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FEATURED Q&A

What Can Be Done to Lower Ecuador's Homicide Rate?



Ecuador's homicide rate soared almost 300 percent between 2019 and 2022. A crime scene in Ecuador is pictured. // File Photo: Ecuadorean National Police.

Q Ecuador's homicide rate has skyrocketed in recent years, soaring nearly 300 percent between 2019 and 2022, according to the national police. Approximately 83 percent of the killings are related to drug trafficking, said Interior Minister Juan Zapata. Why have homicides escalated so much in recent years in Ecuador? What is President Guillermo Lasso's government doing to reverse the trend, and what more should it do? What are the main obstacles authorities face in Ecuador in lowering the homicide rate?

A Ivonne A-Baki, Ecuador's ambassador to the United States: "Once he assumed power, President Guillermo Lasso's first priority was to reach a consensus in the Public and State Security Council, a body in which all the powers of the state are represented, on a strong policy to combat organized crime and drug trafficking. This was based on the recognition that this scourge affects governability, democracy and the country's economic and social stability, for which it was necessary to directly confront this problem and recover the rule of law. The good results achieved in this fight, which has made it possible to seize around 370 tons of cocaine in the last year and a half, have also resulted in increased activity by criminal groups, which seek to weaken the government's actions. According to the Ministry of the Interior, 83 percent of homicides in Ecuador are related to drug trafficking and organized crime groups. In this context, the national government has approved a Comprehensive Strategy for Security and Peace, which seeks to strengthen, among other things, the capacities of the National Police and the Ecuadorean Armed Forces and has established a Secretariat of

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

U.S. Sees Decline in Arrests of Migrants From Latin America

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security on Wednesday reported a decline in the number of migrants from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela who were arrested at the U.S.-Mexico border.

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ECONOMIC

Lula Backs Trade Deal Between China, Mercosur

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva voiced support on Wednesday for a trade agreement between China and the Mercosur trade bloc.

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POLITICAL

State Department Bars Panama's Martinelli From Entering U.S.

The U.S. State Department announced Wednesday it barred former Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli from entering the country over graft allegations.

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Martinelli // File Photo: Panamanian Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Migrant Arrests in U.S. From Latin America Decline

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security on Wednesday reported a decline in the number of migrants from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela who were detained while attempting to illegally cross the U.S. border from Mexico, Reuters reported. Over a week-long period ending Tuesday, U.S. authorities detained 115 migrants from those four countries at the border. That was down sharply from 3,367 for the week ending Dec. 11, a drop of 97 percent, said the Department of Homeland Security. The decline followed new rules in the United States that expel some migrants to Mexico in exchange for opening legal entry to the United States for others. The administration of U.S. President Joe Biden announced on Jan. 5 that migrants from Cuba, Haiti and Nicaragua would be sent to Mexico without the opportunity to seek asylum in the United States. The move amounted to an expansion of the Title 42 public health order, which former President Donald Trump put in place early in the Covid-19 pandemic, saying it was needed to help curb the disease's spread. Biden's order earlier this month allows migrants from Nicaragua, Cuba and Haiti who have financial sponsors based in the United States to enter the United States after passing background checks, CBS News reported. That expanded pathway to a legal presence in the United States is capped at 30,000 admissions per month and allows eligible migrants to live and work legally in the country.

U.S. Bars Panama's Martinelli From Entering Country

The administration of U.S. President Joe Biden on Wednesday barred former Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli from entering the United States because of "his involvement in

significant corruption," said Secretary of State Antony Blinken. "Specifically, Martinelli accepted bribes in exchange for improperly awarding government contracts during his tenure as the president," he said. The ban also applies to two of Martinelli's sons, who returned to Panama on Wednesday after serving prison sentences in the United States for laundering bribes from Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht. The sons also face trial in Panama, as does their father. The former president has not been convicted of any crimes and denies wrongdoing.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Brazil's Lula Voices Support for China-Mercosur Trade Deal

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva said Wednesday that he would welcome an agreement between Mercosur and China in a bid to modernize and open the trade bloc to more regions, Reuters reported. At a Celac Summit of Latin American leaders in Buenos Aires on Tuesday, less than a month after taking office, Lula asserted his leading role in the region. "Although China is Brazil's main trading partner, we want to talk as Mercosur and discuss a Mercosur-China agreement with our Chinese friends," he said. Also this week, on a visit to dissuade Uruguay from striking a unilateral deal with China, which could undermine the Latin American customs union, Lula said the Mercosur agreement with the European Union must be completed urgently. Talks for the E.U.-Mercosur agreement were finalized in 2019, but environmental concerns stalled its approval. "Uruguay's interest in outside markets reflects Mercosur's shortcomings, which in turn have driven the slow demise of the trade bloc long before Uruguay floated its ambitions for outside trade deals," Allison Fedirka, director of analysis at Geopolitical Futures told the Advisor in a [Q&A](#) published Dec. 22. "The bloc never achieved its full economic, common market ambitions and, consequently, it has become more political in nature," she added.

NEWS BRIEFS

Colombian Drug Lord Pleads Guilty to Smuggling Charges in U.S.

Dairo Antonio Úsuga, the former head of Colombia's Gulf Clan drug cartel, pleaded guilty in the United States to smuggling charges, acknowledging that he led the cartel and a paramilitary group that trafficked cocaine, the Associated Press reported. "Tons of cocaine were moved with my permission or at my direction," Úsuga, also known as "Otoniel," told a federal court in Brooklyn, N.Y. He faces at least 20 years in prison when he is sentenced.

Costa Rica Planning to Revive Consular Relations With Venezuela

The Costa Rican government announced Wednesday it is seeking to revive consular relations with Venezuela, which have been severed since 2020, Agence France-Presse reported. Foreign Minister Arnoldo André said that following the recent removal of Juan Guaidó as head of Venezuela's opposition government, Costa Rica was ready to engage with the government of President Nicolás Maduro. Costa Rica said the move did not signal a resumption of diplomatic ties with Caracas. A consular service will be established through a third country which has Venezuelan representation, André added.

Guyana Using Satellites to Monitor Oil Spills

Guyana's Environmental Protection Agency says it can now use satellites to monitor oil spills in the country's territorial waters, the Associated Press reported Wednesday. However, Vincent Adams, the agency's former leader, said the satellites lack preventive measures as they are only effective at drawing attention to an oil spill after it has already started polluting the sea. "By then this could already be too late," Adams said.

BUSINESS NEWS

Puerto Rico Selects Genera PR to Operate Power Generation

Puerto Rico on Wednesday privatized power generation in the U.S. territory, selecting Genera PR to assume the operation and maintenance of the island's electricity production, the Associated Press reported. "I am sure that we are on the right track to give our people the reliable and affordable energy system that they deserve," Governor Pedro Pierluisi said in announcing the decision, which he said will help move the commonwealth past its "archaic and unstable" generation units. A subsidiary of New York-based New Fortress Energy, Genera PR works closely with Shell and other producers of oil and natural gas, the AP reported. The unit will handle contracts connected to fuel purchases for Puerto Rico's 12 power facilities under a 10-year agreement with Puerto Rico's government, the wire service reported. "Today is a historic day," said Puerto Rico's secretary of state, Omar Marrero, who added that hurricanes in recent years have exposed the delicate state of the territory's power grid. Some of Puerto Rico's power generation units are 10 years old and have sustained blackouts at rates five times worse than average in the industry over the past five years. They have also produced less than half of the power the commonwealth's government had forecast. "Decades of mismanagement and neglect have left Puerto Rico with an expensive, inefficient and dated energy system," said the federal control board that oversees Puerto Rico's finances, adding that it supports the selection of Genera PR. Under its agreement with Genera PR, Puerto Rico's government is to pay the company a \$22.5 million annual fee over the first five years, NBC News reported. That fee will decrease after the fifth year to an amount that will be at least \$5 million annually. Puerto Rico's government has also agreed to pay as much as \$15 million in transition costs to the company.

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Public Security and the State to coordinate joint actions to fight organized crime. This strategy includes an investment of \$5 billion over three years, which will include public funds and international cooperation. The Ecuadorean government has highlighted in multiple international forums and bilateral meetings, including in the recent meeting between Presidents Lasso and Biden, that it is necessary to recognize responsibility and a shared burden to face this regional and global problem, for which Ecuador hopes to receive resources and cooperation from international partners to underpin its strategy to combat transnational organized crime."

A Hernán Flom, visiting assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at Trinity College: "The abrupt increase in homicides in Ecuador is another example of criminal violence escalating due to competition between armed groups for the control of drug transit routes. Homicides in Ecuador are mainly concentrated in its northern region bordering Colombia, where cocaine enters the country on its way north to Mexico or south toward ports shipping it to Europe. Furthermore, in Ecuador's fragmented drug market, gangs are not capable of brokering credible cease-fires between themselves, as in El Salvador, or with the state, as in São Paulo, to pacify the situation. On the bright side, President Guillermo Lasso is attempting to coordinate anti-drug trafficking policies with his Colombian counterpart, Gustavo Petro—despite their ideological differences—and he has met with President Joe Biden to request greater financing for security purposes. However, his decision to declare a state of emergency and bring in the military to aid in internal security are likely to fail to contain violence while increasing human rights abuses, as the Mexican and Colombian experiences show. Furthermore, these measures will be insufficient without bolstering the country's criminal justice system and combating corruption, not just

among prison guards and police, but also surrounding the influence of drug money on elections. More generally, addressing Ecuador's security crisis requires Latin America and the United States to rethink the approach to the drug war, as imprisonment has generally consolidated rather than weakened criminal groups, fueling violence without dismantling the illicit markets that undergird it."

A Daniela Chacón Arias, executive director at Fundación TANDEM and former Quito vice mayor and city council member: "As has happened before in countries such as Colombia and Mexico, organized crime has permeated various social and political institutions in Ecuador: the judiciary, the prison system, as well as the executive and legislative branches. Ecuador will hold municipal

“Organized crime has permeated various social and political institutions in Ecuador...”

— Daniela Chacón Arias

elections on Feb. 5, and already many candidates have been denounced for their ties to drug trafficking or have been threatened and killed in gun violence. It is no surprise that the provinces that are being hit hardest are the ones the state has traditionally abandoned (Guayas, Esmeraldas, Manabí and Los Ríos). It is heartbreaking to see news reports about young men and boys proudly carrying guns and joining criminal bands as their perceived only choice for a better life. This violence also affects women. In 2022, a femicide occurred every 26 hours in Ecuador, and 65 percent of those femicides happened in those four provinces. Lasso's solution is the already well known, outdated

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and ineffective war on drugs. He assures that the record-high violence is the result of increased control by his government without fully acknowledging other causes. The president has not yet launched or announced policies or programs to attack poverty, a lack of opportunity and social violence which are at the root of this problem. The approach will only yield more violence. Lasso is missing an important opportunity to bring light to an issue that requires a regional response and a change in approach.”

A **R. Evan Ellis, Latin America research professor at the U.S. Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute:** “Although traditionally a low-violence country, Ecuador is caught between the world’s two biggest coca producers—Colombia and Peru. In recent years, Mexico’s major cartels, Sinaloa and Jalisco Nuevo Generación (CJNG) have increasingly used Ecuadorean routes to move cocaine, working with local gangs. Sinaloa’s Ecuador operation empowered the once marginal ‘Choneros.’ The December 2020 murder of Choneros leader ‘Rasquiña’ then fueled the emergence of rival gangs, several of which splintered from the Choneros, many backed by CJNG. Although Colombian criminal organizations had previously caused problems as well, the growing power of Sinaloa—and CJNG-backed gangs such as the Choneros, Lobos, Tiguerones and Chone Killers—spilled over into prison violence beginning in February 2021, as well as terrorist acts outside, designed to intimidate the government in the movement and treatment of gang members in the prisons, particularly in Esmeraldas, Guayas and Manabí, where both drug operations and key prisons are located. Ecuador’s record violence also reflects the struggle between groups for control of drug trafficking routes. The declaration of multiple states of emergency, the deployment since 2020 of additional military personnel to the affected provinces and attention to prison overcrowding and control is not a

long-term fix. An attempt to move gang leaders between prisons actually sparked the latest major round of violence. In the short term, efforts against criminal organizations will likely produce further fragmentation, uncertainty and increased violence before making the situation better.”

A **Alberto Acosta-Burneo, editor of Weekly Analysis in Guayaquil:** “Ecuador currently ranks among the most dangerous countries in Latin America, according to the Gallup World Poll. Behind the violence are gangs, drug trafficking and civil unrest. The violence has many facets, but the underlying problem is the institutional framework. The Ecuadorean state has failed to retain two powers: legitimacy to create rules and enforce them, and authority to create the moral obligation of citizens to obey the rules. In the absence of legitimacy and authority, violence has become the mechanism of political and social settlement. Thus, the Indigenous movement has used violence to attack citizens and their property to impose agendas that did not win the preference at the ballot box. The last uprising in June 2022 cost us \$1 billion in losses and property damage. The disarticulation of the institutional framework is evident in the state’s inability to exercise the monopoly of legitimate violence to guarantee individual rights and protect citizens. Gangs and drug traffickers control territory and have even infiltrated the justice system and the security forces. Fear has invaded citizens and is as debilitating as violence because it puts all under the control of traffickers and criminals who charge for protection. The solution to this problem inevitably involves a reconstruction of state institutions and the recovery of legitimacy and authority to impose order. There is no easy way out.”

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta.

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