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## FEATURED Q&A

# Will More Funding Boost Colombia's Education System?



Following large-scale protests, Colombian President Iván Duque last week signed a deal with student leaders to increase education funding. // Photo: Colombian Government.

**Q** Colombian President Iván Duque announced Dec. 14 that his administration had reached an agreement with student leaders who for months have been taking to the streets in protest to demand higher levels of government funding for education. Duque said his government will allocate more than 4.5 trillion pesos (\$1.4 billion) in additional funds for education over the course of his four-year term. How much will the additional funding improve education in Colombia, and what should it be used for? Will students continue pressuring Duque, and if so, what other demands will they make? To what extent is Colombia's education system declining, and what reforms and improvements does it most need?

**A** Luis Enrique García de Brigard, founder of Appian Education Ventures and former Colombian vice minister of education: "The agreement reached by President Duque and student leaders is bittersweet. The students' protests highlighted the increased relevance that education is gaining in Colombia's public agenda and succeeded in creating awareness about the need for additional funding. This is undoubtedly good news. However, the fact that the students' demands were deeply ideologized and primarily directed to the issue of funds gives little hope for a fundamental improvement of higher education. In spite of well-documented cases of mismanagement and outright corruption within public universities, the students sided with a flawed narrative that all the challenges facing the sector can be reduced to funding and that the greater purpose of providing universal access to higher education can only be achieved through public initiative. The policies of

Continued on page 3

## TODAY'S NEWS

### ECONOMIC

## Ecuador Seeking to Cut Deficit by \$800 Million

Ecuador's government plans to cut gasoline subsidies and government workers' salaries in order to reduce its fiscal deficit.

Page 2

### POLITICAL

## Guatemala Gives 11 CICIG Workers 72 Hours to Leave

The Central American country's government told the U.N.-backed anti-corruption commission that 11 of its members "no longer enjoy the privileges and immunities" of their posts.

Page 3

### ECONOMIC

## U.S. Vows \$10.6 Bn in Aid to Central America, Mexico

The aid is an effort to boost economic development and governments in order to curb migration north. Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard said the new aid would more than double such commitments in southern Mexico.

Page 2



Ebrard // File Photo: Mexican Government.

## ECONOMIC NEWS

## U.S. Pledges Billions in Aid to Mexico, Central America

The United States on Tuesday pledged \$5.8 billion in aid and investment in Central America and an additional \$4.8 billion in development aid for southern Mexico, as it seeks to help strengthen governments and economic development in the region to curb migration north, the State Department said in a joint U.S.-Mexican statement, the Associated Press reported.

“I have a dream that I want to see become a reality ... that nobody will want to go work in the United States anymore.”

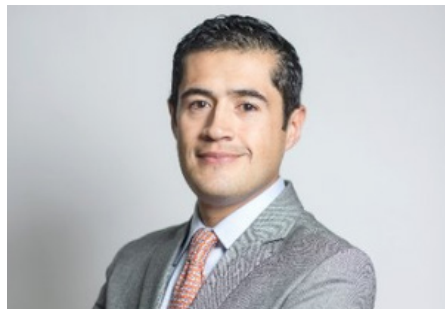
— Andrés Manuel López Obrador

Mexico's foreign minister, Marcelo Ebrard, read the statement out loud in Mexico City. “The commitments established here signify more than doubling foreign investment in southern Mexico starting in 2019,” Ebrard said, the AP reported. However, much of the promised aid comes from previous commitments or is conditional on the demonstration of “commercially viable projects,” The New York Times reported. The Trump administration has repeatedly sought to cut foreign aid to the region unless migration to the United States stops entirely. “It should come as no surprise that Democrats in Congress are skeptical about the Trump administration's rhetorical commitment to new funding for Central America and southern Mexico,” U.S. Representative Eliot L. Engel (D-N.Y.), who is expected to chair the House Foreign Affairs Committee next year, said on Tuesday, The New York Times reported. Earlier that morning, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador told reporters, “I have a dream that I want to see become a reality ... that nobody will want to go work in the United States anymore.” His

government recently announced that it plans to invest more than \$30 billion to boost the economies of its southern states over the next five years and accommodate Central American migrants into Mexico with visas, health care and employment. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Dec. 11 issue of the Advisor.]

## Ecuador Cutting Gasoline Subsidies, Workers' Salaries

Ecuadorean officials said Tuesday that they will cut gasoline subsidies and lower salaries of government workers in an effort to reduce the country's fiscal deficit by \$800 million, El Comercio reported. Ecuador has grappled with falling prices for its oil exports, and President Lenín Moreno has sought to reduce the deficit since taking office last year. Last week, Moreno secured a \$900 million loan from China, and a possible funding agreement with the International Monetary Fund remains a possibility, Reuters reported. Finance Minister Richard Martínez said the country's gasoline subsi-



Martínez // File Photo: @RichardM\_A via Twitter.

dies have come at a cost of more than \$50 billion in the past decade. Cutting the gasoline subsidies will lead the fuel to increase in price from \$1.48 per gallon to \$1.85 per gallon, which will put it in line with prices in neighboring countries. The increase will not apply to public transit, Martínez said. “All Ecuadoreans have been paying for the fuel used by luxury vehicles, like Mercedes-Benz or 4x4s,” said Martínez. He said cutting the subsidy will save the government \$400 million annually. Additionally, the government plans to reduce the salaries of public employees, which will save it

## NEWS BRIEFS

## More Than 50 São Paulo Police Officers Arrested Amid Bribery Allegations

Brazilian authorities on Tuesday arrested more than 50 police officers in São Paulo, with state prosecutors accusing them of taking bribes from the country's largest drug gangs, Reuters reported. In return, the groups' members were allowed to sell narcotics. Prosecutors said there was proof of collaboration between the officers and the powerful First Capital Command drug gang, known as the PCC, which controls cocaine and gun cargoes into Brazil and ships drugs to Africa and Europe through Brazilian ports.

## Andrade Gutierrez to Pay Brazil \$381 Mn to Settle Corruption Charges

Construction firm Andrade Gutierrez Engenharia will pay Brazil 1.49 billion reais (\$381.49 million) to settle corruption allegations stemming from the massive “Car Wash” corruption probe, Reuters reported. The deal that the company signed with authorities is contingent on its cooperation with investigators. Andrade Gutierrez has agreed to testify about alleged acts of wrongdoing involving some 250 individuals and at least 100 companies, Brazil's solicitor general, Grace Mendonça told reporters.

## Colombia Scraps Two Oil Auctions, Plans to Reschedule in February

Colombia's National Hydrocarbons Agency on Tuesday announced it had scrapped two exploration auctions, which it said it would relaunch in February, Reuters reported. The Sinu-San Jacinto tender for 15 blocks in the northern area of the Andean country was canceled after interested companies withdrew their biddings, and the so-called Permanent Competitive Procedure auction round was canceled due to a judicial ruling.

\$300 million annually, said Labor Minister Raúl Ledesma. Under the plan, salaries of cabinet ministers will be cut by 10 percent, while other high-ranking officials will see a salary reduction of 5 percent, *El Comercio* reported. Additionally, the government plans to eliminate 25,000 vacant positions and cut the number of advisors in government ministries. The reductions are expected to reduce spending by \$400 million.

## POLITICAL NEWS

# Guatemala Gives 11 CICIG Members 72 Hours to Leave

Guatemala's government on Tuesday told a United Nations-backed anti-corruption agency that 11 of its members whose visas were recently revoked or denied had 72 hours to leave the country, *Prensa Libre* reported. The Guatemalan foreign ministry said the credentials of 11 members of the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, known as CICIG, had been invalidated after their visas were revoked or denied, adding that they no longer "enjoy the privileges and immunities" of their posts. The move is Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales' latest swing against the commission, after having announced earlier this year that he would not renew CICIG's mandate, which ends next September. Morales also sought to ban Iván Velásquez, the head of CICIG, from returning to Guatemala earlier this year after a business trip, the Associated Press reported. CICIG has repeatedly sought to end the president's immunity to investigate him for alleged illicit campaign financing. Morales alleges the commission violates the presumption of innocence of those it has investigated. Lawyers César Rincón and Luis Fernando Orozco are among the agency's members that are affected, CICIG spokesman Matías Ponce said, the AP reported. Rincón and Orozco have headed high-profile cases, including one that led to the resignation of former President Otto Pérez Molina. [Editor's note: See related Q&A in the Sept. 20 issue of the Advisor.]

## FEATURED Q&A / Continued from page 1

recent decades are a powerful testament that funding alone will not make the difference and that without joint efforts between the public and private sectors, Colombian students will have to wait for generations before they can enjoy universal access. Absent from the protests were demands for increased accountability from universities—which enjoy unparalleled autonomy—and a structural reform that can modernize the system and serve students well. The government should direct its efforts to designing policies that ensure that fresh funds are not captured by the rent-seeking structures that have historically preyed on higher education funding."

**A** **Germán A. Ramírez García, founder and principal of GRG Education:** "The recent agreement between the Colombian government and the striking students and professors is good news for two main reasons: 1.) It highlights the truly democratic spirit of the government and its openness to constructive social dialogue, something particularly important in light of Colombia's troubling history of violent conflict resolution, and 2.) It explicitly recognizes the relevance of education as perhaps the most critical component in Colombia's pursuit of growth and equity, both of which will be essential to a lasting peace. As demonstrated empirically by World Bank and OECD studies, if properly allocated, the additional resources are likely to lift the outcomes of the education system. Deliberate and focused efforts will be required on several fronts under an overarching policy goal of performance improvement for the system as a whole. Among the areas that can have a lasting positive impact, two are worth noting. First is professionalizing the teaching profession, raising standards for entry and investing in skills development; this along with enhancing the attractiveness and social status of the profession by offering teachers better salaries and working conditions.

Second is developing strong evidence-based performance assessment mechanisms across the entire education system to inform policy-making and drive efficient resource allocation. At the heart of it would be

“The recent agreement between the Colombian government and the striking students and professors is good news for two main reasons...”

— Germán A. Ramírez García

providing incentive mechanisms to reward institutional performance fomenting a virtuous improvement cycle. Nevertheless, the protests are likely to continue signaling the need for renewed governance and funding arrangements to make the education system more equitable and responsive to the needs of a highly diverse country."

**A** **Fernando Cepeda Ulloa, professor of political science at Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá and a former Colombian interior minister:** "Colombia's student movement has been traditionally weak. When it has manifested itself, it is efficient. For example, it sank Juan Manuel Santos' education reform. It also made Luis Carlos Galán's term as minister of education from 1970 to 1972 much more difficult. Since the Santos administration, controversy had surrounded an excellent program of generous scholarships for the best students who lacked the resources to enter university. The program allowed them to choose their university of preference, and not just public universities. Then came the complaint that private universities were being favored with public resources because of the high cost of their tuition. And, from there, a defense

Continued on page 4

## FEATURED Q&amp;A / Continued from page 3

movement for public universities developed, a movement that professors and deans also supported. The persistence of student leaders managed to get the government to make surprising concessions amid a budgetary shortage. Colombia has had a mixed public-private education system that has excellent institutions on both sides. Some, such as Universidad Nacional, had been suffering serious infrastructure problems, which had become unacceptable. The agreement has been well received, and no new protests are expected. Education, at all its levels, is a national priority. There are serious problems, such as high university desertion, which contrasts with a high number of high school graduates who do not enter university. And now, a new phenomenon: it seems that education is no longer the social elevator it once was. The university system requires something more than a bigger budget. That is the greatest challenge: quality and relevance in the face of a world that is experiencing radical changes."

**A** **Mateo Samper, independent consultant and nonresident senior education fellow at the Inter-American Dialogue:**

"After two months of strikes and 13 protests across several cities in Colombia, the government and leaders of student and teachers' groups reached an agreement last week to resume classes. The strike was the product of a slow but steady and decades-long decline of funding for public universities. The main culprit was a 1992 law that tied increases in funding to inflation. As tertiary enrollment rates rose significantly over the years—more than 100 percent in the last decade alone—resources failed to keep up with demand. This created various

problems including understaffing, underpaid teachers, inadequate infrastructure, lack of funding for research and a high level of indebtedness affecting the institutions and the quality of their programs. The additional money, which will come from the national

**“The strike was the product of a slow but steady and decades-long decline of funding for public universities.”**

— Mateo Samper

budget as well as from royalties from the oil industry, will be used to improve operations and infrastructure, while some will go to pay off the sector's debt. Importantly, the agreement paves the way to rewrite the old law and redesign public programs in order to provide more incentives for students to attend public universities instead of private ones. This was a main critique of the infamous program 'Ser Pilo Paga,' which this government is abolishing. Even if the money is not enough to correct years of underfunding—some say that the total should have been double the amount committed—it is an important accomplishment that corrects the course and hopefully adds a needed boost to raise the quality of tertiary education in line with the needs of the 21st century."

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org).*

## LATIN AMERICA ADVISOR

is published every business day by the Inter-American Dialogue, Copyright © 2018

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**Latin America Advisor** is published every business day, except for major U.S. holidays, by the Inter-American Dialogue at 1155 15th Street NW, Suite 800 Washington, DC 20005

[www.thedialogue.org](http://www.thedialogue.org)

ISSN 2163-7962

Subscription inquiries are welcomed at [fretrial@thedialogue.org](mailto:fretrial@thedialogue.org)

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