

Latin America and the Caribbean

Andes

➔ **Colombia Armed groups continued to vie for control of territory in rural areas.** Clashes between Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissident factions and Gaitanista Drug Cartel (AGC) over territorial control further intensified in several regions. FARC dissident factions 18th and 52nd Fronts 2 Jan circulated pamphlet in Bajo Cauca area of Antioquia and Córdoba departments (north west), vowing to purge AGC and any other resistance from Nudo de Paramillo mountains. Govt ombudsman 8 Jan warned about accelerating combat between FARC dissidents and AGC-affiliated groups in Cauca, Putumayo and Caquetá departments (south west). Meanwhile, violence involving military, National Liberation Army (ELN) and FARC dissident factions continued in Cauca. Notably, suspected ELN combatants 15 Dec killed municipal councillor for Argelia municipality in El Plateado area; councilman was prominent defender of peasants' land rights and strong advocate for coca crops substitution. Twelve more councillors from Argelia were evacuated to capital Bogotá 26 Jan after facing threats to their lives. On two-year anniversary of ELN bomb attack on police training academy in Bogotá, President Duque 17 Jan reiterated request for Cuba to extradite ELN leadership to face trial as suspected masterminds of attack, which left 22 dead, and other crimes. Special Jurisdiction for Peace (established under govt-FARC peace deal to handle cases deriving from conflict) 28 Jan charged eight former FARC high-ranking members with war crimes for kidnapping more than 21,000 people during decades-long conflict, including current head of FARC political party Rodrigo Londoño. Duque 4 Jan announced goal to manually eradicate 130,000 hectares of coca in 2021 – a similar number to what was achieved in 2020. Meanwhile, legal challenges continued to delay resumption of aerial fumigation, halted in 2015 over health concerns. Pasto regional court (Nariño department, south west) 14 Jan ruled that govt must undertake prior consultation with indigenous and ethnic communities in order to resume spraying. In letter to new U.S. administration, Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities 21 Jan asked for protection against armed group violence.

➔ **Venezuela President Maduro consolidated power with inauguration of new National Assembly.** Newly-elected lawmakers – in their vast majority supporters of ruling socialist party – 5 Jan took office and elected Maduro's key ally Jorge Rodríguez as assembly's president. Assembly 7 Jan approved creation of special commission for dialogue, peace and national reconciliation, along with another special commission in charge of investigating alleged wrongdoing by 2016-2021 National Assembly headed by Juan Guaidó. Ruling-party legislators late Jan asked attorney general to prohibit Guaidó and 20 other opposition leaders from leaving country. Disagreements over strategy and decision-making continued to plague mainstream opposition. In virtual plenary of 2016-2021 assembly 5 Jan, Democratic Action, largest party in Guaidó's coalition, opposed creation of Political Council to oversee Delegate Commission, made up of 20 legislators in charge of assembly's functions; Democratic Action had abstained from approving creation of Delegate Commission in Dec. EU foreign policy chief

Josep Borrell 6 Jan rejected newly-elected assembly, but stopped short of endorsing opposition's argument that Guaidó-led assembly remains country's legitimate parliament; while European Parliament 21 Jan issued resolution calling on EU Council to recognise Guaidó as country's legitimate interim president, EU member states 25 Jan said Guaidó was part of democratic opposition. Outgoing U.S. administration 19 Jan imposed sanctions on three individuals, 14 entities and six vessels for contributing "to evade U.S. sanctions on Venezuela's oil sector"; same day deferred for 18 months removal of Venezuelan nationals from U.S. Following U.S. President Biden's inauguration 20 Jan, Maduro 23 Jan called for "new path" in Venezuela-U.S. relations. Meanwhile, govt stepped up harassment of independent media and NGOs. Notably, pro-govt media and authorities early Jan accused journalists of news website Efecto Cocuyo and others of taking money from UK govt to act as anti-govt "mercenaries"; authorities 12 Jan arrested five employees of HIV-prevention NGO Blue Positive on charges of criminal association and money laundering. Tensions flared up with Guyana over disputed oil-rich maritime territory (see Guyana).

Central America and Mexico

↓ **El Salvador Rare attack on political activists left two dead, while political tensions ran high ahead of legislative and municipal elections planned for Feb.** Unidentified assailant 31 Jan opened fire on leftist opposition party Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) members in capital San Salvador, killing two and wounding three others. President Bukele shortly after suggested attack had been staged by FMLN, sparking outrage. On occasion of anniversary of Jan 1992 peace accords that ended 12-year civil war, Bukele lashed out at two peace accord signatories, opposition parties FMLN and Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA). Bukele 16 Jan said anniversary day would no longer commemorate "agreement between corrupt actors", but remember conflict's victims; Bukele in Dec had called peace accords "farce" signed by parties' leadership for their own benefit. New reports of irregularities in prison system emerged, hinting at possible govt-gangs dialogue process. Notably, online newspaper El Faro 12 Jan claimed director of prisons authorised in Oct transfer of MS-13 gang leader Chino Milo from maximum-security jail Izalco Fase III to hospital for "medical emergency" despite lack of apparent health problems; Milo is close to one of MS-13's heads who is reportedly having conversations with govt officials. U.S. prosecutors 14 Jan charged 14 MS-13 senior leaders, 11 of whom are in El Salvador, with terrorism. Meanwhile, court 5 Jan found former President Tony Saca and his wife guilty of illicit enrichment and ordered them to repay govt \$4.4mn. Judge 6 Jan ordered new trial against former President Mauricio Funes on money-laundering charges. Judge investigating 1981 El Mozote massacre of around 1,000 civilians allegedly perpetrated by military officers was granted access to Catholic Church's archives 25 Jan, after Archbishop of San Salvador Escobar Alas initially opposed inspection. In joint statement, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras govts 11 Jan said they will coordinate efforts to curb irregular migration. Guatemalan authorities 18 Jan said at least 300 Salvadorans had entered country through Nueva Anguiatú crossing point same day, trying to join caravan of Honduran migrants en route to U.S. (see Honduras); 25 Jan returned over 100 Salvadorans to their home country.

➔ **Honduras Fresh allegations of President Hernández's involvement in drug trafficking emerged, and thousands departed for U.S.** U.S. prosecutors 8 Jan accused Hernández of aiding prominent drug trafficker to deliver tons of cocaine to U.S. in 2013 in exchange for hefty bribes and access to his laboratory; prosecutors also accused former army chief, René Orlando Ponce, of providing logistical support to same trafficker. Govt and Ponce immediately rejected U.S. accusations, claiming they are part of revenge campaign by captured drug traffickers. Three opposition deputies 14 Jan presented formal impeachment request against Hernández, but Congress 25 Jan repealed motion. Meanwhile, gang violence continued amid competition for control of drug markets. Authorities late Dec to mid-Jan found at least 15 bodies in plastic bags in several cities across country including Tegucigalpa, Tela, San Pedro Sula, Choloma and Santa Bárbara. Ahead of general elections set for Nov, Congress 14 Jan failed to pass new electoral law; stumbling blocks include party presence in polling stations and reimbursement of party campaigning expenses. Ruling National Party 25 Jan said law will be discussed after primaries scheduled for March. In joint statement, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras govts 11 Jan said they will coordinate efforts to curb irregular migration. Caravan of 6,000-9,000 U.S.-bound Hondurans, split into two groups, 14-15 Jan departed from San Pedro Sula city in Cortés department (north west). Thousands 15-16 Jan pushed past Honduran and Guatemalan security forces and crossed into Guatemala. Guatemalan army 17 Jan cracked down on caravan in Chiquimula department, using sticks and tear gas and reportedly injuring at least four; Honduran govt same day exhorted Guatemalan govt to investigate incident. Guatemalan authorities 25 Jan said they had returned over 4,800 Hondurans to their country of origin.

➔ **Mexico Authorities cleared former Defence Minister Salvador Cienfuegos of drug trafficking charges following his release from U.S. custody; meanwhile, gang violence remained high.** In Guanajuato state (centre), deadly turf war between Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel (CSRL) and Jalisco Cartel New Generation (CJNG) continued in Santa Rosa de Lima territory. Suspected CJNG gunmen 7 Jan shot nine people dead in Celaya municipality. CSRL members next day killed four, set house on fire, and left threatening message addressed to CJNG in same municipality. Clashes between suspected CJNG and security forces 11 Jan in Villagrán and Celaya municipalities left one police officer and at least nine assailants killed. Unidentified assailants overnight 12-13 Jan shot dead family of five inside their home in Irapuato municipality. In neighbouring Jalisco state (also centre), authorities 13 Jan found 17 plastic bags containing human remains in Tlajomulco de Zúñiga municipality; unidentified gunmen 30 Jan opened fire at civilians in Ojuelos municipality, killing seven. Territorial disputes between cartels also continued to claim lives in neighbouring Michoacán state. Two clashes between CJNG and suspected members of United Cartels — alliance of cartels and organised crime groups — 9-15 Jan left at least 16 dead along Michoacán-Jalisco border; local militia mid-month also clashed with CJNG. In Tamaulipas state (north), authorities 23 Jan found 19 burnt bodies in vehicles in Santa Anita town close to U.S. border; Guatemalan migrants reportedly among victims. Ahead of June legislative, gubernatorial and local elections, unidentified assailants 12 Jan shot dead member of Guanajuato state parliament in Juventino Rosas municipality. Authorities 14 Jan cleared former Defence Minister General Salvador Cienfuegos — who was arrested in U.S. in Oct on charges of organised crime and allowed to return to Mexico in Nov

following Mexican govt pressure – of all charges. U.S. next day reserved right to reinstate investigation against Cienfuegos, said move questioned bilateral security cooperation; Mexican govt had promised thorough investigation of Cienfuegos in return for his release from U.S. custody. Govt 25 Jan announced President López Obrador tested positive for COVID-19.

➔ **Nicaragua Govt continued to harass political opponents and opposition remained plagued by divisions ahead of Nov general elections.** Police 2 Jan besieged group of political opponents from Citizens for Freedom (CxL) party and cut off drinking-water supply in their refuge in capital Managua. Police 3-9 Jan raided homes of several opposition leaders and journalist Aníbal Toruño, head of Radio Darío, in Managua, Masaya and León cities. Govt 11 Jan said it was open to national dialogue with opposition and civil society, but only after elections. National Assembly 18 Jan ratified constitutional amendment to introduce life sentence for hate crimes; amendment entered into force 25 Jan. Meanwhile, opposition groups Civic Alliance (which withdrew from opposition platform National Coalition late last year) and CxL 13 Jan agreed to join forces to “transition from the current dictatorship” in Nov elections. CxL President Kitty Monterrey same day said National Coalition platform and its founding member Blue and White National Unity “do not exist”. Appointments in National Assembly’s committees also deepened fractures within opposition Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC). Five PLC deputies 14 Jan opposed redesignation of four parliamentary committee seats to PLC members; party 25 Jan expelled two of them, along with two other party members.

Caribbean

↓ **Guyana Tensions flared up with Venezuela over disputed oil-rich territory.** Venezuelan National Assembly 7 Jan rejected last month’s International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling that court has jurisdiction to hear suit brought by Guyana over demarcation of its land border with Venezuela; ruling over Essequibo province, which is controlled and administered by Guyana but has long been claimed by Venezuela, may ultimately determine which country has rights to oil and gas fields off Essequibo. Venezuela’s President Nicolás Maduro same day vowed to “reconquer” disputed province and announced creation of new maritime territory dubbed “strategic zone of national development” in area that Guyana says encompasses its territorial waters and exclusive economic zone. Regional bloc Caribbean Community 12 Jan said it “firmly repudiates any acts of aggression by Venezuela against Guyana” and supports “maintenance and preservation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Guyana”. Guyana and U.S. 8 Jan started joint coast guard exercise off Essequibo, and commander of U.S. Southern Command 11 Jan arrived in Guyana for three-day visit. Govt 23 Jan accused Venezuelan navy of intercepting two fishing vessels in Guyana’s territorial waters and detaining 12 fishermen 21 Jan, condemned “wanton act of aggression”; Venezuela 25 Jan said fishermen were detained in Venezuela’s waters, issued warning against further “illegal incursions” into its territory, saying it will exercise “sacred right to defend [its] sovereignty”.

🌐* **Haiti Political crisis and widespread insecurity persisted, and violence could escalate when deadline set by opposition for President Moïse to step down expires in Feb.** In open letter to Organization of American States (OAS) Sec Gen Luis Almagro, group of opposition leaders 2 Jan accused Moïse of having “deliberately refused to organise legislative elections” in late 2019 to start ruling by decree, and denounced “return to dictatorship”; Almagro 6 Jan reiterated OAS support for govt’s plan to organise electoral process this year. Provisional Electoral Council 8 Jan scheduled constitutional referendum for 25 April, first round of presidential and legislative elections for 19 Sept, and run-offs for 21 Nov, along with municipal and local elections. Hundreds 15 Jan demonstrated across country, rejecting electoral calendar and calling for Moïse to step down by 7 Feb, pursuant to argument that Moïse’s five-year mandate started in 2016 (Moïse maintains his term began when he took office in 2017); brief clashes between protesters and police reported in capital Port-au-Prince. Hundreds 20 Jan again marched through Port-au-Prince to demand Moïse’s resignation, clashed with police, leaving several injured. Gang and criminal violence remained high. Police 2 Jan carried out operation against alleged “heavily armed bandits in military uniforms” in Cannan suburb on outskirts of Port-au-Prince, reportedly killing at least three and arresting seven. Unidentified gunmen 3-7 Jan kidnapped three police officers and killed another in Port-au-Prince metropolitan area. UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet 19 Jan expressed concern that “persistent insecurity, poverty and structural inequalities in Haiti coupled with increasing political tensions may lead to a pattern of public discontent followed by violent police repression and other human rights violations”. In rare move, Moïse 25 Jan acknowledged surge in kidnappings for ransom, urged citizens to assist police to quell gang violence.

