



Latin America and the Caribbean

Andes

► **Colombia** Govt's peace efforts with FARC dissidents and ELN remained fragile, armed group Gaitanista Self-Defence Force expressed interest in talks, and violence in countryside persisted at high levels.

Govt partially cancelled ceasefire with FARC dissidents, who responded with show of force. President Petro 17 March cancelled bilateral ceasefire with dissident Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) faction known as FARC-EP Estado Mayor Central (FARC-EMC) in Cauca, Nariño and Valle de Cauca departments along Pacific coast. Decision followed 16 March incident in Toribío municipality (Cauca), in which members of local FARC-EMC front fired at civilian population, killing elderly woman. In show of force, FARC-EMC 30 March posted video announcing creation of new regional bloc, which they said would work to consolidate armed group's presence in Valle del Cauca, Huila, Tolima and Quindío departments, latter two being places where EMC has only recently established itself. Govt and dissidents set to hold extraordinary session 3 April aimed at de-escalating crisis.

Govt-ELN tensions persisted over regional dialogue, Gaitanistas agreed to talks. Tensions between govt and guerrilla group National Liberation Army (ELN) ran high over former's plan to open peace dialogue in Nariño, initially set to include regional ELN front and other armed groups. ELN central command condemned initiative, accusing govt of trying to undermine group's coherence; strong reaction laid bare deep fractures within ELN. National and local govt in Nariño 9 March inaugurated dialogue with civil society, but walked back plans to include armed groups. Meanwhile, Petro 18 March called on armed group Gaitanista Self-Defence Force to engage in talks or "be destroyed"; group next day accepted offer for dialogue, though next steps remain unclear.

Confrontations between armed groups continued, exacting heavy toll on civilians. Notably, UN 15 March reported displacement or confinement of 7,000 people in Nariño, where FARC-EMC fronts clashed with separate dissident FARC faction Segunda Marquetalia and ELN. UN report on children and armed conflict, made public 25 March, found 61% increase in incidents of conflict violence affecting minors from 2021-2023, compared with 2019-2021.

In another important development. Petro 26 March threatened to break off diplomatic relations with Israel if it doesn't comply with UN Security Council resolution calling for ceasefire in Gaza (see Israel/Palestine).

➡ **Ecuador Violence continued at high levels despite state of emergency, with unknown gunmen shooting Ecuador's youngest mayor; efforts to tackle corruption continued.**

President renewed state of emergency amid precarious security situation. President Noboa 7 March extended nationwide state of emergency, in place since Jan, for additional 30 days to address criminal violence; renewal is second and last time such extension is permitted. Violence continued at high levels, however. Notably, unknown gunmen 24 March shot dead country's youngest mayor, Brigitte García, in San Vicente town (Manabí province) alongside her communications director, Jairo Loor; death marked latest in string of attacks on political figures in Ecuador. Riot in military-controlled prison in Guayaquil city, reportedly sparked by "internal revolt" against alleged mistreatment of inmates, 27 March left at least three prisoners dead. Gunmen 30 March shot dead nine people and injured ten others in Guayaquil. Kidnappings and extortions increased fivefold between 1 Jan and 8 March compared to same period last year. Meanwhile, authorities prepared for 21 April referendum that, among other things, will propose measures to tighten security and reform constitution.

Police arrested twelve as part of Attorney General's corruption probe. Office of Attorney General Diana Salazar 4 March announced arrest of twelve people, including judges and politicians, as part of so-called "Purge" investigation into officials suspected of ties to criminal groups; operation spawns from Salazar's wider "Metastasis" investigation into high-level corruption across Ecuador. President of Guayas' Court of Justice Hugo González 8 March resigned after Attorney General's office announced he was implicated in "Purge"; Hugo González denies wrongdoing.

↓ **Venezuela Authorities blocked opposition coalition from registering their banned candidate or her replacement in bid to clear field of President Maduro's strongest opponents for presidential poll.**

Authorities blocked opposition from registering candidate for election. Govt-controlled National Electoral Council (CNE) 5 March announced presidential poll would be held 28 July, resulting in election timetable compressed into under five months. Candidates 21-25 March registered their candidacy, leading to frenzied negotiations within opposition. Main opposition candidate María Corina Machado and opposition coalition Unitary Platform 22 March jointly announced that retired academic Corina Yoris would replace Machado as opposition's unity candidate after govt refused to lift ban on her candidacy. Yet CNE, which had already annulled all but two of Unitary Platform's parties, blocked Corina from registering, sparking outcry from opposition; move laid bare threat Machado and her substitute posed to Maduro if allowed to run.

Opposition party within coalition unilaterally registered their candidate. CNE 26 March announced that Manuel Rosales, whose Un Nuevo Tiempo is one of Unitary Platform's four main parties, had registered his candidacy; Rosales perceived as lesser threat to Maduro's re-election prospects. Opposition negotiator Stalin González 26 March justified decision, saying opposition's abstentionism in past polls had "left Venezuelans without an option". Next day, however, Unitary Platform managed to register retired diplomat Edmundo González as placeholder unity candidate; substitution permitted until 20 April. Meanwhile, President Maduro 25

March registered his candidacy alongside a dozen others, many of whom are allied with govt or suspected of acting in its interests.

International community condemned govt. Regional govts, including oft-discreet Colombia and Brazil, and U.S. 26 March expressed concern about situation. U.S. set to decide by 18 April whether to snapback sanctions on oil and gas sectors in light of Maduro's violations of govt-opposition agreement in Barbados, though re-imposition may be delayed or partial.

In another important development. Lawmakers 21 March approved creation of new Venezuelan state in disputed Essequibo area, oil-rich region administered by Guyana, as govt used issue to foment nationalist sentiment; law also allows candidates for elected office to be barred for not supporting Venezuela's claim.

Central America and Mexico

➔ **El Salvador** Ruling party swept to victory in local elections; two years after President Bukele first introduced state of exception, Legislative Assembly once more renewed measure.

President Bukele's Nuevas Ideas party claimed victory in local elections. Salvadorans 3 March cast their votes for mayors, municipal councils and twenty deputies for regional political forum Central American Parliament. Nuevas Ideas was widely expected to win after govt-controlled Legislative Assembly reduced number of municipalities from 262 to 44 in June 2023 to firm up presidential control at local level. Nuevas Ideas secured 28 out of 44 mayorships, four political parties allied to Bukele won fifteen and opposition party Nationalist Republican Alliance secured one. Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), guerrilla group turned political party that has headed govt twice, failed to win any mayorships or seats in Legislative Assembly; defeat prompted party's Sec-Gen Óscar Ortiz 4 March to announce it would undergo "total reorganisation". With elections over, govt expected to focus on improving economy amid hesitations from international financial institutions over future loans after country designated Bitcoin as legal tender.

Authorities extended state of exception. Legislative Assembly 8 March extended state of exception for another 30 days. 27 March marked two years since Bukele first introduced security measures to tackle gangs. Rights group Amnesty International same day said that as of Feb 2024, human rights organisations and media reports had registered "327 cases of enforced disappearances, more than 78,000 arbitrary detentions... a situation of prison overcrowding of approximately 148%, and at least 235 deaths in state custody"; group accused govt of "reducing gang violence by replacing it with state violence".

➔ **Mexico** As election season officially began, leading presidential contenders outlined their security policies amid uptick in political violence.

Mexico kicked off election campaign. Campaign season 1 March officially began, with leading presidential contenders 4 March outlining their security agendas. Opposition candidate Xóchitl Gálvez called for an end to President López Obrador's "hugs, not bullets" policy, withdrawal of armed forces from policing and continued

use of military for combatting organised crime. Ruling MORENA party's candidate Claudia Sheinbaum vowed continuity with current administration, saying she would double down on social programmes to address root causes of crime and consolidate National Guard's integration into army; she also proposed upping National Guard's investigative and intelligence capacities while improving coordination between different levels of govt and with prosecutors. Meanwhile, López Obrador 12 March accused opposition of plotting "electoral fraud and a technical coup" with help of electoral institutions; head of Electoral Tribunal 18 March denied allegations.

Guerrero and Chiapas states witnessed more political violence. In Guerrero, unknown gunmen 3 March shot dead Alfredo González, mayoral contender in Atoyac town; MORENA candidate for mayoralty of Chilapa city, Tomás Morales, was killed 12 March. In Chiapas, Institutional Revolutionary Party candidate for mayoralty in San Juan Cancuc town found dead 14 March. Meanwhile, criminal violence continued, particularly in Michoacán state. Notably, landmine explosion 5 March killed three farmers in Tumbiscatío municipality; unknown gunmen 17 March killed and decapitated three police officers on road connecting Pátzcuaro and Uruapan towns; and armed group clashes 26 March erupted in Apatzingán municipality, terrorising local community.

Police in Guerrero shot student, sparking outrage. Police 7 March fatally shot student from Ayotzinapa teachers' college in Guerrero, same institution attended by 43 students that went missing in 2014. Police alleged student and several others were caught driving stolen car. Incident triggered violent protests. Authorities 13 March arrested two officers allegedly involved in shooting.

➡ **Nicaragua Crackdown on dissent continued, ruling party claimed victory in regional polls, and Managua strengthened ties with China.**

Crackdown on civil society and religious organisations persisted. Authorities 5 March closed fifteen NGOs and one university amid ongoing crackdown on civil society. Religious persecution also continued: according to report presented 6 March before Human Rights Council in Geneva, authorities have detained 55 religious figures and exiled 44 since April 2018. Regime 12 March proposed suspending relations with Vatican after Pope Francis 10 March called govt a "dictatorship" led by an "unbalanced" president. Authorities 27 March convicted eleven pastors who work with U.S.-based missionary group to between twelve and fifteen years in prison on money laundering charges.

Ruling party won local polls in autonomous Caribbean regions. Local elections 3 March took place in Nicaragua's two autonomous regions, which are located along eastern Caribbean Coast and home to number of Indigenous groups. Ahead of poll, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 23 Feb released report expressing concern about unfair electoral conditions, notably citing govt's cancellation of Indigenous party YATAMA's legal status and detention of party leaders, Brooklyn Rivera and Nancy Henríquez. Ruling party 4 March claimed victory in polls, which saw low turnout and were marked by incidents of violence and voter coercion around polling stations.

West imposed more restrictions on Nicaragua. U.S. 14 March imposed arms restrictions on Nicaragua, 21 March sanctioned Attorney General Wendy Carolina Morales Urbina for her role in govt's "unjust persecution of political prisoners and

civil society”. Amid growing pressure from West, Nicaragua continued to strengthen ties with China and Russia. Notably, delegation from Chinese People’s Association for Peace and Disarmament 11 March visited Nicaragua to strengthen cooperation.

Caribbean

➡ Cuba Protests broke out in Cuba amid electricity and food shortages.

Demonstrators 17 March took to streets in at least five locations across Cuba, including second biggest city Santiago de Cuba, in response to prolonged power outages and food shortages. Protests were largest since anti-govt demonstrations erupted in July 2021 over worsening economic crisis and govt’s handling of COVID-19 pandemic. U.S. Embassy in Cuba 17 March urged govt “to respect the human rights of the protestors and address the legitimate needs of the Cuban people”. Foreign ministry 18 March summoned U.S. chargé d’affaires over comments and pointed to decades-long U.S. trade embargo in fuelling Cuba’s “difficult economic situation”. President Diaz-Canel, meanwhile, called for calm and accused “mediocre politicians and social media terrorists” in U.S. state of Florida of provoking unrest; U.S. dismissed allegations as “absurd”. Some analysts fear that deteriorating living conditions, including extensive power rationing, and poor economic outlook could fuel more protests in coming months.

↓ Haiti Gangs launched coordinated attacks across Port-au-Prince, targeting critical sites, freeing over 4,700 inmates and forcing thousands to flee; outside pressure yielded agreement to form new govt.

Chaos erupted in capital as rival gang coalitions launched coordinated attacks. Gang violence dramatically escalated after G9 and Gpèp rival gang coalitions late Feb joined forces and launched coordinated offensive in capital Port-au-Prince and surrounding areas. Gangs throughout March targeted critical sites, including police stations, ports, airport and govt buildings; 18 March attacked several upscale neighbourhoods in Pétionville commune, killing at least fifteen. In response, mobs 20 March killed at least two suspected gang members in Pétionville commune. Police 26 March reported deaths of seventeen suspected gang members, including leader of Delmas 95 gang, since 29 Feb. Violence displaced thousands and forced tens of thousands more to flee Port-au-Prince amid ever-worsening humanitarian crisis.

Plan to form transitional council moved forward after initial difficulties. Several political parties 5 March agreed to create transitional govt led by rebel leader and ex-convict Guy Philippe, who has ties to gangs. Outside partners subsequently stepped up efforts to form more representative govt as foreign support for Henry collapsed. Leaders from CARICOM (body of Caribbean nations) and other countries 11 March called emergency meeting in Jamaica, same day announced transitional government comprised of seven-member presidential council and two non-voting civil society representatives would be established; council tasked with appointing new PM, creating path toward elections and preparing for Kenya-led security mission. Henry that night announced he would resign after council is installed. Formation initially held up by disagreements, though council members 27 March issued first statement, announcing preparations for their installation and pledging to devise plan that can

restore order. Meanwhile, G9 leader Jimmy 'Barbecue' Chérizier 29 March said he would consider laying down weapons if gangs are included in peace talks.

Kenya halted plans to deploy security mission. Kenyan govt 12 March paused plans to deploy police in Haiti, citing changes to conditions on the ground. Kenyan President Ruto next day said Nairobi would resume preparations when presidential council is installed. Only \$10.8mn has been deposited in UN-managed trust fund to cover mission, estimated to cost \$600mn.