



Latin America and the Caribbean

Andes

➔ **Colombia Govt-ELN talks faced setback following ceasefire renewal; violence remained high across countryside.**

Govt-ELN talks faced challenges despite ceasefire renewal. After challenging discussions in Cuban capital Havana, gov't and guerrilla group National Liberation Army (ELN) 5 Feb announced extension of bilateral ceasefire for further six months. Agreement includes unilateral commitment from ELN to end kidnapping for ransom and to release all those detained. Days later, however, group's western front 10 Feb launched armed strike in Chocó department along San Juan, Sipí and Cajón rivers in order to block advance by rival armed group Gaitanista Self Defense Forces. New crisis erupted 20 Feb when ELN recalled its negotiators for consultations, accusing gov't of trying to undermine national talks by sponsoring regional dialogue initiative in Nariño department; ELN's central command objects to involvement of local ELN front in a regional process, as it undermines group's coherency at national dialogue. Sides 26 Feb reaffirmed commitment to continue negotiations despite disagreement.

"Total peace" efforts with FARC dissidents and other groups continued. Gov't 1 Feb signed agreement to open talks with dissident Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) faction called Segunda Marquetalia. Separately, tensions mounted between gov't and second dissident faction already in talks, known as FARC-EP Estado Mayor Central (FARC-EMC); FARC-EMC 15 Feb issued communiqué accusing security forces of advancing on its troops in Buenos Aires town, Cauca department (along Pacific coast). Meanwhile, two criminal groups in Buenaventura city 5 Feb extended truce; agreement includes crucial provision allowing for creation of monitoring mechanism.

Gaitanistas clashed with army. Violence intensified mid-Feb between Gaitanista Self Defence forces and military, which is escalating pressure campaign against group. Clashes 16-17 Feb left five soldiers dead along border between Antioquia and Bolívar departments. President Petro 17 Feb issued ultimatum to group, saying security forces would dismantle it if forces are not willing to demobilise.

Petro faced criticism for slow implementation of coca substitution programs. Major civil society and farmer's organisations from Catatumbo region, home to some of Colombia's highest density coca crops, 11 Feb sent letter to Petro urging his administration to accelerate coca substitution programs; protests likely if there is no gov't response.

➔ **Venezuela** As presidential poll inched closer, crackdown deepened with arrest of prominent activist and expulsion of UN human rights monitors; govt prepared electoral timetable.

Authorities detained high-profile activist. Security forces 9 Feb arrested lawyer and human rights activist Rocío San Miguel at airport in capital Caracas, holding her for over three days incommunicado. Chief Prosecutor Tarek W. Saab 12 Feb announced San Miguel had been charged with treason and terrorism in connection with alleged plot to assassinate President Maduro. Rights groups and international actors, including U.S., demanded her release. Arrest of San Miguel, a moderate who heads an NGO focused on defence and security, seen as govt message that dissent will not be tolerated. Meanwhile, discussions in govt-controlled National Assembly to restrict, or even eliminate, NGOs continued.

Govt expelled UN human rights monitors in further sign of crackdown. FM Gil 15 Feb announced govt had given officials at Caracas office of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) 72 hours to leave country. Decision came after OHCHR 13 Feb said San Miguel's detention could amount to forced disappearance and called for her "immediate release"; Gil said comments violated Venezuela's sovereignty and that office had become "private law firm of coup plotters and terrorist groups". Expulsion bodes ill for govt cooperation with other outside monitors, including potential EU election observation mission for 2024 presidential vote.

Govt held consultations on electoral calendar. Govt-controlled National Assembly 5-16 Feb held consultations with political parties, businesses, unions and others to suggest date for presidential election; opposition coalition Unitary Platform 4 Feb declined invitation, saying meeting contravened Oct 2023 govt-opposition Barbados Agreement, in which sides agreed to "jointly" present election authority with their proposal; it accused govt of planning election without adequate guarantees for free and fair vote. Consultations led to proposal 28 Feb that includes over twenty potential dates for poll; electoral authorities to finalise date in March.

In other important developments. Tensions with Guyana continued over contested Essequibo, oil-rich region currently administered by Guyana, with Caracas reportedly bolstering troops near border and Georgetown receiving increased military assistance from Washington. Russian FM Lavrov 20 Feb visited Caracas to reaffirm ties.

Central America and Mexico

➔ **El Salvador** President Bukele and his Nuevas Ideas party won landslide victory in elections marred by irregularities; authorities once again extended state of exception.

Bukele secured presidency amid irregularities in vote count. Salvadorans 4 Feb cast their votes in elections to select president and congress, with Bukele on ballot despite constitution prohibiting immediate presidential re-election. As expected, electoral tribunal 9 Feb announced Bukele won with 82.66% of votes, 18 Feb declared his Nuevas Ideas party had secured 54 congressional seats out of 60. Election marred by irregularities, however, leading to allegations of fraud ostensibly aimed at making sure Nuevas Ideas secured large congressional majority. Notably, electronic electoral

system failed, leading to manual vote count that Electoral Tribunal president Dora Martínez 6 Feb suggested could have been intentional. Several opposition parties 19 Feb claimed to have documented dozens of “anomalies” during count, including system failures when inputting opposition votes and duplication of votes in favour of Nuevas Ideas. However, Electoral Tribunal 22 Feb rejected petition by opposition parties to annul elections. Organization of American States’ Electoral Observation Mission 21 Feb said that, despite electoral process being “deficient, slow and disorganised”, results reflected will of voters.

Authorities extended state of exception as mass trials continued. Legislative Assembly 9 Feb extended state of exception for additional thirty days. Earlier, Salvadoran courts 8 Feb began mass trials against 492 Mara Salvatrucha gang leaders, which human rights organisations have said violate due process and right to legal defence. Meanwhile, former national security advisor Alejandro Muyschondt, accused of being a double agent and sharing confidential information, 7 Feb died in state custody; his lawyer and mother 9 Feb claimed he had been tortured.

➔ **Mexico Killings of political candidates raised fears of an uptick in violence ahead of 2 June polls; ruling party faced criticism for constitutional reform package and allegations of ties to criminal outfits.**

Assassinations of political figures raised fears of violent electoral season. As 2 June elections drew closer, unknown gunmen 15 Feb assassinated ruling MORENA party hopeful for local congress in Misantla city, Veracruz state (east), 26 Feb assassinated two MORENA mayoral candidates in Maravatío, Michoacán (centre); nineteen potential candidates killed since June 2023, majority from MORENA. Amid govt failure to prevent criminal influence in elections or implement protective measures for other candidates, fears abound that campaign season beginning 1 March will see uptick in political violence as groups battle over territory and state access.

Critics accused govt of weakening checks and balances before poll. President López Obrador 5 Feb presented constitutional reform package targeting autonomous federal institutions he accuses of serving “neoliberal” opposition forces, including National Electoral Institute (INE). Tens of thousands 18 Feb protested in capital Mexico City voicing support for INE, while political opponents accused MORENA of trying to orchestrate election result by weakening checks and balances.

Ruling party faced more allegations of ties to criminal groups. Following late Jan allegations that López Obrador received criminal financing for his unsuccessful 2006 presidential bid, armed group Los Ardillos alleged in 15 Feb interview that Los Zetas crime group also contributed to his campaign. Media outlet *The New York Times* 22 Feb published further allegations about links between drug cartels and officials close to president; López Obrador same day attacked paper’s correspondent and published her mobile number, 24 Feb claimed his “moral and political authority” is “above the personal data protection law”.

Criminal violence continued. In sign of criminal groups’ increasing use of explosive devices, bomb-laden drone 7 Feb killed civilian in Gabriel Zamora municipality, Michoacán state. Meanwhile, church officials in Guerrero state 14 Feb said four bishops met with leaders of Tlacos and Familia Michoacana criminal groups in bid to halt rising violence; priest 22 Feb said groups had agreed to respect each other’s

territories. Similar informal negotiations growing in high-conflict areas to address violence.

➡ **Nicaragua U.S. sanctioned 100 officials in response to govt crackdown; Managua granted asylum to Panama's former president.**

Crackdown on religious organisations, civil society and opposition persisted. Inter-American Court of Human Rights 1 Feb called for immediate release of Brooklyn Rivera and Nancy Henriquez, Indigenous political leaders of outlawed Yatama party who have been detained since late 2023. Meanwhile, targeting of religious organisations and civil society continued. Notably, govt 6 Feb shuttered five evangelical NGOs; state's official gazette 16 Feb reported closure of Scouting Association of Nicaragua alongside seven other NGOs, four of them religious, said authorities would confiscate assets of all eight groups. U.S. 16 Feb announced visa restrictions on over 100 Nicaraguan municipal officials, accusing them of supporting a regime that "continues to engage in a repressive campaign that silences civil society and unjustly detains courageous individuals for exercising their fundamental freedoms". UN 29 Feb accused Nicaragua's govt of "serious systematic human rights violations, tantamount to crimes against humanity".

In another important development. Ortega 7 Feb granted asylum to former Panamanian President Martinelli, whose July 2023 conviction for money laundering was upheld by Panama's Supreme Court 2 Feb; move in line with Managua increasingly offering asylum to former Central American officials accused of corruption.

Caribbean

↓ **Haiti Violent protests erupted calling for PM Henry's resignation as gang violence, both between rival outfits and against govt, wreaked havoc in Port-au-Prince.**

Anti-Henry protests spread across country. Former coup leader Guy Philippe, who has urged Haitians to join him in peaceful revolution to remove acting PM Henry, 6 Feb joined anti-govt protests in Pétienville neighbourhood of capital Port-au-Prince. Demonstrations 7 Feb took place in over twenty cities, turning violent as protesters looted and set fire to state buildings; police killed five members of Brigade for the Security of Protected Areas, armed environmental agency led by close friend of Philippe. Henry that night urged calm and promised to hold meetings with opposition to organise elections. Leading politicians including Jean Charles Moïse, now allied with Philippe, and former PM Claude Joseph 18 Feb organised fresh protests in Port-au-Prince, Ouanaminthe and Les Cayes cities. CARICOM (body of Caribbean nations) 28 Feb announced Henry agreed to hold elections by Sept 2025.

Resurgent gang rivalry displaced thousands, wave of attacks rocked capital. After two-month lull in fighting between G9 and Gpèp coalitions in Cité Soleil, at least three gangs from Gpèp 5 Feb launched attack on area controlled by rival gang from within G9 coalition; UN 13 Feb said fighting displaced almost 10,000. G9 leader Jimmy 'Barbecue' Chérizier 29 Feb claimed responsibility for wave of attacks on police stations and airport in Port-au-Prince; he stated it was coordinated offensive

by gangs belonging to G9 and Gpèp to capture national police chief and govt ministers, and prevent Henry (on visit to Kenya – see below) from returning to Haiti. Apparent gang coordination suggests they could now be seeking to form united front and potentially join forces with Guy Philippe and his allies to oust PM in coming months.

Preparations for Kenyan-led multinational mission to Haiti continued. Henry 29 Feb visited Kenya amid efforts to overcome legal obstacles preventing Nairobi from instigating multinational mission to Haiti. Canada and other countries 22 Feb pledged another \$120mn for mission amid funding concerns. U.S. ambassador to UN 26 Feb said Benin offered to contribute 2,000 troops to mission.

In another important development. Judge 19 Feb charged 51 individuals in relation to 2021 killing of President Moïse.