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FEATURED Q&A

Will the Mexico City Metro Tragedy Lead to Improved Safety?



Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard, who was mayor of Mexico City at the time when the metro line that collapsed was built, could be among those politicians most tarnished by the incident, commentators note below. // File Photo: Casa de América via CC license.

Q Twenty-six people were killed and dozens injured on May 3 after a Mexico City metro overpass collapsed, sending train cars plunging toward a busy road below. Mexico City Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum and President Andrés Manuel López Obrador vowed a full investigation to determine the cause of the disaster. How much does this incident call into question the safety of other overpasses and infrastructure in Mexico? How adequate are the country's safety inspection protocols? What are the political implications of the incident, given that the metro line involved was built when Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard was Mexico City's mayor?

A Antonio López, Mexico-based civil engineer and structural and seismic engineering consultant: "Mexican engineering is cutting-edge, and the country is a global pioneer in seismic analysis and design. Infrastructure work is carried out considering advances in research, regulations and experiences; Mexico City and the country have seen their regulations evolve radically as a result of earthquakes. It is important to carry out periodic reviews of all existing infrastructure, especially following earthquakes, including overpasses, bridges and public and private buildings, in order to evaluate their structural safety and whether updating is required. Government agencies are in charge of each structure, and there are evaluation protocols outlined by engineering specialists. The structural safety inspection protocols in Mexico City are adequate. The Mexico College of Civil Engineers currently works with specialists and the federal government through the Technical Committee of Structural Safety to enforce a detailed and clear protocol

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Colombia Protest Deaths Pass 40

Protest groups have called for a national strike today after failed talks held Monday with President Iván Duque's government.

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Historic Droughts in Brazil to Drive Up Power Prices

Brazil's worst drought in two decades has left water reservoirs that supply energy operating well below typical output and forcing the nation's power producers to turn to more expensive thermal production.

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POLITICAL

Scandal Brews in Peru Over Fake Vaccinations

Peru's Health Ministry said Tuesday it is investigating reports of nurses trying to inoculate patients with empty syringes during the country's coronavirus vaccination campaign. Interim President Francisco Sagasti said the culprits would be "severely punished" and could face criminal charges.

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Sagasti // File Photo: Peruvian Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Colombia Protest Death Toll Passes 40

The number of deaths reported from nearly two weeks of anti-government protests in Colombia rose past 40 on Tuesday, Reuters reported. Colombian student activist Lucas Villa was declared brain dead nearly a week after he was shot eight times at a peaceful protest against President Iván Duque's government, CNN Español reported. Villa was one of three students shot by unknown gunmen on motorcycles at a demonstration on the evening of May 5 in central Colombia. A well-known figure in Pereira, Villa's killing drew national attention, with Duque expressing "deep sadness" after the news of his death and Minister of Defense Diego Molano expressing "all our commitment to finding those guilty for this atrocious crime," CNN reported. So far three police officers are facing murder charges connected to demonstrator deaths unrelated to Villa's. Protest groups have called for a national strike today after failed talks held Monday with Duque's government. The National Strike Committee includes major unions and student groups, but the degree to which they have control over protesters remains uncertain. Meanwhile, barricades set up along major transportation routes by protesters have stalled commerce. Authorities say illegal checkpoints and extortion of truckers on the road are contributing to soaring food inflation due to shortages, with prices for some fresh fruits rising nearly fourfold in recent days, El Tiempo reported. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in Tuesday's issue of the Advisor.]

Scandal Brews in Peru Over Fake Vaccinations

Peru's Health Ministry said Tuesday it is investigating reports of nurses trying to inoculate patients with empty syringes during the country's coronavirus vaccination cam-

paign, the Associated Press reported. Three confirmed cases of the practice were reported in the capital city of Lima in March, according to the report. The results of an investigation, which may involve criminal charges, could be released as soon as Thursday. "Any vaccinator who has breached the protocol or attempted to commit this misdeed will be severely punished," said Interim President Francisco Sagasti at a vaccination event on Tuesday, Andina reported. The "air vaccine" cases follow another scandal in Peru that blew up after it was revealed that almost 500 well-connected people were secretly vaccinated. Moreover, wealthy Peruvians have traveled abroad in order to get the vaccine. In a close first-round election last April that he ultimately lost, presidential candidate Hernando de Soto faced a backlash after admitting he traveled to the United States to get the Covid-19 vaccine. Peru so far has vaccinated only about 2 percent of its population, including those over 80 years of age, doctors and health personnel who treat coronavirus patients, according to the AP.

Venezuela's Guaidó Proposes Gradual End to Sanctions

Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó, whom dozens of countries including the United States recognize as the nation's legitimate interim president, on Tuesday proposed a gradual lifting of U.S. sanctions on the South American country in a bid to get Nicolás Maduro's government to reach an agreement with opposition parties. "Our objective is to get out of this tragedy and recover democracy. That is what we must focus on," Guaidó said in a video posted on Twitter. In the video, Guaidó said it was necessary to seek solutions that are both "realistic and viable" and proposed a "national agreement" that would be comprised, in part, of general elections with the participation of all opposition political parties, in addition to the ruling Socialist Party. The announcement follows several moves by the Maduro government that analysts have described as conciliatory signals to the United States, such

NEWS BRIEFS

USTR Asks Mexico to Probe GM Labor Vote

The United States has asked the Mexican government to probe what it described as "serious violations" of labor rights at a General Motors facility in Silao, in the central state of Guanajuato, the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden said today, The New York Times reported. The Office of the U.S. Trade Representative is invoking a "rapid response" mechanism included in the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or USMCA, trade deal to request the review. The USTR said the request was related to workers' recent vote on a collective-bargaining agreement.

Currency Factors Hurt Arcos Dorados Results

Montevideo-based restaurant chain Arcos Dorados, the world's largest independent McDonald's franchisee, today reported first-quarter revenues of \$559.8 million, a decrease of 9.1 percent in U.S. dollar terms year-over-year. The decline was due to the significant average depreciation of key local currencies, primarily the Brazilian real and the Argentine peso, the company said. In constant currency terms, revenues grew 3.8 percent in the quarter, boosted by strong results that overcame a "tough comparison" with the pre-pandemic months of January and February 2020, the company said.

BNP Paribas Gets License as a Local Bank in Mexico

Paris-based BNP Paribas, Europe's largest bank, on Tuesday launched operations as a local bank in the Mexican market. "We thank the regulators for their unequivocal support in granting this license," said Francisco Hernández Lozano, BNP Paribas' CEO in Mexico, in a statement. Having a full banking license granted by regulators will allow the bank to expand its activities locally, including local currency financing and deposits, the company said.

as the appointment of two opposition leaders as election officials. Other actions included granting house arrest to six U.S. citizens who were former employees of Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA's U.S.-based refiner, Citgo, as well as allowing the U.N. World Food Program back into the country. An official from the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden a week ago suggested the White House needed to see "concrete actions" by Maduro before modifying its policy toward the Andean nation, including lifting any sanctions. However, the administration's policy toward Venezuela is reportedly under review, Bloomberg News reported Tuesday, citing an unnamed U.S. official, who also told the news service that the Maduro government should be talking with the country's opposition to schedule free and fair elections. The official said the White House is reviewing its policy toward Venezuela and evaluating sanctions.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Brazil Droughts to Push Up Power Costs

Brazil's worst drought in two decades has left water reservoirs that supply energy operating well below typical output and forcing the nation's power producers to turn to more expensive thermal production, Folha de S.Paulo reported today. In the country's southeast and midwest regions, reservoirs are operating at a third of their energy storage capacity. Consumers should expect more expensive bills until the end of the year, which is ultimately likely to affect inflation figures nationally, according to the report. Meanwhile, industry executives have warned that a quarter of the Brazilian thermal capacity is currently unavailable, due to maintenance works or transmission bottlenecks, and state oil company Petrobras has scheduled maintenance work in August on one of its main gas producers, the Mexilhão field. President Jair Bolsonaro said this week that Brazil is experiencing the worst water crisis in its history, warning that it poses major problems for electricity generation, Reuters reported.

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and inspect existing infrastructure at all times, not only after earthquakes. The government participates through the Secretariat for Comprehensive Risk Management and Civil Protection, the Institute for Construction Safety and technical specialists from research institutes such as the National Center for Disaster Prevention and UNAM's Engineering Institute. Mexico City houses the largest number of specialists, while other cities lack human, technical and economic resources, especially states susceptible to natural phenomena, including Guerrero, Oaxaca and Chiapas. In such a large country with so many threats, there will always be a shortage of specialist engineers who are available to contribute to disaster prevention and improve the quality of life. As a structural and seismic engineering expert, this is what I'm concerned with. I do not know the political implications of the incident. What is clear is that Mexican civil engineering will clearly respond to the causes of this tragedy. An expert and technically rigorous report is underway. The judicial system will be in charge of determining responsibilities, based on studies carried out by Mexico's best specialists."

A Vanessa Rubio-Márquez, former member of Mexico's Senate and deputy government minister:

"A technical problem in Mexico City's subway, 'el metro,' was ineffectively addressed since it was flagged back in 2014. The result of this mistake? Twenty-six people died, and more than 50 were injured, on May 3 in what is considered the worst accident of the Mexican metro in history. Three actions are inescapable: 1.) An independent technical investigation to determine responsibilities of the accident, 2.) A due diligence process on the actions that were taken once problems were identified seven years ago and clear answers to why they were ineffective in preventing this catastrophe from happening and 3.) An integral evaluation of the metro's line 12, in order

to ensure its integrity for the future. One of the biggest problems of Mexico's current government is the disdain for science-based decision-making and a lack of rigor when tackling the country's main challenges. This tragedy, however, needs straightforward answers that should have scientific and technical knowledge at their core. A populist and divisive discourse is not going to bring lost lives back, neither will it ensure the safety for users when they go back to the underground's line 12. The evaluation of the political and technical decision-making in the construction and operation of this line has brought the current government into scrutiny, with Mexico City being the key political and social bulwark of AMLO's power, as it is the place which he governed from 2000 to 2005 and where his resistance movement took place in 2006. Mexico City also is not only currently governed by his party, but also led by one of the most likely presidential candidates for 2024."

A Amanda Mattingly, managing director at The Arkin Group in New York: "Mexicans are right to demonstrate against the city for the collapse of a metro overpass on line 12 last week that left more than two dozen dead—especially as it is coming to light that there were warnings about its structural integrity going back to 2012, when the metro line was first built. From the start, line 12 has been subject to warnings about design problems and substandard construction oversight as well as complaints about construction costs and delays. The line was closed for several months in 2014 for repairs, and then cracks were detected in the structure in 2017 after an earthquake struck Mexico City. Safety inspection protocols may have been adequate to issue warnings, but it seems the city did not take the necessary steps to address them. What authorities did or did not do to ensure the safety of metro passengers and those in the area will become clear during the investigation currently

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underway. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has said that he wants the investigation to conclude quickly, but no doubt he will try to protect his foreign minister, Marcelo Ebrard, who was mayor of Mexico City at the time when line 12 was built. If there is evidence of corruption on the part of Ebrard's administration that contributed to the poor design, inadequate construction oversight, the siphoning off of funds or cutting corners on the infrastructure project in any way, Ebrard's political reputation could suffer greatly. The findings could also lead to further inquiries into Ebrard's role in addressing the coronavirus crisis and affect his chances as a possible presidential candidate in 2024."

A **Raúl Benítez Manaut, professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM):** "In 1975, Mexico City's metro registered its worst accident ever, with 31 dead and 70 others injured. On May 3 this year, 26 people died and 79 were injured. The responsibility lies in the hands of the most relevant politicians of the López Obrador government. 'Neoliberalism' and 'the corruption of the old regime' cannot be blamed. The two most popular politicians in government are now under scrutiny in relation to the accident. Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard was mayor of the city when line 12 was constructed. Current Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum is also responsible. With the current government's austerity policy, there has been a lack of maintenance of the city's metro system. This is considered the main reason for the accident. The second reason is that the elevated overpass passes through a curvy street, and the train's wheels rubbed against the tracks. Since its construction, train engineers pointed out serious faults in the structure. Also, there are suspicions of corruption related to its construction. More than 200,000 people are now left without a transportation service. The ruling Morena party is surely going to lose that mayoral office in the June 6 election. The president's austerity policy is affecting the

country's strategic infrastructure—dams, highways, city water and power systems all suffer from a lack of maintenance. Even the public health care system suffers; there is a shortage of cancer medication, for example, due to a lack of budget. Surveys show a decline in support for the president's party in the upcoming election of 15 governors, 500 federal deputies and a huge number of mayorships in the country. The metro accident adds to the anger of a portion of the population, most of whom live in the city. This election will be the first referendum on López Obrador's presidency, and the metro accident is on the minds of many."

A **Ruben Olmos, president of Global Nexus in Washington:** "The unfortunate metro incident highlights several social and structural challenges at the core of a growing city that leftist politicians have governed for the last two decades. Many of them have prospered politically, such as President López Obrador and Foreign Minister Ebrard, who served as back-to-back mayors. In fact, Mexico City is considered the heart of the leftist PRD and Morena movements. The metro has always been a fundamental means of public transportation, but it is also seen as a sense of pride, not just for locals but for Mexicans in general, who see it as part of the country's modernity. While governments have advanced considerably in building new infrastructure such as the so-called 'second-floor' pathways, the bidding process for construction and maintenance have never been very transparent, and corrupt officials may have not enforced strict inspection protocols. The incident goes beyond the terrible loss of lives. It opens a debate around the need to increase spending, not decrease it. Mostly, it directly hits the president's succession plan. Both Claudia Sheinbaum and Marcelo Ebrard are the two clear front-runners and the closest politicians to the president. The outcome of the investigation and the result of the June midterm election will officially jump-start the 2024 election process."

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