



## Latin America and the Caribbean

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### Andes

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➔ **Colombia** Govt attempts at dialogue with armed groups faced more obstacles as violence continued; governing coalition in Congress began to collapse.

*Govt-ELN talks continued, peace efforts with FARC dissidents faced headwinds.* Third round of talks between govt and National Liberation Army (ELN) began 2 May in Cuba's capital Havana amid hope for ceasefire. ELN 15 May paused talks after President Petro 12 May questioned group's political agenda, given its reliance on illicit economies; talks resumed 17 May, parties 25 May extended negotiations until 8 June. In other "total peace" efforts, dissident faction of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) known as FARC-EP Estado Mayor 16 May raised concerns about govt's compliance with bilateral ceasefire, alleging military violations in Nariño department (Pacific coast) and along Venezuelan border. Petro 21 May partially suspended ceasefire with group in four southern and central departments following murder of four minors from Indigenous community in Putamayo department (south). In retaliation, FARC-EP Estado Mayor 27 May vowed to prevent candidates from campaigning in Oct local elections in territory it controls.

*Confinement and other violence intended to establish social control continued.* Communities in Nariño and Choco departments along Pacific Coast continued to experience confinement and displacement amid clashes among various armed groups. Indigenous community in Silvia, Cauca department, early May reported FARC dissidents forcibly closed schools and attempted to recruit children. In Sucre and Bolivar departments along Atlantic coast, teachers early May reported receiving threatening pamphlet from criminal group Gulf Clan, demanding portion of their salaries.

*Petro hinted at approach toward drug policy reform.* Petro 13 May elaborated on still-developing drug policy reform amid fall in price of coca, suggesting govt will expand crop substitution programs that began after 2016 peace agreement, seek agreements with coca-growing communities not included in programs and promote alternative uses for coca leaf plant.

*Ruling coalition fractured.* Govt mid-May lost congressional majority after U Party declared itself independent, fracturing Petro's fragile governing coalition; local elections in Oct could limit scope for his political reform and "total peace" plans.

➔ **Ecuador** President Lasso dissolved congress to avoid impeachment and will rule by decree until August elections; violent crime continued.

*Lasso dismissed legislature and called snap elections.* With impeachment vote impending in Congress over corruption allegations, President Lasso 17 May invoked constitution's "mutual death" clause, dissolving Congress and calling snap elections; Lasso will now rule by decree until poll takes place in Aug; unclear whether he will run for re-election. Amid concern president's unprecedented use of "mutual death" clause could spark unrest, soldiers 17 May surrounded National Assembly, with head of Armed Forces' Joint Command warning security forces would "act firmly" if violence broke out. Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, which spearheaded 2019 and 2022 "national strikes", 17 May condemned Lasso's move as "a dictatorship scenario" but refrained from calling protests.

*Several mass shootings left 13 dead amid rising drug-related violence.* Unknown gunmen 14 May killed seven in Quevedo city, Los Rios, one of Ecuador's most violent provinces; in Montañita tourist town along Pacific coast, gunmen 20 May killed six. Meanwhile, officials 8 May reported that Junior Roldán, a leader of criminal gang Los Choneros, one of Ecuador's largest, was killed in neighbouring Colombia; Roldán's demise represents significant loss for gang.

➔ **Venezuela** **Opposition issued regulations for primary vote in Oct, govt introduced new law to protect foreign assets, and Brazil's president held talks with Maduro.**

*Electoral commission published regulations for opposition primaries.* Independent commission charged by opposition coalition Unitary Platform with organising primary election in October to choose presidential candidate for 2024 poll 7 May published regulations for process. These include online procedure enabling Venezuelans abroad to vote, provided they are already registered to vote in Venezuela. Commission plans to set up polling stations in 80 cities in 31 countries, where voting will be manual; it has yet to decide whether to ask govt-controlled National Electoral Council (CNE) for assistance in facilitating automated process in Venezuela using official polling stations, amid fears CNE involvement would compromise election's integrity and deter many people from voting.

*Govt introduced legislation to protect foreign assets.* U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control 1 May decided to no longer protect Venezuelan state-owned oil refiner Citgo, based in U.S. and managed by opposition, from negotiations over its future, potentially paving way for sale of Citgo shares to pay off creditors; President Maduro same day condemned move. Govt 16 May introduced draft legislation threatening lengthy prison sentences and confiscation of assets for anyone "directly or indirectly" involved in what it terms "theft" of Venezuelan assets abroad; Maduro 22 May signed bill into law.

*Brazil's leader launched efforts to bolster ties with Maduro.* Brazilian President "Lula" da Silva 29 May held talks with Maduro in Brazil's capital in push to strengthen relations. Lula called for free elections in Venezuela, condemned U.S. sanctions and invited Maduro to fight against narrative of anti-democracy and authoritarianism "built against Venezuela". Chilean President Boric and Uruguay's President Luis Lacalle Pou criticised Lula's choice of words, highlighting Maduro's responsibility in Venezuela's crisis. Meanwhile, exiled opposition leader Juan Guaidó 14 May announced tour of European capitals to urge govts against normalising relations with Maduro.

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## Central America and Mexico

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➔ **El Salvador** Authorities renewed state of exception as crackdown on gangs continued, and court handed down lengthy prison sentence to former president for ties to gangs.

*Security forces fenced off community after suspected gang members killed officer.* As Legislative Assembly 16 May approved state of exception's 14th extension, presumed gang members same day killed officer in Nueva Concepción municipality (Chalatenango department); authorities 17 May deployed 500 police and 5,000 soldiers to area and installed fence around perimeter, making Nueva Concepción fifth municipality to be cordoned off since President Bukele late 2022 announced phase 5 of Territorial Control Plan, intended to "extract every last terrorist from the communities of El Salvador". Meanwhile, NGO Cristosal 29 May said at least 153 people had died in custody since state of exception began in March 2022.

*Court sentenced former president for illicit association with gangs.* Trial proceeded against former President Mauricio Funes and former Justice and Security Minister David Munguía Payés, accused of "illicit association" and "breach of duties" during 2012-2014 gang truce, notably making "pact" with gangs. Former director of State Intelligence Service José Ricardo Perdomo 3 May testified that Funes knew of "irregular conditions" inside prisons, such as mediators entering without registering, deactivation of cell phone signals and gang leaders' transfer to other prison facilities with lower security measures. Court 29 May sentenced Funes and Munguía to 14 and 18 years in prison, respectively.

➔ **Guatemala** Authorities restricted participation of popular candidates in June general elections.

*Authorities banned opposition politicians in lead up to key polls.* Ahead of 25 June general elections, which include votes for presidency, Congress and local municipalities, court 26 May blocked candidacy of presidential frontrunner Carlos Pineda of Prosperidad Ciudadana party over "administrative issues". Decision is latest in series of court rulings banning popular candidates from participating in polls, including Indigenous leader Thelma Cabrera of People's Liberation Movement and Roberto Arzú of Podemos party, both in Feb. Organization of American States, which in March expressed concern about exclusion of hundreds of candidates, and European Union plan to send election observation missions.

*Media space grew more restricted.* Independent news outlet *elPeriódico*, which for 27 years reported on corruption, impunity and trafficking dynamics, 15 May ceased production; NGO Committee to Protect Journalists 15 May said closure was result of govt's "judicial and financial harassment". Founding president of publication imprisoned on various charges in case observers say was riddled with irregularities.

➔ **Honduras** Authorities extended state of exception amid mounting scepticism of measure and high levels of violence; efforts to install anti-corruption body continued at slow pace.

*Insecurity persisted, notably targeting women, LGBT+ community and journalists.* Despite growing opposition to state of exception, govt 20 May extended measure

until 5 July as director of police continued to tout impact. Violence continued, however, with 957 murders recorded in 2023 and extortion still prevalent. Number of recent reports illustrated that women, LGBT+ people and journalists particularly targeted: newspaper *Proceso* 9 May reported 130 femicides 6 Dec-30 April; LGBT+ organisation *Catrachas* 7 May said 194 members of community killed 2017-2022, with convictions in only 13 cases; human rights commissioner 2 May said 97 journalists killed since 2001.

*Anti-corruption efforts progressed slowly.* UN and govt 4 May announced impending arrival of international experts to help install International Commission Against Corruption and Impunity (CICIH); preparations still under way by end of month. Congress continued to block legal reforms required in memorandum of understanding with UN, which could overshadow progress to establish CICIH; among opponents is opposition National Party, which 2 May accused govt of moulding CICIH procedures in ruling Libre party's interests.

➡ **Mexico Supreme Court struck down parts of govt electoral reform, criminal violence continued, and U.S. ended pandemic-era border policy.**

*Court invalidated parts of govt electoral reform.* Supreme Court 8 May declared unconstitutional parts of govt's Plan B electoral reform that, among other things, would reduce budget and power of country's election authority; court said ruling Morena party had pushed plan through without due legislative process, such as proper debate. President López Obrador afterward accused court of undermining separation of powers and of serving elite interests, 17 May called for judges to be appointed by popular vote. Meanwhile, media outlet *Latinus* 2 May claimed associates of López Obrador's sons had received public contracts worth \$20mn and positions within federal institutions without fulfilling legal requirements; López Obrador 4 May denied allegations.

*Criminal violence continued.* In central-eastern Hidalgo state, unknown assailants 14 May killed six in Atotonilco de Tula municipality, area contested by rival criminal groups; in central-eastern Puebla state, unknown gunmen 23 May shot dead journalist Marco Aurelio Ramírez in Tehuacán municipality. In central San Luis Potosí state, presumed Gulf Cartel members 15 May kidnapped 50 migrants near Matehuala city and demanded ransom. In north-eastern Tamaulipas state, shootout between Gulf Cartel and opposing groups, including Jalisco cartel, 15-16 May left at least 19 dead in Méndez municipality. Also in Tamaulipas, shootout between security forces and members of local criminal group 29 May left ten dead on road connecting Nuevo León and Laredo cities. In north-western Sinaloa state, security forces 13 May arrested Héctor Elías Flores Aceves, Sinaloa cartel's lieutenant in Quintana Roo state, in Guamúchil municipality.

*U.S. ended controversial pandemic-era border policy.* U.S. 11 May ended Trump-era Title 42 provision that allowed U.S. authorities to turn away undocumented migrants at U.S.-Mexico border by citing pandemic-related concerns. Under new policy, U.S. can expel migrants who arrive irregularly; FM Marcelo Ebrard next day said Mexico would limit number of daily deportations from U.S. to 1,000.

➡ **Nicaragua Authorities apprehended dozens of critics, while crackdown on NGOs and Catholic Church persisted.**

*Authorities arrested and immediately prosecuted dozens of opponents.* Authorities 3 May arrested 57 people, most of them govt critics, and arraigned them in “express hearings” at courts in capital, Managua. Govt-aligned judges charged them with “conspiracy to undermine national integrity” and “propagation of false news”, next day ordered their conditional release: they are now required to sign in with their local police station every day. Police 12-14 May carried out another “night hunt”, detaining and hastily prosecuting 18 regime opponents. Meanwhile, seven civil society organisations 24 May demanded immediate release of all political prisoners.

*Crackdown on NGOs and Catholic Church continued.* Govt 3 May cancelled legal status of 20 NGOs, including eight that requested voluntary dissolution. National Assembly 10 May revoked legal status of local Red Cross Branch, accusing it of violating its own rules on political neutrality during 2018 protests; 19 May revoked legal status of 26 more NGOs, bringing total number banned since April 2018 to nearly 3,500. Meanwhile, govt 18 May closed private Catholic university of Archdiocese in Managua, bringing number closed since Dec 21 to 25. Police 20, 22 May arrested two priests in Nueva Segovia and Estelí departments; 23 May arrested priest from Matagalpa Diocese (north) for “committing acts to undermine the nation’s independence and integrity”.

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## **Caribbean**

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### **➡ Haiti Civilian self-defence groups expanded anti-gang operations, lynching suspected gang members and fuelling fears of increasingly brutal retaliatory attacks to quell uprising.**

*Civilians escalated attacks on suspected gang members.* Civilian self-defence movement known as Bwa Kale (“peeled wood”) that emerged late April quickly spread through parts of capital Port-au-Prince and beyond as civilians used improvised weapons to hunt down and kill suspected gang members. Fears of escalating violence grew: acting PM Henry 1 May called on vigilantes to “calm down” and hand over suspected members to police; UN human rights office 9 May reported at least 164 killings of suspected gang members in April; and former police chief and current Representative to Organization of American States Léon Charles 13 May said vigilantes are not viable medium- or long-term solution to gang violence, cautioning against extrajudicial executions. Director of National Police Frantz Elbé, however, same day praised his forces for increased operations against gangs and noted civilians’ important supporting role.

*Gangs pressed ahead with operations and retaliatory actions.* Despite threat of self-defence groups and stepped-up security operations, gang offensives continued in several areas, including north and east of Port-au-Prince. In Onaville town, Canaan gang 14 May reportedly killed ten people attempting to return home after being displaced in April. Gang operating in Titanyen town 17 May ambushed two armoured police vehicles. Gangs also responded to joint police-Bwa Kale efforts; notably Gran Grif and Kokorat San Ras gangs early May intensified joint operations in Artibonite department (north) following late April police raid, supported by civilians, against Kokorat San Ras.

*Talks on international intervention continued without breakthrough.* Scepticism among international actors about scaling up security assistance in Haiti persisted. Notably, Canadian congressional committee 5 May urged Ottawa to make clear it would “not participate in direct engagement in military operations”. UN Sec-Gen Guterres and Jamaican PM Holness 15 May called on Haitian political actors to reach agreement in order to ease reluctance of international actors to send security mission, saying Haiti posed threat to region.