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FEATURED Q&A

Can Uruguay Get its Rising Homicide Rate Under Control?



Senator Jorge Larrañaga, a member of Uruguay's opposition National Party, has led the drive for a referendum for tougher policies against crime. // File Photo: Facebook site of Jorge Larrañaga.

Q Homicides in Uruguay, while still relatively low among Latin American countries, increased by 45.8 percent in 2018 as compared to a year earlier, according to Interior Ministry figures. What's behind the jump in the homicide rate? Will security play a big role in Uruguay's upcoming presidential election in October, or are other issues more important to voters? To what extent could the rise in the murder rates affect the ruling Broad Front Party's chances of re-election?

A Caio Pizetta Torres, political risk analyst for Brazil and the Southern Cone at Control Risks' global risks analysis practice in São Paulo: "The reasons behind this upward trend are manifold and a source of heated political debate as parties seek to capitalize on the issue, which will surely play a central role in the October general elections. While the ruling Broad Front (FA) says turf wars between gangs are the main culprit, the opposition accuses the government of insisting on inadequate security policies and introducing lenient legislation such as the new Code of Criminal Procedure, which incentivizes prosecutors to plea bargain with criminals. As a matter of fact, they are both correct. The new code is likely to have increased recidivism without addressing growing numbers of unsolved crimes, whereas gangs are increasingly making their presence felt in low-income areas. Polls show that voters rank violence as their main concern ahead of the presidential election, and they largely blame the FA and President Vázquez, who was elected in 2014 promising to address the issue, for the deterioration of the security environment. As a result, the National Party

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Judge Blocks U.S. Policy Keeping Asylum Seekers in Mexico

A U.S. federal judge blocked the Trump administration's policy of keeping asylum seekers in Mexico while their cases make their way through immigration courts in the United States.

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POLITICAL

Colombia's Lower House Rejects Peace Deal Changes

The lower house of Colombia's Congress rejected President Iván Duque's proposed changes to the tribunal tasked with handling war crimes.

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ECONOMIC

Mexico Plans to Begin Taxing Digital Platforms

Mexico plans to tax digital businesses, such as Netflix, beginning in its budget plan next year, said Deputy Finance Minister Arturo Herrera.

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Herrera // File Photo: Mexican Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Judge Blocks Policy Keeping U.S. Asylum Seekers in Mexico

A U.S. federal judge on Monday blocked a Trump administration policy that has kept migrants seeking asylum in Mexico while their cases are processed in U.S. immigration courts, The Washington Post reported. In the ruling, District Judge Richard Seeborg in San Francisco halted enforcement of the Migrant Protection Protocols policy just days after

The ruling blocks the Trump administration from sending any future asylum seekers back to Mexico.

Homeland Security Secretary Kristjen Nielsen, who resigned on Sunday, vowed to strengthen it. The White House implemented the policy in January at the San Ysidro port of entry in California and then expanded it to the border crossings at Calexico, Calif., and El Paso. Under the program, hundreds of migrants have been sent back to Mexico after declaring their desire to seek asylum in the United States. In the decision, the judge ruled in favor of 11 plaintiffs—11 migrants from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras—and ordered that they be allowed to enter the United States within two days, USA Today reported. The ruling, which takes effect on Friday, also prevents the Trump administration from sending any asylum seekers back to Mexico in the future. The policy was not properly put into effect and violates U.S. law and the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees, to which the United States is a signatory. In Mexican border towns, asylum seekers “face undue risk to their lives and freedom,” Seeborg wrote. Trump reacted to Seeborg’s ruling by tweeting, “A 9th Circuit Judge just ruled that Mexico is too dangerous

for migrants. So unfair to the U.S. OUT OF CONTROL!” The flow of Central American migrants attempting to cross the southern U.S. border has reached decade-long highs, maddening Trump. The White House recently rescinded the nomination of Ronald Vitiello to lead U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, a move that preceded Nielsen’s resignation on Sunday, The Washington Post reported. The Justice Department declined to comment Monday on the judge’s decision. The Trump administration can still appeal the ruling to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit. The American Civil Liberties Union was among the groups that filed the lawsuit against the policy. It called the ruling a “very important decision” on the White House’s “unprecedented” attempt to keep asylum seekers out of the United States.

Colombia’s Lower House Rejects Peace Accord Changes

The lower house of Colombia’s Congress on Monday rejected President Iván Duque’s proposed changes to the tribunal tasked with handling war crimes as part of the country’s peace accord with the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, rebels, El Tiempo



Duque // File Photo: Colombian Government.

reported. Duque had asked Congress to review six parts of the law that regulates the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, or JEP, court, which was created to investigate, hear prosecutions and sentence those responsible for massacres, sexual violence and other crimes during the 50-year war between the guerrillas and the government, Reuters reported. The president asked for better clarification on extradition

NEWS BRIEFS

Mexico to Begin Taxing Digital Platforms: Deputy Finance Minister

Mexico will aim to tax digital platforms such as Netflix in its budget plan for next year, Deputy Finance Minister Arturo Herrera said Monday, adding that the country’s total tax take was too low relative to those of other Latin American countries, Reuters reported. Herrera recognized there is no broad consensus on how to tax digital services but said the government should be able to levy “interim” taxes on such companies while an international agreement is established. [Editor’s note: See related Q&A in the March 27 issue of the Advisor.]

Trump Administration Ends Deal to Bring Cuban Baseball Players to U.S.

The Trump administration has blocked Major League Baseball, or MLB, from contracting players directly from Cuba to play professionally in the United States, officials said Monday, invalidating a historic deal struck last December between the MLB and Cuba, The Wall Street Journal reported. The MLB claims that creating a legal path for Cuban players to join the U.S. league provides a safer alternative for them to arrive in the United States without resorting to human traffickers.

Chile’s Piñera Wants ‘More Ambitious’ Commitments on Climate Change

Chile will seek “more ambitious” commitments to mitigate climate change at the United Nations COP-25 conference, President Sebastián Piñera said Monday, Reuters reported. The 2015 Paris agreement, which aims to keep temperature increases this century below 2 degrees Celsius, is not enough to “prevent the world from continuing on a path that could end in tragedy,” the president added. Chile is scheduled to host the conference in December.

rules, FARC repayment of conflict victims and to toughen sentencing, as well as to exclude sexual crimes from the court's responsibility. Duque has long argued that the peace deal is too lenient toward the FARC. Lawmakers rejected the proposal, with 110 voting against the modifications and only 44 in support. Duque's proposals had been widely expected to be defeated because the peace accord is already enshrined in the country's Constitution, and changes to it would require a two-thirds majority in the legislature, Reuters reported. Duque's coalition has less than half of the seats in the lower house and a slight majority in the Senate. It is the latest congressional defeat for the Colombian president, who took office in August, following a severely diluted tax reform bill last year, the scrapping of proposed justice legislation and a pension reform delayed until next year. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the March 29 issue of the Advisor.]

BUSINESS NEWS

Switzerland Returns to Brazil \$365 Mn Seized in Probes

Swiss prosecutors today said they have returned some 365 million francs (\$365 million) to Brazil of the funds seized during investigations into Brazilian construction company



Dodge // File Photo: Brazilian Government.

Odebrecht and state oil company Petrobras, the Associated Press reported. Approximately 700 million francs remain frozen in the European country. Swiss Attorney General Michael Lauber and Brazilian prosecutor general Raquel

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(PN), the main opposition party, will continue to press on the topic, a strategy that has yielded substantive growth in the polls so far. Luis Lacalle Pou and Jorge Larrañaga, the leading contenders for PN's nomination, are advocating for a strict law-and-order approach to combat crime, which will get traction among voters. With little to brag about when it comes to security policies, the FA will find itself on the defensive, giving the opposition its best opportunity to win back power."

A **Diego Sanjurjo, lecturer and postdoctoral fellow at the Institute of Political Science at Universidad de la República in**

Montevideo: "Since records began, Uruguay has been part of a select group of countries in Latin America with relatively low levels of crime. This has changed in recent years, however, as homicide rates increased from 5.9 murders per 100,000 population in 2011 to the current record of 11.8 murders per 100,000 population in 2018. This is the fourth-highest in South America, since only Venezuela, Colombia and Brazil have higher killing rates. There are three probable causes behind such a sharp increase. The first is the rise of property crime and illicit markets, which have been growing steadily in the country since the 1990s. The second is closely related and is the progressive establishment of organized crime and drug trafficking groups. Lastly, a much more lenient penal code was approved at the end of 2017 and spread the idea that criminals

Dodge signed a declaration "reaffirming their commitment to continue and intensify their cooperation" at a meeting on Monday in Brasília, according to a statement from Lauber's office. Swiss authorities are conducting some 70 related criminal investigations, two of which are in connection to Swiss financial groups, the statement said. Officials say the case is among the most complex they have ever handled and that assets worth about 700 million

who got caught would not be sent to prison. Unsurprisingly, more than 70 percent of Uruguayans consider insecurity the country's main problem, and the issue is already at the center of the 2019 presidential election campaign. In fact, Uruguayans will be voting

“**Undoubtedly, insecurity has turned into the toughest nut to crack for the ruling Broad Front Party and for its chances of re-election.**”

— Diego Sanjurjo

the same day on a referendum on a number of security measures, including on the possibility of instituting life imprisonment and the creation of a special military unit that could collaborate in the fight against crime, among others. Undoubtedly, insecurity has turned into the toughest nut to crack for the ruling Broad Front Party and for its chances of re-election."

A **Charles H. Blake, professor of political science at James Madison University's School of Public & International Affairs:**

"During the Broad Front's three consecutive presidencies since 2004, a prolonged economic expansion has been accompanied by a rising robbery rate and, now, by a jump in the homicide rate. The increase in property

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francs have been seized in Switzerland, the AP reported. Alleged crimes include aggravated money laundering and bribery of foreign public officials. In Brazil, more than 130 businessmen and politicians have been convicted as part of the massive "Lava Jato," or "Car Wash," investigation into money laundering at Petrobras and Odebrecht, including former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who is serving a 12-year prison sentence, Reuters reported.

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crime often had been seen as correlated with the economic expansion. However, opposition politicians have attributed the more recent increase in the homicide rate to penal code reforms enacted in 2017. Jorge Larrañaga, a senator from the center-right National Party, has promoted an initiative that calls for a handful of sterner anti-crime measures. That petition drive gathered enough signatures to place the plebiscite on the 2019 ballot. In recent public opinion polls, half or more of respondents have labeled crime as the most important problem in Uruguay. In the Latinobarómetro poll conducted in mid-2018, that percentage was 44 percent. Although the Broad Front as the incumbent government is vulnerable to criticism on crime, nearly 40 percent of Uruguayans said the crime was the most important problem in the years 2013-2014, and yet the Broad Front still won the 2014 elections handily. The Broad Front will run again in 2019 on its economic successes. While security is an important issue, the more troubling indicator for the Broad Front is that President Tabaré Vázquez's approval ratings have stayed between 40 percent and 50 percent throughout his second presidency—in contrast to the two prior Broad Front presidencies, which enjoyed approval ratings between 60 percent and 70 percent. Swing voters may be tiring of the Broad Front's long series of electoral successes."

A Rosario Queirolo, associate professor and director of the Department of Social and Political Sciences at the Catholic University of Uruguay: "Although the Uruguayan homicide rate is low in comparison with other Latin American countries, it has been increasing in past years. There are no clear explanations for the jump in the homicide rate, which has also been accompanied by an increase in the crime rate. Data from the Americas Barometer 2016-2017 survey show a higher percentage of crime victim-

ization in Uruguay than in other countries in the region: 23.5 percent of interviewees in Uruguay reported being victims of crime during the last year, whereas in Colombia, the number was 18.6 percent, and in Jamaica it was 11 percent. These results do not correspond with data, for example, from the United Nations Development Bank, which shows Uruguay as one of the countries in the region with the lowest crime rates. Moreover,



Several opposition candidates are focusing their campaigns on insecurity..."

— Rosario Queirolo

insecurity perception has also increased, and it is now considered the most important problem among Uruguayans. As a result, the insecurity problem is already one of the main topics in the 2019 election campaign. Several opposition candidates are focusing their campaigns on insecurity, and one of them, Jorge Larrañaga, who is running to be the nominee for Partido Nacional, has presented signatures to the Electoral Court to have a plebiscite for a constitutional reform related to public safety. On the other side, the government has been focusing on the combat of drug trafficking, housing usurpation and crime organization. These actions, which the Ministry of Interior has led, have been well received by the population as a sign of state capacity. In conclusion, both sides are making public security central for this coming election. It is still soon to know if security issues will have more impact on voting decisions than the traditional economic ones."

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