

# Latin America and the Caribbean

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## Andes

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➔ **Bolivia** **Arrest of former Interim President Jeanine Áñez triggered mass protests.** Police 13 March arrested Áñez, along with former cabinet ministers Rodrigo Guzmán and Álvaro Coimbra on charges of terrorism, sedition and conspiracy during 2019 political crisis, which led then-incumbent President Morales to resign and Áñez to declare herself interim president; authorities 11 March also issued arrests warrants for former general and ex-police chief who had both urged Morales to resign. Áñez 15 March transferred to prison for four-month pre-trial detention. Tens of thousands of Áñez supporters same day protested across country, including at least 40,000 in country's largest city Santa Cruz. Organization of American States 15 March said "judicial mechanisms [...] have been transformed into instruments of repression by the ruling party". Thousands 18 March demonstrated in capital La Paz in support of govt and President Arce, asked for "justice" for what they consider "coup d'Etat" against Morales in 2019. Court 20 March extended Áñez's pre-trial detention to six months. In letter posted on Twitter, Áñez 23 March accused police and govt of "abusive" actions, said she had been denied proper medical treatment while in detention.

➔ **Colombia** **Ombudsman reported record displacement figures since early 2021, while controversy emerged over govt's handling of children forcibly recruited into armed groups.** Ombudsman's office 8 March reported more than 11,000 people forcibly displaced in 2021, compared to 15,000 in all of 2020; displacement highest along Pacific coast, where rival armed groups have been clashing over territorial control and opposing military; 90% of those displaced reportedly from Indigenous or Afro-Colombian communities. UN humanitarian office 9 March said unclear number of people, up to 3,000, displaced by brutal dispute between rival criminal groups in port city of Buenaventura, Valle de Cauca department (west along Pacific coast) since early Jan; UN Human Rights Office in Colombia 19 March recorded over 41 homicides and 13 cases of disappearance in city since early Jan, urged authorities to dismantle criminal networks operating there. Military airstrike on camp of alleged Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissident faction 2 March killed several combatants in Calamar municipality, Guaviare department (centre south). After local journalist 9 March claimed 14 minors killed, Defence Minister Diego Molano next day said child recruits are "war machines" no longer deserving state protection; in response, director of child protection agency Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar same day said child soldiers are victims. Forensics next day confirmed death in govt airstrike of 16-year-old and two other youths aged 18 and 19. Meanwhile, car bomb allegedly placed by FARC dissidents outside town hall of Corinto, Cauca department (south west), 26 March wounded 43 people. Colombian NGO Dejusticia 7 March released Dec 2020 letter from seven UN Special Rapporteurs to President Duque expressing strong opposition to resumption of aerial fumigation of coca, citing "enormous risks for the environment and human rights" and violation of 2016 peace agreement. Govt subsequently dismissed letter and maintained intention to restart fumigation in April. Clashes between

Venezuela's military and Colombian FARC dissidents 21 March erupted in Venezuelan border state of Apure; Colombian govt 28 March said 4,700 had sought refuge in Colombia since fighting started; refugees reportedly accused Venezuelan soldiers of abuses, including killing civilians.

➔ **Venezuela Diplomatic efforts resumed to resolve political crisis, and clashes erupted between military and Colombian guerrilla group at border with Colombia.** Norwegian delegation 9 March arrived in capital Caracas in attempt to revive comprehensive talks between President Maduro's govt and mainstream opposition; initiative comes as civil society organisations and opposition faction led by former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles have been trying to negotiate with govt appointment of more inclusive National Electoral Council (CNE) ahead of regional and local elections due by late 2021. Mainstream opposition leader Juan Guaidó 3 March said he would support appointment of new CNE only if its members were not chosen unilaterally by govt-controlled National Assembly. National Assembly 16 March extended deadline for appointing CNE by two weeks, potentially allowing mainstream opposition to put forward candidates; but opposition did not take up opportunity. During visit to Caracas, Spanish deputy FM Cristina Gallach 28-29 March discussed political crisis with govt, opposition and business representatives. Guaidó, recognised by U.S. as Venezuela's legitimate president, and U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 2 March discussed "return to democracy in Venezuela through free and fair elections" and "urgent humanitarian needs". UN Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela 10 March said police forces committed at least 200 extrajudicial killings in 2021, and UN human rights chief Bachelet next day called for "prompt and independent investigations" into ongoing "extra-judicial executions". Clashes between military and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissidents 20-21 March erupted in Apure border state, leaving at least two Venezuelan soldiers dead; Colombian govt 28 March said 4,700 had sought refuge in Colombia since fighting started; refugees reportedly accused Venezuelan soldiers of abuses, including killing civilians. U.S. 8 March granted Venezuelan migrants temporary protected status, allowing them to stay and work in U.S. for 18 months. Amid negotiations between govt and mainstream opposition for access to COVID-19 vaccines under World Health Organization's COVAX mechanism, mainstream opposition 19 March said it would seek to use \$30mn in govt funds – frozen in U.S. accounts as part of sanctions against Maduro's govt – to pay for vaccines. Maduro however reiterated refusal of AstraZeneca vaccine, one of main vaccines under COVAX, citing side effects.

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## **Southern Cone and Brazil**

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↓ **Brazil Political tensions peaked as rifts deepened between President Bolsonaro and military, while COVID-19 pandemic spiralled out of control.** Bolsonaro 29 March dismissed six cabinet members, including Defence Minister Fernando Azevedo e Silva and FM Ernesto Araújo; move followed growing rift between Bolsonaro and military on one hand, and lawmakers' growing discontent over Araújo's COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy, on the other. Commanders of Army, Navy and Air Force next day jointly resigned in protest. Meanwhile, spiralling COVID-19 infection rates – due partly to spread of COVID-19 P1 variant

– overwhelmed hospitals across country; death toll 24 March reached milestone of 300,000 since outbreak of pandemic, and record 3,780 daily fatalities reported on 30 March. Bolsonaro 15 March appointed new health minister, fourth in a year, and 21 March labelled state governors and mayors “tyrants” for imposing lockdowns. Several Latin American countries strengthened travel restrictions to and from Brazil during month. Supreme Court 8 March annulled two corruption convictions against former President Lula on grounds that court did not have proper jurisdiction in case, clearing him to stand for re-election in 2022 general election; 23 March ruled that Judge Sergio Moro who presided over past proceedings was biased and acted in collusion with prosecutors.

↓ **Paraguay Amid growing discontent over govt’s handling of COVID-19 pandemic, violent protests erupted and President Mario Abdo Benítez survived impeachment bid.** Amid growing public discontent with record rates of COVID-19 infections, hospitals nearing collapse and country’s slow vaccine program, thousands 5 March demonstrated in capital Asunción to call for Benítez’s resignation; protest turned violent as some protesters threw rocks at police and broke down security barriers, and police fired rubber bullets and tear gas at demonstrators; clashes left at least one protester dead and over 32 injured including 12 police officers. Public Health Minister Julio Mazzoleni same day stepped down; dismissal followed lawmakers’ non-binding declaration previous day calling for Mazzoleni’s resignation amid health crisis. Benítez 6 March reportedly called on cabinet to resign and replaced ministers for education, women’s affairs and civil affairs, after thousands poured into streets of downtown Asunción for second day in a row. Lower-scale protests persisted in following days. U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 14 March urged govt to work with international and regional partners to “overcome this global pandemic, combat corruption and increase transparency and accountability”. Lawmakers 17 March rejected impeachment motion filed by opposition against Benítez and VP Hugo Velázquez over govt’s handling of pandemic; as protesters gathered outside Congress, police used rubber bullets and water cannons to disperse them.

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## **Central America and Mexico**

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➔ **El Salvador President Bukele gained control of legislature amid persistent tensions between govt and electoral authorities.** Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) 19 March announced final results of legislative and local elections held in Feb, giving Bukele’s party Nuevas Ideas absolute majority in Legislative Assembly with 56 of 84 seats, and 152 of 262 municipalities. TSE had delayed proclamation by a few days after Nuevas Ideas 16 March filed petition claiming electoral body was trying to reduce number of party’s city councillors in at least 83 municipalities. Earlier in month, police 1-2 March said they had found abandoned ballots in Chalatenango (north) and San Rafael Obrajuelo (centre) municipalities, but TSE head 11 March insisted that 100% of ballots had been counted. Meanwhile, after employees’ union of Legislative Assembly 10 March denounced existence of at least 1,000 ghost jobs in Congress, Attorney General’s Office 15 March opened investigation and next day searched Assembly, gathering more than a thousand documents. Organization of American States-backed

International Commission against Impunity in El Salvador 25 March called on govt to carry out series of legal reforms to enhance fight against corruption. Association of Journalists in El Salvador 1 March reported at least 58 infringements of journalists' activities on election day, including 40% by National Police. Supreme Court 5 March admitted claim for protection from digital newspaper El Faro against finance ministry's audit, which included request for information about newspaper's subscribers. Govt immediately said court was protecting El Faro's "NGO-like agenda disguised as journalism". Authorities 2 March detained MS-13 leader Hugo Armando Quinteros Mineros in Santiago de María municipality, Usulután department (east); U.S. authorities had charged him with terrorism in Jan. Criminal court 5 March sentenced 128 suspected gang members to between three and 415 years in prison for murder and terrorist activities.

➡ **Honduras As president's brother sentenced for drug trafficking in U.S., top level officials continued to face accusations of supporting long-established drug trafficking network.** U.S. court 30 March sentenced president's brother, Juan Antonio "Tony" Hernández, to life imprisonment for drug trafficking and ordered over \$138mn in his assets to be confiscated. U.S. court 22 March also found Honduran national Geovanny Fuentes Ramírez guilty of drug trafficking. During Fuentes' trial, Los Cachiros drug cartel's former head Devis Leonel Rivera Maradiaga 11 March said he had bribed President Hernández when he was head of Congress in 2012 in exchange for protection; also said Los Cachiros bribed current VP Ricardo Álvarez and former President Zelaya in 2012 and 2006 respectively; both immediately denied accusations. U.S. Prosecutor 19 March said Hernández accepted bribes from Fuentes as recently as 2019. Ahead of trial, Hernández 8 March said anti-drug cooperation between Honduras and U.S. would be jeopardised should U.S. authorities believe "false testimonies" and once again denied accusations of partnering with traffickers. Ahead of Nov general elections, primary elections 14 March took place for all political parties despite lack of electoral law, and absence of quick-vote count or results transmission mechanism; roughly 1mn voters (out of 5mn) reportedly unable to cast vote due to incongruencies between old and new voter registries. As of 26 March, preliminary results showed capital Tegucigalpa mayor, Nasry Afura (under investigation for alleged misuse of public funds), in lead position to gain ruling National Party's nomination; former Minister Yani Rosenthal (who served three years in U.S. prison for laundering drug money) in lead position for opposition Liberal Party; and wife of former President Zelaya, Xiomara Castro, in lead position for opposition Libre Party. Luis Zelaya, losing candidate for Liberal Party, rejected preliminary results, citing "evident signs of fraud", and 24 March formed electoral coalition with two Libre Party losing candidates and former presidential candidate Salvador Nasralla. As of 25 March, electoral authorities had received 147 challenges to electoral results. Unidentified assailant 22 March shot and killed indigenous and environmental activist Carlos Cerros near San Antonio city in north west.

➡ **Mexico Political violence continued in run-up to 6 June legislative, regional and local elections, and women mobilised against gender-based violence.** Unidentified assailants 17 March killed Pedro Gutiérrez, ruling MORENA party precandidate for municipal presidency of Chilón town, Chiapas state (south), alongside his 8-year-old son and another person; 20 March killed Ivonne Gallegos Carreño, opposition precandidate for mayor of Ocotlán de Morelos

town, in Oaxaca state (south). Govt 4 March said at least 64 politicians, including 17 candidates running for office, had been killed between Sept 2020 and Feb 2021. On International Women's Day, thousands of women 8 March gathered across country against gender-based violence, high rates of femicides and impunity enjoyed by perpetrators, as well as President López Obrador's backing of Félix Salgado Macedonio, who stands accused of rape, as ruling MORENA party candidate for Guerrero state governorship. Women's march in capital Mexico City turned violent: demonstrators threw firecrackers and Molotov cocktails against fence erected outside presidential palace and clashed with police, leaving at least 81 injured including 62 police. National Electoral Institute 26 March suspended Macedonio's candidacy alongside 26 other candidates, citing failures to report campaign spending. Suspected members of La Familia Michoacana criminal group 18 March ambushed and killed 13 police officers or agents from state prosecutor's office in Coatepec Harinas municipality, Mexico state (centre). Angry villagers 29 March detained 15 soldiers for hours in Motozintla municipality, Chiapas state (south) near border with Guatemala after soldier reportedly shot dead Guatemalan migrant. Prosecutors 28 March said they were investigating four municipal police officers following death of woman in police custody previous day in Tulum town, Quintana Roo state (south); Obrador next day said woman had been subjected to "brutal treatment and murdered". In major policy shift, Chamber of Deputies 11 March approved law partly legalising marijuana; law still has to pass Senate. U.S. President Biden 22 March dispatched envoys to Mexico and Guatemala for talks on how to manage major increase in number of migrants heading for Mexican-U.S. border; Biden 24 March said he had tasked U.S. VP Kamala Harris with coordinating efforts to stem flow of migrants on border.

➡ **Nicaragua President Ortega continued to face domestic and international pressure to cease crackdown on dissent and carry out electoral reforms.** UN Human Rights Council 23 March passed resolution calling on govt to "release all those arbitrarily or illegally detained", halt repression against dissidents and adopt "electoral and institutional reforms" ahead of general elections scheduled for Nov. Chair of EU Parliament's delegation for relations with Central American countries 15 March expressed concern over lack of conditions for free and transparent elections, citing recent "adoption of new repressive laws" and absence of electoral reform. Six U.S. Congress members, both Democrats and Republicans, 25 March introduced bill to increase sanction pressure on Ortega's govt to ensure that electoral reforms are carried out. U.S. State Department report 30 March said govt "continued to hold 106 political prisoners as of Dec 2020, nine of them in solitary confinement"; U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken same day said Ortega's "corrupt" govt "passed increasingly repressive laws that limit severely the ability of opposition political groups, civil society and independent media to operate". On occasion of National Journalist Day, around 500 journalists, editors and photographers 1 March called on govt to immediately cease attacks against media; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression Pedro Vaca same day denounced "very sophisticated censorship mechanisms" and "significant erosion of the rule of law". Ortega 8 March accused civil society organisations of laundering money "to develop destabilising terrorist activities".

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## Caribbean

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➔ **Haiti** **Death of police officers in anti-gang operation triggered violent unrest and President Moïse sought international support to combat mounting insecurity.** Anti-gang operation in Village de Dieu neighbourhood of capital Port-au-Prince 12 March turned violent, leaving at least four special police unit officers dead and eight others wounded. After video showing gang members beating police circulated online, harsh criticism of botched operation and widespread insecurity emerged on social media under #FreeHaiti hashtag, and several days of unrest roiled Port-au-Prince and surroundings, with demonstrators 15 March erecting barricades on city's main roads. Members of outlawed Fantom 509, group of disgruntled police officers, 17 March protested to demand return of officers' bodies still held by gang members, also set Delmas police station on fire and freed four jailed comrades accused of participating in 7 Feb alleged coup attempt against President Moïse; next day broke into Croix-des-Bouquets police station, freeing one officer reportedly imprisoned for shooting gang member. Moïse 15 March asked Organization of American States (OAS) Sec Gen Luis Almagro for assistance to deal with security crisis and next day requested UN technical and logistical support for police forces. Govt 18 March declared state of emergency in several areas where gangs exert control. Meanwhile, thousands 7 March demonstrated in Port-au-Prince in massive pro-democracy protest, denounced surge in abductions and called on Moïse to resign. On anniversary of Haitian constitution, thousands 28-29 March took to streets in Port-au-Prince to protest constitutional referendum scheduled for 27 June; Moïse 29 March reiterated need for constitutional reform. OAS 17 March passed resolution welcoming Moïse's invitation to send Electoral Observation Mission to monitor upcoming constitutional referendum and general elections. Meanwhile, Dominican Republic govt 2 March detailed plan, first announced 27 Feb, to build fence along border with Haiti to curb irregular migration and illicit trade.