Virus-proof Violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle

Latin America Report N°83  |  13 November 2020
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Principal Findings

**What’s new?** The COVID-19 pandemic had an immediate impact on organised crime across Mexico and Central America’s northern countries as lockdowns slowed movement of people and goods. But criminal groups swiftly adapted to the new normal, using it to tighten or expand their control over people and territory.

**Why does it matter?** The region’s criminal groups, many acting in collusion with rogue state actors, are largely responsible for some of the world’s highest murder rates and wield asphyxiating power in an increasing number of communities. With state budgets under huge strain, official responses are set to remain lacklustre.

**What should be done?** Governments should combine policing to contain and deter crime with increased support to the most insecure areas and vulnerable populations. Rather than reverting to heavy-handed tactics, they should invest in programs that reduce impunity and create economic alternatives for at-risk young people, potentially with the help of COVID-19 emergency funds.
Executive Summary

Criminal groups in Mexico and the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) have been quick to absorb the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic and seize new opportunities provided by lockdowns, distracted states and immiserated citizens. At first, trade disruptions and movement restrictions forced some criminal outfits to slow illicit activities. But the lull has not lasted. Exchange of illicit goods already appears to be swinging back to normal, while extortion rackets are resurging. As the region’s recent history shows, quick fixes to rein in organised crime and official corruption are very likely to be counterproductive. Instead, governments should concentrate their limited resources to aid the most violent regions and vulnerable people, ideally through regional programs to curb impunity and create alternatives to criminal conduct.

After months of lockdowns of varying severity, with disease transmission still uncontrolled and poised to spike again, the threat of rising crime across the region is manifest. Mexico has been afflicted for years by transnational criminal organisations that feed off a lack of economic opportunity and corruption in the state and security forces. The new force in the underworld, the Jalisco Cartel New Generation, has bared its teeth during the pandemic in fights for control of illicit markets such as drug trafficking and “taxing” legal commodities. It has also displayed its paramilitary might in the media. Myriad criminal groups have claimed to be lifelines for local people, largely in bids to widen their support base.

Across the north of Central America, street gangs that have lorded it over their economically struggling strongholds for years have also found ways to take advantage of the pandemic. After the outbreak, they advertised themselves as champions of communities under lockdown, handing out food baskets and forgiving protection payments. Due to COVID-19 movement restrictions, violence fell briefly in Honduras and Guatemala. But it is now back to or above pre-pandemic levels, while extortion rackets in both countries appear set to intensify. El Salvador is an outlier in that murder rates have stayed close to historical lows for reasons that remain disputed. The government says its security plan has kept violent gangs at bay, while Crisis Group has suggested that gang and government leaders may have struck an informal agreement to scale back violence. But, if such a pact exists, neither side has acknowledged it in public, and sudden spates of killings underline that gangs’ commitment to peace is far from robust.

Behind concerns about deteriorating security in Mexico and northern Central America is the realisation that the pandemic (and counter-measures) will worsen the economic and institutional ills underlying the crime wave. The incidence of COVID-19 varies from country to country, but it is hard to imagine that any will avoid a negative impact on livelihoods, public services and the popular mood. Mexico ranks fourth worldwide with its officially reported death toll of over 90,000 – which the government admits is an undercount – while rates of infection in northern Central America stand around the Latin American average. Nonetheless, all four countries are now facing one of the most severe economic contractions in decades, made worse in Central America by the recent devastation left by Hurricane ETA. Expected falls in 2020
GDP, reaching close to 10 per cent in Mexico and El Salvador and causing unemployment to soar across the region, are set to reverse advances in reducing inequality and poverty, weaken public services in poor areas, intensify criminal rivalries and sharpen officials’ motives for consorting with illicit business.

With a few notable exceptions, government responses to chronic insecurity have so far failed to stem violence or significantly reduce judicial impunity for serious crimes. State security policy will now face even bigger hurdles as budgets are squeezed.

In facing these challenges, however, governments can avoid the errors of the past. Far from reducing violence, militarised crackdowns have splintered criminal groups, exposing communities to more intimidation and forced displacement. Instead of launching missions to “kill or capture” criminal leaders, security forces should aim during the pandemic to protect the most vulnerable and deter the extortion that plagues them. Governments should focus their use of emergency funds on meeting the needs of people most exposed to the pandemic and its fallout, including spikes in violence. In directing COVID-19 relief funds and foreign financing to the most affected regions, governments should look beyond traditional law enforcement approaches. They should develop region-specific approaches that identify the local characteristics of conflict in order to design programs that promise to reduce impunity, prevent recruitment by illicit groups, demobilise violent outfits and create economic alternatives to crime.

Prospects for security in Mexico and northern Central America are bleak so long as the pandemic persists. Apprehensive governments may well be tempted to meet rising murder rates with draconian responses that double down on the failed efforts of the past. But if they do not address some of the sources of the criminal stranglehold over poor communities, chances are the perpetrators of violent crime will grow stronger.

Mexico City/Guatemala City/Bogotá/Brussels, 13 November 2020
Virus-proof Violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle

I. Introduction

Already among the world's most violent places, Mexico and Central America's Northern Triangle countries are facing the prospect of still greater insecurity as COVID-19 batters a region unprepared to counter the pandemic or cushion its economic effects. Home to more than 160 million people, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have collectively suffered over one million cases of the virus, as well as more than 100,000 deaths — the vast majority of them in Mexico. The medical emergency has stretched public and health services to the limit, while its economic impact is shaping up to make it the most devastating shock in the region's contemporary history. Poor people, many of them informally employed and lacking any sort of social safety net, are being hit particularly hard. In the absence of concerted state responses, rising poverty and inequality could bolster the conditions that have long favoured the growth of illicit business and deepen the threat posed to states and societies by armed criminal outfits.

Before COVID-19 arrived in Mexico and Central America, the regional criminal landscape displayed certain common features. After years of using military force to attack narco-trafficking “kingpins” and focusing on the extradition of major offenders to the United States, once-mighty drug trafficking organisations in Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico had splintered into myriad groups controlling smaller patches of territory, and in some cases vying with each other for expansion.1

Both local and transnational criminal groups have also diversified their economic activities over time. In Mexico, organised crime has turned more local. By seeking full control over territory, including over people and local state institutions, these groups aim to extort a steady flow of payments from licit sectors of the economy. Agriculture and mining have been ensnared in these rackets, as have other businesses large and small.2 In the northern countries of Central America, criminal gangs’ core income generator has also traditionally been the shakedown.3 But gangs such as the MS-13 and 18th Street have also started to run small business ventures, particularly restaurants, car washes, auto body shops and local transport services, in part to launder money.4

Against this backdrop, this report looks in depth at how organised crime in Mexico and the Northern Triangle has mutated to thrive in the circumstances of COVID-19.

4 Crisis Group telephone interviews, UN Office on Drugs and Crime official, former gang member and security experts, June and August 2020.
It builds on Crisis Group’s earlier work on the impact of the novel coronavirus in the region as well as its years of study of the factors linking criminal violence, state policy and socio-economic distress throughout Latin America.\(^5\) Research for the report included more than 35 in-person and telephone interviews with government officials, police officers, security experts, civil society representatives, and former or active members of criminal groups.

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II. The Brief Disruption of Illicit Business

Similar causes underpin the high rates of violence and crime in Mexico and the northern Central American countries, and account for the governments’ difficulties in improving public safety. Crime rings have become more aggressive in how they acquire and assert territorial control. These groups have diversified their sources of income, moving beyond dependence on drug trafficking or extortion. Additionally, in all four countries, the state has proven unable to curb official corruption and security forces’ complicity in illicit activities, or to prevent the erosion of its legitimacy in crime-affected areas.

A. Before the Pandemic

Despite overall similarities among all four countries, there was significant variation in crime patterns immediately prior to COVID-19’s outbreak, with positive trends in Guatemala and El Salvador contrasting with adverse ones in Honduras and Mexico.

Before the pandemic, murder rates were falling in both Guatemala and El Salvador, partly due to declining hostilities among gangs as they all settled into their own pockets of territory. Major improvements in Guatemala’s criminal investigations and prosecutions over the past decade – many of them supported by the UN-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, whose mission the government terminated in 2019 – have also curbed impunity for serious crimes, while the reported understandings between Salvadoran authorities and gangs are likely to have contributed significantly to reducing homicides in that country.6

Honduras and Mexico, on the other hand, were struggling to contain the spread of violent crime when the coronavirus hit. In Honduras, fighting among dozens of minor gangs, combined with ineffective and excessively militarised law enforcement, resulted in murders going up in 2019 and the first two months of 2020, reversing an eight-year downward trend.7 Successive Mexican administrations have failed to curtail lethal violence, and homicides were down only 0.57 per cent in 2019 from the record of 36,685 reached the year before.8 Despite his campaign pledges to the contrary, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador continues to rely on heavy-handed use of force to address a plethora of entrenched and multi-sided conflicts with criminal organisations. A lack of commitment to reform of the police and justice system has meant that numerous state officials remain complicit in crime.9

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8 The total in 2019 was 36,476, according to the National Institute for Statistics and Geography.

B. Effects on Illicit Activities

The pandemic’s immediate effect was predictably to slow down illicit economic activity in all four countries, but criminal groups soon recovered by various means.

By late March, Northern Triangle governments had imposed strict lockdowns and restrictions on people’s movements, causing an abrupt but short-lived drop in the revenues of criminal groups and street gangs. Honduras’ National Anti-Gang Force (FNAMP) estimated that extortion crimes had dropped by 70–80 per cent from mid-March to late April.10 The closure of local markets and suspension of public transport in Guatemala and El Salvador compelled leaders of the two main gangs, the 18th Street and MS-13, to forgive some protection payments, particularly from small vendors and bus drivers, two sources which authorities believe account for most of their revenues.11

Government-imposed lockdowns also hurt criminal groups involved in transnational smuggling in northern Central America. Border shutdowns and mobility restrictions hindered the overland drug trade, according to an official in the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and testimony from the Guatemalan town of Jalapa, situated in a busy drug corridor in the centre of the country.12 The suspension of commercial flights curbed small shipments by “mules” who carry synthetic drugs and – to a far lesser extent – cocaine.13 Border shutdowns across the region also helped reduce illegal migration to the U.S., although they could lead to an increase in human smuggling over the medium term. UN agencies and Interpol argue that trafficking networks have remained operational and will return in full force as soon as mobility restrictions ease.14

In Mexico, where the government shied away from the quarantines imposed in the rest of the region, the narcotics trade was nevertheless shaken.15 Mexico is the biggest exporter of heroin, marijuana and, together with China, methamphetamines

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11 In El Salvador, the 18th Street gang is split into two factions, the Southerners and the Revolutionaries, which function as two autonomous groups. “Pandillas amenazan a quien incumpla la cuarentena”, El Faro, 31 March 2020. “Pandilleros conceden indulto en el cobro de extorsión”, El Periódico, 26 March 2020.
12 Jalapa is a common transit point for cocaine smuggled from Chiquimula and Jutiapa, on the border with Honduras and El Salvador, and for drugs coming through Guatemala City. Crisis Group interviews, security guard from Jalapa and UNODC official, May and August 2020. “Identificadas 10 rutas del narcotráfico”, Prensa Libre, 21 October 2014.
13 The UN Office on Drugs and Crime calculates that barely 4 per cent of cocaine is smuggled through the air. “COVID-19 and the Drug Supply Chain: From Production and Trafficking to Use”, UNODC, May 2020, p. 3.
15 The Mexican federal and state governments imposed restrictions on commerce, including restaurants and shops, and ran an uneven campaign calling upon citizens to maintain a “safe distance” from one another, but largely refrained from mandatory measures so as to limit the epidemic’s economic fallout. See “Neighbor at Risk: Mexico’s Deepening Crisis”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 4 September 2020.
and fentanyl to the U.S.\textsuperscript{16} Interruption of Chinese production of precursor chemicals for the latter drugs also caused traffickers headaches. At the same time, historically low oil prices and low domestic petrol consumption cut heavily into the revenues of criminal groups involved in oil siphoning, which has lately become an important racket in the country.\textsuperscript{17} The economic shock prompted some groups to furlough a number of foot soldiers.\textsuperscript{18} Tough lockdown measures in South America’s cocaine producers and exporters – Colombia’s maritime and terrestrial borders have been closed to most traffic (with exceptions including cargo trade) since 17 March 2020 while the government shut down all international flights on 23 March, only gradually restoring them from September – created further economic pressure as they complicated use of a major supply line.\textsuperscript{19}

Some of these business disruptions turned out to be brief. By late May, imports into Mexico of precursor chemicals were “flowing very well again”, according to a high-level operator working with the Jalisco Cartel and other Mexican criminal groups.\textsuperscript{20} It also helped, he said, that global and domestic oil prices had started to climb back up by late April.\textsuperscript{21} In fact, U.S. Customs and Border Protection authorities reported that, while cocaine seizures fell dramatically in March and April, volumes of other confiscated drugs – such as heroin – remained relatively stable during the first months of the pandemic or even rose in the cases of fentanyl and methamphetamine.\textsuperscript{22} Consumption of some illegal drugs, notably methamphetamine, appears to have risen in the U.S. during the pandemic, as have overdose deaths in several U.S. cities.\textsuperscript{23}


\textsuperscript{18} Crisis Group interviews, operator working with criminal groups involved in oil siphoning in central Mexico, 10-15 April 2020.


\textsuperscript{20} Crisis Group interview, 29 May 2020.

\textsuperscript{21} Crisis Group interview, 21 August 2020. Historical oil prices are available at oilprice.com.


\textsuperscript{23} “How Mexico’s drug cartels are profiting from the pandemic”, \textit{The New York Times}, 7 July 2020.
C. Economic Adaptation

Confronted with obstacles to drug trafficking and drop-offs in extortion revenue, criminal groups rapidly adapted. Their first move was to reduce expenses and rely more on “savings”.24 Just as some Mexican criminal groups furloughed members, gangs in the north of Central America such as the MS-13 and 18th Street moved to trim the payroll: “Like in a business, when there is a crisis you cut unnecessary costs”, said a former gang member, adding that gangs in El Salvador also started limiting “economic support” to relatives and lawyers of jailed gang members.25

Extortion has remained a critical source of revenue for criminal groups in northern Central America and Mexico during the pandemic.26 Yet they have been compelled to adapt the rackets to keep the money flowing in straitened circumstances. Gangs, for example, have stepped up the use of new forms of payment, such as wire transfers via banks or other online platforms, to substitute for in-person collections.27 Once the Honduran and Guatemalan governments started reactivating the economy in early June and August, respectively, police reported that gangs resumed shaking down some businesses toward which they had shown leniency earlier, and in some cases demanded back payment.28 Current and former Guatemalan gang members recounted that at the height of the lockdown the 18th Street gang had exempted certain businesses, but continued to demand extortion payments from local shops and transport operators no matter how much government health measures had affected them.29

Guatemalan authorities tried to halt the resurgence of extortion, but to little avail. When they sought to isolate jailed leaders of the 18th Street gang, also known as la rueda (the circle), the gang retaliated by holding prison guards captive on at least two occasions.30 Meanwhile, individuals and groups passing themselves off as the main gangs, known as “imitators”, have stepped up their activities, increasingly tar-

24 Crisis Group interview, UNODC official, Guatemala City, 10 September 2020.
25 Traditionally, gangs use extortion revenues to cover their detained members’ legal fees and to subsidise the living expenses of the detainees’ relatives. Crisis Group telephone interview, former gang member, 30 March 2020.
26 More than 5 per cent of businesses surveyed by the Salvadoran Chamber of Commerce in April confirmed having suffered extortion. If accurate, this number would be a sharp drop from the 22 per cent that were being extorted in 2016, according to the most recent survey available, but there are indications that it is too low due to underreporting. “Encuesta Empresarial #2 Impacto de la ampliación de medidas de emergencia por el COVID-19 en la economía de la MIPYME”, Cámara de Comercio e Industria de El Salvador, 13 April 2020. “Extorsiones a la pequeña y micro empresa en El Salvador”, Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social, 23 June 2016.
29 Crisis Group interviews, Guatemalan active and former gang members, Chinauta, October 2020.
geting households and using online phishing to identify their next victims. According to the police, they are reportedly responsible for more than 80 per cent of shakedowns in the country, but a prosecutor specialising in extortion-related wire-tapping warned that most victims of gang extortion do not report those crimes to the police for fear of retaliation.

Gangs operating in the Northern Triangle have also stepped up drug peddling and other petty crime to make up the shortfall in extortion revenue. Security sources indicate that the MS-13 and 18th Street gangs have diversified into retail sales of marijuana – which is grown mostly in Guatemala and Honduras – and synthetic drugs such as methamphetamine and fentanyl, now processed in northern Central America. In the case of Honduras, gangs have increasingly resorted to armed robbery and contraband. Testimonies from Guatemala and El Salvador point to gangs’ efforts to meddle with or profit from the distribution of health care equipment such as face masks and emergency government aid, with Salvadoran authorities forced to include certain gang-connected families among the beneficiaries of handouts and subsidies.

Meanwhile, international drug trafficking through northern Central America persists, much of it apparently by boat or private jet. In May, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime warned of a possible increase in maritime drug shipments from South America as a result of reduced air traffic and border shutdowns. Guatemalan authorities report that private jet landings have continued unabated, particularly in the northern jungles of Petén. In Honduras, cocaine seizures have even increased: by late September 2020, authorities had already confiscated 2,830kg of cocaine over the

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31 In Guatemala, authorities define “imitators” as those who disguise themselves as gang members to demand extortion payments. Most of them act individually or in small groups, often in areas without a strong gang presence. The authorities thus do not consider “imitators” to be organised crime, though some experts argue that some of them have developed hierarchies. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Guatemalan police officer, security expert, anti-extortion prosecutor and former gang member, June and October 2020. “Coronavirus: Por crisis en comercios y transporte criminales extorsionan domicilios”, Prensa Libre, 3 April 2020. “Alertan de nuevo modo de extorsiones en redes sociales”, República, 13 August 2020.

32 Crisis Group telephone interviews, Guatemalan police officer and anti-extortion prosecutor, June and October 2020.


34 The MS-13 in Honduras no longer depends on extortion revenues due to its involvement in cocaine trafficking, and part of its leadership had already been airing the idea of suspending this practice in the past couple of years. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Honduran FNAMP officer and journalist, 2 and 9 September 2020.

35 In the first three months of Guatemala’s quarantine, the government paid a “family bonus” of around $120 per month. The authorities received more than 300 complaints of threats to or theft from recipients. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Salvadoran security expert, humanitarian worker and UNODC official, 7 May, 28 July and 12 August 2020. “Coronavirus: MP recibe denuncias por amenazas a beneficiarios de bono familia y robo de recibos”, Prensa Libre, 18 June 2020.


course of the year, compared to 2,218kg in all of 2019.\textsuperscript{38} By mid-October, Guatemalan and Honduran authorities had also already located and destroyed close to as many illegal airstrips in 2020 as in all of 2019.\textsuperscript{39} The increasing number of coca cultivation camps found in both Guatemala and Honduras have also sounded alarms that these transit countries could be morphing into producers as well.\textsuperscript{40}

As noted above, in Mexico, crime rings have been weaning themselves off reliance on drug trafficking for fifteen years, expanding into other illicit businesses. One of the most lucrative areas of growth has been to “tax” licit economies through extortion. In central Mexico, criminal groups have focused on extracting payments from the agricultural sector, such as the avocado, lime and berry industries in Michoacán and Jalisco.\textsuperscript{41} Affecting firms of all sizes, extortion has become a crucial means of generating income in areas where state protection is absent or incomplete.\textsuperscript{42} According to the Bank of Mexico, one in every fourteen businesses nationwide suffered shake-downs in 2019, with the rate rising to one in five in certain regions.\textsuperscript{43}

Climbing commodity prices also mean that mining has become a more enticing source of extortion revenue, even if criminal groups have to compete over it.\textsuperscript{44} The price of gold, which has jumped during the pandemic due to a flow in global investment toward dependable assets, will make the precious metal even more highly coveted by rival criminal outfits.\textsuperscript{45} Similarly, the price of iron ore has risen as a result of reinvigorated Chinese demand.\textsuperscript{46} Mexican outfits have also continued to profit from other illicit markets less affected by lockdowns, such as wildlife trafficking.\textsuperscript{47} The capacity to swiftly adapt to changing conditions and to find alternative revenue sources, combined with high levels of judicial impunity and state collusion, accounts for many groups’ operational resilience.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{38} “Drug Flights Climb Again in Honduras and Guatemala”, Insight Crime, 14 October 2020.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} “Honduras Goes From Transit Nation to Cocaine Producer”, Insight Crime, 19 March 2020.
\textsuperscript{41} “Guatemala joins ranks of cocaine producers as plantations and labs emerge”, Reuters, 19 September 2019.
\textsuperscript{42} “America’s appetite for avocados is helping to fuel the Mexican cartels, but giving up guacamole isn’t the solution”, Business Insider, 23 February 2020. Crisis Group interviews, lime and berry producers, farm workers, 2015-2020.
\textsuperscript{43} For a comprehensive overview, see Felbab-Brown, “Mexico’s Out-of-Control Criminal Market”, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{44} “Las extorsiones afectan a 1 de cada 5 empresas en el sur: Banxico”, Forbes, 12 December 2019.
\textsuperscript{45} On the role of natural resources as conflict drivers, see “Organized Crime and Illegally Mined Gold in Latin America”, Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, April 2016.
\textsuperscript{46} “Gold prices: five reasons gold is set to explode”, Forbes, 25 June 2020.
\textsuperscript{47} Iron ore prices reached a six-year high in September, according to Business Insider data. On Mexico’s central Pacific coast, iron ore was a key item sought by local criminal groups until its price dropped sharply in 2013. See “La tormentosa vida en Lázaro Cárdenas”, Revista Nexos, 1 October 2016. The rebound of prices will likely trigger greater criminal interest, as well as conflict, according to local sources involved in clandestine mining. Crisis Group interviews, June and September 2020.
\textsuperscript{48} Wildlife trafficking, another lucrative organised criminal enterprise, has reportedly remained stable during the pandemic. See “Coronavirus Has Not Slowed Looting of Latin America’s Maritime Species”, Insight Crime, 24 June 2020.
\textsuperscript{48} See Crisis Group Report, Mexico’s Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace, op. cit.
III. Benefitting from Contagion

Criminal groups have not only absorbed the COVID-19 era’s economic shocks, but they have also leveraged the contagion and the resulting lockdowns to their benefit. In some areas, the criminal groups are using the pandemic to tighten their grip on the territory and people they control. Where these groups are embroiled in turf battles, the health emergency has in some cases motivated them to compete more fiercely while state authorities are distracted by the public health challenge.

A. “Hearts and Minds”

Some criminal groups in northern Central America and Mexico have tried to turn the flawed state pandemic responses to their advantage by making displays of benevolence. They have handed out basic food packages, for instance – gestures that were limited in number and restricted to a few areas but became widely known.\(^{49}\) The handouts, which the criminal groups publicise on social media channels, are aimed at drawing particular communities into greater dependence and buying their loyalty vis-à-vis hostile state forces and non-state groups.\(^{50}\) According to one criminal leader active in Mexico’s southern state of Guerrero, as long as “they [the local population] are with us and not with them [hostile groups]”, there is less risk that locals will share crucial intelligence – such as the whereabouts of safe houses – with third parties.\(^{51}\)

Likewise, the 18th Street gang in Guatemala donated thousands of face masks to authorities, in a bid “to be recognised in the communities and prevent residents from denouncing them”, according to an officer from a police unit specialising in gang issues.\(^{52}\) The decision by some 18th Street and MS-13 leaders to forgive certain extortion payments seemingly showed a public face of compassion.\(^{53}\) Their motive, however, was not so much altruistic as pragmatic, coming as it did in response to the general economic slowdown.\(^{54}\) “They’re donating face masks with other people’s money: they’re taking, rather than giving”, said one disgruntled Guatemalan gang member.\(^{55}\)

\(^{49}\) “Mexican cartels are providing COVID-19 assistance. Why that’s not surprising.”, Brookings, 27 April 2020; “In El Salvador, criminal gangs are enforcing virus-related restrictions. Here’s why.”, The Washington Post, 1 June 2020.

\(^{50}\) In El Salvador, the Southerners faction of the 18th Street gang handed out food. See “Cómo las pandillas MS-13 y Barrio 18 se están convirtiendo en actores clave contra la epidemia del coronavirus en El Salvador”, RT, 11 April 2020. For Mexico, see “Mexican criminal groups see Covid-19 crisis as opportunity to gain more power”, The Guardian, 20 April 2020.

\(^{51}\) Crisis Group interview, Chichihualco, September 2019.


\(^{54}\) Crisis Group telephone interviews, UN official, Guatemalan security expert and Salvadoran former gang member, April–June 2020.

\(^{55}\) Crisis Group interview, Guatemalan gang member, Chiautla, October 2020.
Criminal groups have also sought to exploit the pandemic by acting as enforcers of public order, taking advantage of their territorial presence and community ties in poor neighbourhoods. In Salvadoran cities such as Santa Ana and San Salvador, gangs have regulated the movement of people in lieu of police.\(^{56}\) Using the pretext of containing viral spread, the MS-13 enforced curfews in some places in El Salvador, punishing violators.\(^ {57}\) One Salvadoran humanitarian worker put it this way: “If gangs say they have never been so calm [meaning they have never killed so little], locals say gangs’ grip [on the communities] has never been so strong”.\(^{58}\)

While this phenomenon is less prominent in Mexico, some non-state armed actors, chiefly the so-called self-defence groups in Guerrero, have acted in a similar fashion.\(^{59}\) Here, the strategic appeal to locals’ “hearts and minds” has an electoral motivation: some criminal groups are looking to use their services to the public as a means of encouraging voters to select their preferred candidates or parties in forthcoming elections, with the idea that once in office these indebt politicians will allow them to operate with impunity.\(^ {60}\) One group’s jefe de plaza, or local lieutenant, said he had “instructed” the local government to set up a food bank for his group to use for handouts.\(^ {61}\) In some cases, however, the food parcels distributed by criminal bands in Mexico were snatched from legal companies or financed through increased extortion from local businesses, according to observers with direct knowledge.\(^ {62}\)

B. Competing for Territory

The pandemic has rekindled pre-existing feuds for control over land, commodities, access to illicit markets and trafficking corridors – as well as communities sitting in the path to larger profits. The Jalisco Cartel New Generation has continued its campaign of territorial expansion across Mexico, particularly in the country’s central region. It showcased its armed might in a viral video depicting a convoy of its “special forces” unit, as well as by brazenly ambushing the local head of public security in an affluent area of Mexico City.\(^ {63}\) According to sources close to the group, as well as members of opposing organisations, in some areas the Jalisco Cartel has been more aggressive in attempts to take over territory on the assumption that security forces are caught up in pandemic-related activities such as guarding hospitals, reducing their ability to intervene in gunfights.\(^ {64}\)

But, despite the COVID-19 circumstances, the underworld remains far from united. No single force has yet shown itself capable of dominating any part of Mexico’s hyper-
fragmented criminal landscape, which, according to a Crisis Group study, features no fewer than 198 active armed groups.65 Bold as its campaign is, the Jalisco Cartel has encountered fierce opposition from locally rooted groups and has failed to turn its presence in the vast majority of Mexican states into territorial hegemony. The state of Guanajuato might become the exception, where Jalisco has gained the upper hand after the arrest of its main competitor’s leader.66 But even in that region, “they are still a long way from being in total control ... [and] the state remains extremely hot”, said a source working with the cartel’s upper echelons, referring to the prevalence of conflict among groups vying for power.67

In other places in Mexico, necessity – and not opportunity – is driving organised crime’s efforts to acquire more territory. The lieutenant of an armed group fighting over the state of Michoacán explained that falling demand for goods such as mangoes meant that extortion revenues were drying up. Instead of trying to squeeze blood from a stone, the group decided to step up its attempts to conquer new turf in search of additional sources of revenue.68

Gangs’ bids for territorial expansion in northern Central American countries vary greatly. In Honduras, dozens of minor gangs challenge the main outfits every day in the streets of San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, even though the 18th Street and MS-13 gangs remain the biggest players. Police officers and experts suggested that gangs large and small – particularly the MS-13 – found in the pandemic an opportunity to step up recruitment and attacks on rivals, particularly in areas controlled by minor gangs, such as the Rivera Hernández neighbourhood in San Pedro Sula.69 In Guatemala, gang-run territory in the capital’s poorer neighbourhoods is fairly well demarcated, leading these groups to focus on expanding their presence in other minor cities.70 The outlier is El Salvador, where the MS-13 and the two 18th Street factions have taken over almost all smaller outfits and consolidated their presence in around 90 per cent of the country’s municipalities in recent years, sharply reducing the violence that inter-gang turf wars previously caused.71

65 Esberg, “More than Cartels: Counting Mexico’s Crime Rings”, op. cit. The study finds that at least 463 criminal groups operated in Mexico for some duration between mid-2009 and 2019. The number of active groups has doubled since 2009.
68 Crisis Group interview, 14 April 2020.
69 Crisis Group telephone interviews, Honduran security experts, National Anti-Gang Force officer and journalist, June, September and October 2020. One security expert who tracks gang crimes said that while many murders during the period have been reported in “border areas” where gangs vie for influence, the most significant change is seemingly an increase in internal gang punishments for disloyalty, particularly within the 18th Street gang. Crisis Group telephone interview, Honduran security expert, 15 October 2020.
70 Crisis Group interviews, Guatemalan UNODC official and former gang members, Chimaputa and Guatemala City, October 2020.
71 Crisis Group Report, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, op. cit.
C. Levels of Violence

Crime, and organised crime in particular, accounts for a large share of lethal violence in Mexico and northern Central America and has deep roots, as noted above. While some commentators hoped that the COVID-19 pandemic would reduce violent crime across the board, that did not come to pass. Instead, the virus’s effects on violence so far have been fleeting. Government policies, particularly mobility restrictions and border shutdowns, contributed to lowering levels of violence in some Central American countries, as did some gangs’ decisions to forgive protection payments. But pre-existing turf wars, coupled with growing scarcity of resources and accelerating fragmentation in some criminal groups, have entailed ongoing – if not intensified – clashes among street gangs. Having briefly dipped, homicide rates are now back to pre-pandemic levels in most places. In Mexico, meanwhile, high levels of armed conflict continued unabated, with 2020 homicides continuing at levels similar to and possibly higher than in 2017 and 2018 – the latter of which is the highest on record.

Where governments enforced strict measures to prevent the virus’ spread, levels of violence decreased, but only temporarily. Even before the first COVID-19 cases appeared in the Northern Triangle of Central America, these governments had closed their borders, suspended international flights to and from the hardest-hit countries, and declared states of emergency. They went on to impose nationwide mobility restrictions such as quarantines and curfews. These measures coincided with a sharp drop in homicide rates: March was one of the least violent months in years, particularly in El Salvador and Guatemala. Police officers from these two countries and Honduras agree that the restrictions, along with enhanced patrols to enforce lockdown measures, had hindered gangs’ capacity to move about and thus to commit murder.

After remaining stable for a month, homicides in Guatemala and Honduras started to climb again from late April, while they did so in El Salvador from July. In all three countries, they are now back to pre-pandemic levels, though rates for now remain

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72 Criminal gangs, for example, are estimated to be responsible for between 20 and 50 per cent of the total homicides in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Crisis Group interviews, Honduran FNAMP, Guatemalan anti-gang division (DIPANDA) and Salvadoran police officers, October 2019 and June 2020. See also Markus-Michael Müller, “Governing Crime and Violence in Latin America”, Global Crime, vol. 19, nos. 3-4 (28 November 2018), pp. 171-191. In Mexico, organised crime is estimated to be responsible for 44 to 80 per cent of overall homicides. See “Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico: 2020 Special Report”, Justice in Mexico Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of San Diego, July 2020, p. 12.

73 Some observers thought that the coronavirus would be a golden opportunity for states to crack down on economically exposed criminal groups. See, eg, Enrique Krauze, “With coronavirus hurting the drug business, there’s an opportunity to corner cartels”, The Washington Post, 26 May 2020.


76 “Cuarentenas y toques de queda se extiende por América”, Forbes Centroamérica, 18 March 2020.


78 Crisis Group telephone interviews, Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran police officers, May and June 2020.
lower than in 2019 (see Appendix E).79 “Nothing has changed in terms of when, where and how murders take place in the country”, said a Honduran security expert.80 Similarly, in El Salvador, violence dropped back down to historically low levels in May and June after an uptick connected to a gang killing spree in April, only to pick up again in July; the annual murder rate nevertheless remains very low relative to previous years.81 Across the region, quarantine appears to have made domestic violence against women notably worse: the Organization of Salvadoran Women for Peace reported a 70 per cent increase in complaints of attacks on women in Central America between mid-March and late May.82

As for Mexico, where the government was slow and uneven in its response to the virus, violent crime has stayed at fairly constant levels. Although the authorities suggested containment measures early on, they made them mostly voluntary, pointing to the initially low rates of transmission. Later, in the face of rising infections and deaths, the federal government placed some restrictions on economic and leisure activities, as well as general mobility. But it always put a higher priority on economic activity, and large swathes of the country where people live hand to mouth never entered general quarantine.83 The lack of restrictions in the countryside appear consistent with an uninterrupted pace of bloodshed and displacement there.84

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79 This is in line with the downward trend in levels of violence, only interrupted in Honduras last year, across the region in recent years (El Salvador since 2016, Honduras since 2011, Guatemala since 2010). Figures drawn from national police forces and assembled by Crisis Group.


83 Poor areas both within and outside cities continue to suffer the highest COVID-19 infection and death rates in Mexico. See “Zonas marginadas de México concentran el mayor número de muertes y contagios de COVID-19”, El Financiero, 14 July 2020.

IV. Fighting Crime in the Time of COVID-19

Even before COVID-19 swept through Mexico and Central America, it was clear that the region’s problem of violent crime had no quick fix. Now conditions are even tougher. States are facing reinvigorated criminal groups that have adapted to the pandemic’s restrictions, amid one of the sharpest economic downturns ever recorded in the region, with the likelihood that poverty, need and inequality will deepen further, driving new recruits into the arms of criminal organisations and helping those organisations consolidate their control over communities. Governments as well as donors should concentrate their resources on the populations most likely to suffer greater violence as times get harder.

A. The Economic Downturn and Criminal Recruitment

After months of pandemic-related constraints on economic activity, the region is facing its worst economic crisis in decades. Mexico has been hit hard by a 47.1 drop in exports to the U.S., and economists project a decrease in GDP of around 9 per cent in 2020.85 Already from March to June, the country lost more than 1 million formal-sector jobs and up to 11.5 million jobs in the informal sector.86 The percentage of the population unable to meet basic needs could rise to 56 per cent (70 million people), according to a study by Mexico’s National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy. Should this estimate prove accurate, it would represent a 50 per cent increase over 2018 in the number of Mexicans in such grim poverty. The study concluded that “this crisis threatens Mexico’s advances in social development and will disproportionately affect the most vulnerable groups”.87

With domestic markets paralysed and international trade unsettled, northern Central American economies are also contracting. The International Monetary Fund recently revised its economic outlook for the region, foreseeing a 2 per cent GDP contraction in Guatemala this year, a 6.5 per cent drop in Honduras and close to 9 per cent dive in El Salvador and Mexico.88 The UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) also projects that poverty levels will increase by 3 to 6.5 percentage points in the Northern Triangle, and extreme poverty by 2.9 to 4.5 points, with El Salvador again faring the worst.89 One study in July showed that 57 per cent of households surveyed in the so-called Dry Corridor of Central America, an area largely covering parts of the Northern Triangle and Nicaragua that is home to

88 See the International Monetary Fund’s World Economic Outlook Database.
around 4.5 million people, were suffering moderate or critical food insecurity. The devastation caused by Hurricane ETA across Central America in early November is sure to make this grim outlook ever worse.

Dire economic conditions and deepening poverty could strengthen criminal groups as well as spur increasing crime rates. Illicit groups draw recruits from a pool of largely economically disadvantaged populations, especially young men: a 2017 survey in El Salvador found, for example, that seven of ten gang members came from households getting by on less than $250 a month, and more than 80 per cent had never worked regularly, either in the formal or informal sectors. As employment opportunities in the licit formal and informal sectors dwindle, more young people could gravitate to labour-intensive illicit businesses, which use new members for tasks such as murder for hire, collection of extortion money, production or distribution of drugs, or mundane tasks. As one journalist from San Pedro Sula put it: “Here the businesses fired half of the employees [...] but you can make 1,000 lempiras (around $40) a week just being a lookout.”

Economic hard times will also enable criminal groups to consolidate their control over communities that have grown increasingly dependent for their livelihoods on illicit rackets, enabling those groups to drum up support for electoral candidates, and potentially to bend the actions of state and judicial institutions in their favour. The risk is particularly clear in El Salvador, where the issue of whom the main gangs might support in the February 2021 general and municipal elections is reportedly a topic of secret discussion between gang leaders and government officials.

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90 “Aquí lo que hay es hambre’: Hambre y pandemia en Centroamérica y Venezuela”, Oxfam, 10 July 2020.
91 Studies have shown that both inequality and absolute poverty are contributing factors to increases in crime and lethal violence, although findings vary across regions and scholars debate the degree to which these factors drive organised crime. See “Citizen Security with a Human Face: Evidence and Proposals for Latin America”, UN Development Programme, November 2013; Bandy X. Lee, “Economic Correlates of Violent Death Rates in Forty Countries, 1962-2008: A Cross-Typological Analysis”, Aggression and Violent Behavior, vol. 19, no. 6 (November 2014).
93 In Guatemala, the Centre for National Economic Research (CIEN) has created a crime complaints index, gathering figures for ten different crimes. While the index’s inter-annual variation was −4.4 per cent in May, it had gone up again to −0.4 per cent by August, with crimes against people experiencing a 0.3 per cent increase. Crisis Group telephone interview, Honduran journalist, 29 July 2020. “COVID-19 and the Drug Supply Chain: From Production and Trafficking to Use”, op. cit.; “Boletín Estadístico de Delitos”, Centro de Investigaciones Económicas Nacionales, 16 September 2020.
94 Crisis Group telephone interview, Honduran journalist, 9 September 2020.
95 Crisis Group telephone interview, prison system official, August 2020. “Gobierno de Bukele lleva un año negociando con la MS-13 reducción de homicidios y apoyo electoral”, El Faro, 3 September 2020.
B. **Flawed Policy Responses**

The region’s governments, which have proven unable to remedy the underlying conditions that give rise to consistently high rates of violent crime, are now largely unprepared to face an even greater challenge from criminal groups. Mexico’s president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has made social and economic programs the centerpiece of his efforts to combat insecurity at its roots. But doubts persist about these initiatives’ effectiveness and their usefulness as responses to the pandemic’s economic fallout. At the same time, the Mexican government continues to deepen its reliance on highly militarised security institutions, including López Obrador’s newly created National Guard, a police force that is civilian in name only and is a blunt instrument for fighting organised crime. As long as these policies continue, the risk remains that criminal groups will fragment further while violent competition over illicit revenues intensifies.

The governments of northern Central America also remain wedded to iron-fist methods, which after two decades show few signs of yielding a sustained reduction in violent crime. At first, Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández’s tough strategy led to a decline in murders, but in 2019 homicides started to climb again. El Salvador’s stark drop in homicides after years of extreme violence appears to stem from an informal understanding between gangs and authorities, but President Nayib Bukele’s administration has kept up its bellicose rhetoric against these groups, priding itself on treating their members harshly. Guatemala’s President Alejandro Giammattei has also insisted on hardline measures, deploying security forces in crime-ridden areas under short-lived “states of exception” and confining or transferring prisoners to cut off communication with the outside. These measures have brought only temporary improvements. Shakedowns and murders went back up as soon as security forces left targeted areas or when extortionists ended their confinement, often following habeas corpus requests to the courts.

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96 For a discussion of these programs’ effectiveness in Mexico’s high-conflict zones, see Crisis Group Report, *Mexico’s Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace*, op. cit.
97 “Coneval ve fallos en programas insignia de AMLO; gobierno ignora recomendaciones”, *Animal Político*, 7 July 2020.
98 Of the National Guard’s 90,000 officers, 51,101 come from the army, 10,149 from the navy and 26,750 from the former federal police. The third cohort are the only ones paid by a civilian institution, the Public Security Secretariat. Overall, under López Obrador more soldiers have been deployed on Mexican streets than under the previous two administrations. Despite his campaign vows, López Obrador has been reluctant to invest in reforms of civilian police and justice institutions, instead further strengthening the armed forces’ role. See Crisis Group Report, *Mexico’s Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace*, op. cit.; and Esberg, “More than Cartels: Counting Mexico’s Crime Rings”, op. cit. Also see “Ni civiles ni policías: Guardia solo ha reclutado a militares que carecen de evaluación policial”, *Animal Político*, 17 August 2020; and “Gobierno de AMLO, el que más militares ha desplegado”, SDP Noticias, 6 September 2020.
101 Monthly homicides in the twelve municipalities where the government imposed a state of exception in February reportedly went down to 0.9 from 1.5, but they went up again to 1.3 in March after these measures ended. “Informe sobre los primeros 100 días de gobierno”, Diálogos, 3 June 2020, p. 13; “Acciones interinstitucionales logran reducir a cero en algunos días, las llamadas extorsivas
A crucial element in determining the future of gangs over the course of the pandemic in Central America will be their treatment in prisons, the source of most orders to extract extortion payments or commit murders. One of the first measures the region’s governments took to prevent the virus’s spread in their overcrowded jails was to suspend family visits, which gang leaders often use to exchange coded messages and pass orders to the outside world. Communication with outside contacts has also been stymied by the imposition of military rule over prisons in Honduras, and by the decision in El Salvador to enforce stricter prison regimes for members of different gangs, who are now forced to share the same cells. Nevertheless, gang members, security experts and police officers argued that, at least in Guatemala and Honduras, jailed gang leaders manage to contact those outside by phones that are illegally smuggled into prisons, sometimes bypassing signal disruption devices by using independent transmission networks. They also use “apps like WhatsApp and Telegram that we lack the technology to intercept”, one Guatemalan prosecutor explained.

The initial disruption in extortion proceeds, combined with the unequal allocation of these takings within gangs, has caused internal strains. As some gangs decided to cut unnecessary costs, jailed members’ relatives and low-level operatives found themselves without an important source of financial support. This step, combined with the order from certain gang leaders to suspend some extortion in order to win public approval, prompted lower-level members to start collecting their own small payments without “permission” from gang bosses or skimming bite-size sums from the gangs’
extortion income.\textsuperscript{108} Such practices have reportedly spurred a tide of killings perpetrated against members of the same gang to punish misbehaviour.\textsuperscript{109}

Disputes between jailed and free gang leaders, compounded by the increased difficulty of communication, are contributing to the progressive fragmentation of gang cliques. The fractures are particularly noticeable in the 18th Street gang, where internal frictions are not new, but risk being exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.\textsuperscript{110} The proliferation of rogue gang factions could fuel internecine violence and jeopardise any future process aiming to address the gang issue as a whole, including through dialogue.\textsuperscript{111}

C. Recommendations

In the face of a potential increase in recruitment by criminal outfits, their entrenchment in vulnerable communities and a return to the high levels of violence they perpetrate, governments should develop policies targeted at preventing further deterioration in public safety. These plans should not neglect the role of firm, forceful policing in containing extreme criminal aggression and protecting people vulnerable to displacement or other serious harm. But they should also ensure that impoverished areas receive material and technical support so that people living there have ways to stay afloat without involvement in illicit activities. In doing so, governments and foreign partners would also help mitigate the worsening exodus of Mexicans and Central Americans fleeing the region.

For starters, governments should use COVID-related donor funds and emergency multilateral credit lines to step up state support for the public through basic service provision, above all in health care, and financial subventions for the poor. Where possible, they should also back law enforcement campaigns aimed at preventing a spike in extortion coinciding with economies’ reopening.\textsuperscript{112} These campaigns should strengthen the investigative capacity of local law enforcement and establish better channels of communication between merchants and police to make extortion easier to report when it takes place.\textsuperscript{113}

Regional governments should also use emergency funds that parliaments have made available for alleviating the humanitarian emergency to boost domestic production of basic goods and food, especially in rural areas that are more susceptible to

\textsuperscript{108} Crisis Group telephone interview, Guatemalan police officer, 23 June 2020.
\textsuperscript{109} Crisis Group interviews, Guatemalan active and former gang members and security expert, Honduran security expert, Chiahuatlán, Guatemala City and by telephone, September and October 2020.
\textsuperscript{112} A total of $230 billion in credit from multilateral lenders is reportedly available to fund the response of emergency and low-income countries to the pandemic. Communiqué from G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors Meeting, 14 October 2020.
drug trafficking and illicit crop production. They should allocate money in an even and transparently non-partisan way, particularly in El Salvador and Honduras, where 2021 elections could tempt rulers to use crisis expenditure to nurture popular support. To soften the pandemic’s impact, the Mexican government should also reconsider some of its extreme austerity measures, an emblem of the López Obrador administration from its outset, which have meant among other things the closure of an array of state agencies deemed superfluous or corrupt, and wide-reaching spending cuts. Resources have instead been focused on social and economic programs that rely chiefly on direct assistance to recipients, with the goal of alleviating inequality and poverty. Although these appear to be appropriate responses to Mexico’s economic debacle, a clear methodology for how these programs will generate their desired effects is so far lacking. It is also questionable whether they are the right means of addressing the privations caused by the pandemic, with those hit hardest economically, including informal-sector workers and small and mid-sized businesses, receiving too little support so far.

Across the region, comprehensive security plans during the pandemic should seek not just to deter crime but also to target its sources. Broadly speaking they could aim to foster legal alternatives to crime, protect civilian populations through geographically focused police deployments, shore up local security and justice institutions and take steps to rid them of corruption, and, where feasible, introduce incentives for young members of criminal groups to reintege into law-abiding society. For example, governments should enhance witness protection programs and offer reintegration and employment programs to criminal groups willing to hand over their weapons.

In rural areas, governments should partner with private-sector and foreign donors to

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**Notes:**

114 In El Salvador, for example, parliament has approved government efforts to seek more than $3 billion through loans, bonds and donations, but there is dispute over how transparently the government has used these funds. In Guatemala, 14.6 billion quetzals (about $1.9 billion) have been approved although little of that sum has so far been spent. “Gobierno se resiste a transparentar el uso de $3 mil millones para atender la emergencia”, El Faro, 23 September 2020; “Cómo quedó la ejecución de los programas sociales después del estado de Calamidad”, Prensa Libre, 2 October 2020.

115 There have been reports, for example, that the Honduran government has been channelling these funds to ruling National Party sympathisers. “Covid-19 is Complicating Central America’s Chronic Illnesses”, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 13 July 2020.

116 “El Gobierno de México pone en marcha el cierre de una decena de subsecretarías por la austeridad”, El País, 1 September 2020.


118 Overall, the López Obrador government has not deviated from its austerity policy. It continues to reject taking on debt to up its COVID-19-related stimulus spending, which is lower than most OECD countries. The government’s economic response to the pandemic has consisted mainly of doubling down on the flagship programs designed to support impoverished populations and areas, including granting four million one-time loans not higher than 25,000 pesos ($1,190) to small firms, but nothing to larger businesses. See “Too little, too late? Mexico unveils $26 billion coronavirus spending shift”, Reuters, 22 April 2020; “Mexico reports ‘catastrophic’ 60,000 Covid-19 deaths”, Financial Times, 23 August 2020; “Mexico’s budget assumptions met with scepticism”, Financial Times, 9 September 2020.

119 Around 80 per cent of homicides in northern Central America are perpetrated with a firearm. “Living with Armed Violence”, Halo Trust Foundation, 26 June 2020.
offer incentives for farmers to replace illicit with legal crops, thereby preventing a boom in coca, marijuana and poppy cultivation.

The extent of the challenges ahead means that authorities likely should focus on a select number of regions affected by high levels of violence and at particular threat from the pandemic’s fallout. They should develop intervention plans for these regions – analysing the dynamics particular to those conflict settings, developing tailored interventions that look beyond traditional law enforcement solutions (for example, to combat corruption and cultivate licit economies), and focusing local, national and international resources to support them. In Mexico, such plans should be rolled out first in regions with the highest levels of lethal conflict, such as Michoacán, Guerrero and Guanajuato, and subsequently extended to other areas. Central America’s most violent cities, such as Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula in Honduras, Guatemala City in Guatemala, and San Salvador in El Salvador, should be priority locations for programs to encourage the disarmament and reintegration of gang members, while remote jungles used for drug trafficking also merit dedicated state attention.

Long-term progress in this direction, however, hinges on institutions capable of carrying out these plans transparently and without criminal connivance. Strict oversight and accountability mechanisms are essential, yet they still lack the political backing they need across the region. Under President López Obrador, efforts against selected individuals suspected of corruption have increased, but there are no signs that the government plans to reinforce previous Mexican administrations’ attempts to build an overarching anti-corruption system. Anti-corruption efforts in northern Central America have stalled following the departure of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala and the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras, the mandates of which were cut short by the respective national governments.

Donor governments, neighbours like the U.S. and international organisations should recognise that supporting steps in these directions is in their immediate interest, as they can mitigate the risk that the region will slide deeper into the vicious cycle of dire living conditions, violence and emigration. International financial institutions, in particular, should consider not only loosening credit conditions but also

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120 For an outline of regional intervention plans in Mexico, see Crisis Group Report, Mexico’s Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace, op. cit.
121 In Guatemala, these areas are in Petén, San Marcos, Alta Verapaz and Izabal provinces, and in Honduras they are in Olancho, Gracias a Dios and Yoro. A comprehensive account of the elements of the most recent successful effort at disarmament in Latin America, that of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2017, can be found in Gerson Arias and Carlos Andrés Prieto, “Lecciones del fin del conflicto en Colombia: dejación de armas y tránsito a la legalidad de las Farc”, Institute for Integrated Transitions, 2020.
starting a debt relief program for pandemic-related funding to prevent a financial crisis in the region down the line.\textsuperscript{126} The U.S. and European Union should work with regional governments to step up support for a dormant UN-backed development plan for Central America and southern Mexico.\textsuperscript{127} While the U.S. government has prioritised its own private investment strategy in Latin America launched in December 2019, called “Growth in the Americas”, it should tie investments in infrastructure projects to robust anti-corruption campaigns and improvements in state institutions’ effectiveness, with the aim of helping stabilise the region and preventing a return to mass northbound migration driven by conflict.\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{126} “World Bank calls for debt relief programme as amounts owed hit record levels”, \textit{The Guardian}, 12 October 2020.

\textsuperscript{127} The most recent outline of a Comprehensive Development Plan for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and southern and south-eastern Mexico was signed in January 2020 by representatives of all four countries under the auspices of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. “The Comprehensive Development Plan is an Innovative Proposal that Addresses the Structural Causes of Migration, With a Focus on Growth, Equality and Environmental Sustainability”, ECLAC, 15 January 2020.

\textsuperscript{128} Under the initiative, which excludes Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela, the U.S. has pledged $1 billion to each of the northern Central American countries. “América Crece: Washington’s new investment push in Latin America”, Toward Freedom, 8 October 2020.
V. Conclusion

Despite initial signs that the COVID-19 crisis might disrupt crime and its attendant violence in Mexico and northern Central America, the pandemic is in fact exacerbating the socio-economic and institutional weaknesses that underpin these phenomena. After an early dip in the Northern Triangle countries, homicide rates have returned to pre-crisis levels in most places, while in Mexico they have held steadily high throughout the health emergency. With the gradual reactivation of economies, extortion is expected to roar back in northern Central America, while the reopening of borders and airports will likely reinvigorate drug trafficking via land and air and other smuggling. At the same time, the economic hardship caused by the pandemic could drive more people, youngsters in particular, to join the ranks of organised crime.

Governments in the region, already struggling to fight crime before the pandemic, face troubling prospects. The economic impact of COVID-19 could linger much longer than the contagion itself, as both the formal and informal sectors languish, poverty and inequality rise, and governments scramble for loans to fund investment and socio-economic relief packages. Authorities should combine targeted policing with the investment of emergency funds that multilateral lenders have made available to respond to the health crisis, giving priority to those regions most exposed to the pandemic and its fallout, including areas affected by rising violence. Donors should pitch in, guided by the same principles. Organised crime has shown notable resilience and adaptability as the coronavirus shapes the present. The governments of Mexico and northern Central America ought to respond with focused and strategic interventions that break with the tried and failed methods of the past.

**Mexico City/Guatemala City/Bogotá/Brussels, 13 November 2020**
Appendix B: Map of Guatemala
Appendix C: Map of El Salvador
Appendix E: Per Capita Homicides in Mexico and Northern Central America

Source: Data on El Salvador comes from the Institute of Legal Medicine with the Attorney General of the Republic and the National Civil Police; data on Guatemala from the Guatemalan National Civil Police; data on Honduras from the Honduran National Civil Police; and data on Mexico from the Executive Secretary of the National Public Security System.
Appendix F: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group’s approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes CrisisWatch, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group’s reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group’s President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group’s Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton’s Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group’s international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.


November 2020
Appendix G: Reports and Briefings on Latin America since 2017

Special Reports and Briefings
Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.
Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.
Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.
COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

In the Shadow of "No": Peace after Colombia’s Plebiscite, Latin America Report N°60, 31 January 2017 (also available in Spanish).
Veracruz: Fixing Mexico’s State of Terror, Latin America Report N°61, 28 February 2017 (also available in Spanish).
Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America, Latin America Report N°62, 6 April 2017 (also available in Spanish).
Power without the People: Averting Venezuela’s Breakdown, Latin America Briefing N°36, 19 June 2017 (also available in Spanish).
Colombia’s Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace, Latin America Report N°63, 19 October 2017 (also available in Spanish).
Venezuela: Hunger by Default, Latin America Briefing N°37, 23 November 2017 (also available in Spanish).
El Salvador’s Politics of Perpetual Violence, Latin America Report N°64, 19 December 2017 (also available in Spanish).
Containing the Shock Waves from Venezuela, Latin America Report N°65, 21 March 2018 (also available in Spanish).
Building Peace in Mexico: Dilemmas Facing the López Obrador Government, Latin America Report N°69, 11 October 2018 (also available in Spanish).
Friendly Fire: Venezuela’s Opposition Turmoil, Latin America Report N°71, 23 November 2018 (also available in Spanish).
A Road to Dialogue After Nicaragua’s Crushed Uprising, Latin America Report N°72, 19 December 2018 (also available in Spanish).
Gold and Grief in Venezuela’s Violent South Latin America Report N°73, 28 February 2019 (also available in Spanish).
A Way Out of Latin America’s Impasse over Venezuela, Latin America Briefing N°38, 14 May 2019 (also available in Spanish).
The Keys to Restarting Nicaragua’s Stalled Talks, Latin America Report N°74, 13 June 2019 (also available in Spanish).
Calming the Restless Pacific: Violence and Crime on Colombia’s Coast, Latin America Report N°76, 8 August 2019 (also available in Spanish).
Venezuela’s Military Enigma, Latin America Briefing N°39, 16 September 2019 (also available in Spanish).
Containing the Border Fallout of Colombia’s New Guerrilla Schism, Latin America Briefing N°40, 20 September 2019 (also available in Spanish).
Peace in Venezuela: Is There Life after the Barbados Talks?, Latin America Briefing N°41, 11 December 2019 (also available in Spanish).
A Glut of Arms: Curbing the Threat to Venezuela from Violent Groups, Latin America Report N°78, 20 February 2020 (also available in Spanish).
Imagining a Resolution of Venezuela’s Crisis, Latin America Report N°79, 11 March 2020 (also available in Spanish).
Broken Ties, Frozen Borders: Colombia and Venezuela Face COVID-19, Latin America Briefing N°42, 16 April 2020 (also available in Spanish).
Mexico’s Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace, Latin America Report N°80, 4 May 2020 (also available in Spanish).
Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, Latin America Report N°81, 8 July 2020 (also available in Spanish).
Bolivia Faces New Polls in Shadow of Fraud Row, Latin America Briefing N°43, 31 July 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Leaders under Fire: Defending Colombia’s Front Line of Peace, Latin America Report N°82, 6 October 2020 (also available in Spanish).
## Appendix H: International Crisis Group Board of Trustees

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRESIDENT &amp; CEO</td>
<td>Robert Malley</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Former White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region</td>
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<tr>
<td>CO-CHAIRS</td>
<td>Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Frank Giustra</td>
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<td></td>
<td>President &amp; CEO, Fiore Group; Founder, Radcliffe Foundation</td>
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<tr>
<td>OTHER TRUSTEES</td>
<td>Fola Adeola</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Founder and Chairman, FATE Foundation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hushang Ansary</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Chairman, Parman Capital Group LLC; Former Iranian Ambassador to the U.S. and Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gérard Araud</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former Ambassador of France to the U.S.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Carl Bildt</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Sweden</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Emma Bonino</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former Foreign Minister of Italy and European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cheryl Carolus</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former South African High Commissioner to the UK and Secretary-General of the African National Congress (ANC)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Maria Livanos Cattaui</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former Secretary General of the International Chamber of Commerce</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ahmed Charai</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chairman and CEO of Global Media Holding and publisher of the Moroccan weekly L'Observateur</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nathalie Delapalme</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Executive Director and Board Member at the Mo Ibrahim Foundation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hailemariam Desalegn Boshe</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former Prime Minister of Ethiopia</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Alexander Downer</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former Australian Foreign Minister and High Commissioner to the United Kingdom</td>
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<td>Sigmar Gabriel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Vice Chancellor of Germany</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hu Shuli</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Editor-in-Chief of Caixin Media; Professor at Sun Yat-sen University</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mo Ibrahim</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Founder and Chair, Mo Ibrahim Foundation; Founder, Cettel International</td>
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<td>Wadah Khanfar</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Co-Founder, Al Shorq Forum; former Director General, Al Jazeera Network</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nasser al-Kidwa</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Chairman of the Yasser Arafat Foundation; Former UN Deputy Mediator on Syria</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bert Koenders</td>
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<td>Former Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs and Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations</td>
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<td>Andrey Kortunov</td>
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<td>Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council</td>
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<td>Ivan Krastev</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies (Sofia); Founding Board Member of European Council on Foreign Relations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Taiji Livni</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former Foreign Minister and Vice Prime Minister of Israel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Helge Lund</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former Chief Executive BG Group (UK) and Statoil (Norway)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Susana Malcorra</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former Foreign Minister of Argentina</td>
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<td>William H. McRaven</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Retired U.S. Navy Admiral who served as 9th Commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command</td>
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<td>Shivshankar Menon</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former Foreign Secretary of India; former National Security Adviser</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Naz Modirzadeh</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Director of the Harvard Law School Program on International Law and Armed Conflict</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Federica Mogherini</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Saad Mohseni</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Chairman and CEO of MOBY Group</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Marty Natalegawa</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, Permanent Representative to the UN, and Ambassador to the UK</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ayo Obe</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Chair of the Board of the Gorée Institute (Senegal); Legal Practitioner (Nigeria)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Meghan O'Sullivan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former U.S. Deputy National Security Adviser on Iraq and Afghanistan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Thomas R. Pickering</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former U.S. Under-Secretary of State and Ambassador to the UN, Russia, India, Israel, Jordan, El Salvador and Nigeria</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ahmed Rashid</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Author and Foreign Policy Journalist, Pakistan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ghassan Salamé</td>
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<td>Former UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative and Head of the UN Support Mission in Libya; Former Minister of Culture of Lebanon; Founding Dean of the Paris School of International Affairs, Sciences Po University</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Juan Manuel Santos Calderón</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former President of Colombia; Nobel Peace Prize Laureate 2016</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wendy Sherman</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs and Lead Negotiator for the Iran Nuclear Deal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ellen Johnson Sirleaf</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former President of Liberia</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Alexander Soros</td>
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<td>Deputy Chair of the Global Board, Open Society Foundations</td>
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<td>George Soros</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Founder, Open Society Foundations and Chair, Soros Fund Management</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Jonas Gahr Store</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Leader of the Labour Party and Labour Party Parliamentary Group; former Foreign Minister of Norway</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Jake Sullivan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former Director of Policy Planning at the U.S. Department of State, Deputy Assistant to President Obama, and National Security Advisor to Vice President Biden</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lawrence H. Summers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former Director of the U.S. National Economic Council and Secretary of the U.S. Treasury; President Emeritus of Harvard University</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Helle Thornning-Schmidt</td>
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<td></td>
<td>CEO of Save the Children International; former Prime Minister of Denmark</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wang Jisi</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Member, Foreign Policy Advisory Committee of the Chinese Foreign Ministry; President, Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Peking University</td>
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</tbody>
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