haitian Drivers and Owners Association 17 March went on strike and along with more than 50 organisations called for demonstrations 29 March to protest insecurity. Civil society members 28 March petitioned Henry to protest "hostage-taking of the entire population", outlining roadmap to address insecurity; Henry same day chaired meeting with Superior Council of National Police and petitioners. Demonstrators 29 March torched plane owned by U.S. missionary group at Les Cayes airport during protest against insecurity; Henry same day condemned incident as "subversive". Protesters 29 March also set alight plane in Jacmel airport to denounce insecurity in Martissant. Dominican authorities 2 March deported former Haitian police officer Tanis Philome to Haiti over alleged link to assassination of President Moïse. Judge Merlan Belabre 4 March became fourth official to oversee investigation. Belabre 12 March accused govt and judiciary of inadequate security for himself and his family since taking on case.