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FEATURED Q&A

How Closely Are Caribbean Leaders Working Together?



Leaders of Caribbean countries gathered this month in the Bahamas for a summit of the Caribbean Community, or Caricom. // Photo: Caricom.

Q Leaders of the Caribbean Community, or Caricom, met Feb. 15-17 in the Bahamas, along with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and a U.S. delegation led by Assistant Secretary of State Brian Nichols. High on the agenda was discussion of the crisis in Haiti, where gangs have grown in power since President Jovenel Moïse's assassination in July 2021. At the summit, Caribbean leaders also discussed migration, health care, drug trafficking, food security and climate change. What were the biggest advances that came out of the gathering? How much did the summit achieve in terms of finding a solution to Haiti's crisis? To what extent did the summit strengthen economic cooperation, which Trudeau's office had identified as a main goal of the meeting?

A Raymond Joseph, former ambassador of Haiti to the United States: "It's rather early to know the biggest overall advances that resulted from the summit in the Bahamas. But Prime Minister Ariel Henry, who attended the meeting, failed to get what he had asked in a plea last October to the international community: foreign boots on the ground to help counter gangs. Perhaps some attention has been paid to Dr. Ralph Gonsalves, the prime minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, who said, last November, that his country won't send troops to Haiti. 'Such a move by any country,' he added, 'could be seen by the Haitian people as propping up a government that the majority of Haitians see as illegitimate.' Thus, at the summit, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who's resisted a U.S. push for his country to lead an invasion force, said Canada will help reinforce the Haitian National Police

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Mexicans Protest Budget Cuts to Electoral Agency

Hundreds of thousands of Mexicans protested Sunday against measures that would slash the funding of the country's electoral agency, the National Electoral Institute.

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Medellín to Freeze Utility Bills at Empresas Públicas

Colombia's second-largest city, Medellín, is seeking to freeze household utility bills charged by Empresas Públicas, which provides energy, water, gas and telecommunications services.

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POLITICAL

Peru Withdraws Ambassador to Mexico

Peruvian President Dina Boluarte's government withdrew its ambassador to Mexico over Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's support for ousted Peruvian President Pedro Castillo.

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Boluarte // File Photo: TV Perú.

POLITICAL NEWS

Mexicans Protest Budget Cuts to Election Agency

Hundreds of thousands of Mexicans demonstrated in cities across the country on Sunday in protest of legislation that would slash the budget of Mexico's elections agency, The Wall Street Journal reported. Approximately 150,000 protesters filled the Zócalo square in Mexico City in one of the largest protests of president Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration. López Obrador said last Thursday that he would sign the legislation, which previously won final approval in Mexico's Congress. The measure would cut the \$760 million annual budget of the National Electoral Institute by nearly a third, which the agency has said will result in the layoffs of 6,000 to 17,000 of its permanent staff, including key staff members who are in charge of organizing elections, The Wall Street Journal reported. López Obrador has said the agency is too expensive and that its senior managers are associated with corrupt right-wing elites. Clad in white and pink clothing, the colors of the electoral institute, protesters flooded the Zócalo and spilled out onto adjacent streets, the Associated Press reported. One protester, Enrique Bastien, a 64-year-old veterinarian, said that with the reforms, López Obrador "wants to return to the past" when "the government controlled elections," the wire service reported. "It was a life with no independence," he added. López Obrador has said he would sign the reforms into law, though he added that he expects them to be challenged in court. Opposition parties, directors of the electoral institute and several state governors have said they would file court challenges against the measures, The Wall Street Journal reported. The electoral institute's head, Lorenzo Córdova, has said he expects ordinary citizens to also file thousands of injunctions to prevent the changes from being implemented on the grounds that they violate citizens' rights to elections that are free and fair.

Peru Withdraws Envoy to Mexico Over Support for Castillo

The government of Peruvian President Dina Boluarte on Friday withdrew its ambassador to Mexico over Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's support for ousted Peruvian President Pedro Castillo, Bloomberg News reported. "Mr. López has decided to support the coup of former President Castillo," Boluarte said on state television. Peru's Congress removed Castillo from office on Dec. 7 after he unsuccessfully attempted to dissolve the legislative body and rule by decree. Castillo was arrested that day and remains jailed. López Obrador has said Castillo is the one who is the victim of a "coup," and he has granted asylum to Castillo's family. López Obrador met Friday with Castillo's wife, Lila Paredes, at the National Palace in Mexico City and has called Boluarte a "spurious president," Bloomberg News reported. On Saturday, Mexico's government said it regretted the decision by Boluarte's government to withdraw its ambassador to Peru and added that it would maintain its diplomatic presence in Lima, Reuters reported. In a statement, Mexico's Foreign Relations Department said it "will keep open diplomatic channels of communication to benefit both societies, and also expresses hope that a democratic agreement can be reached soon to resolve the differences in our fellow Latin American country," the Associated Press reported.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Brazil's FDI Hits Highest January Level in Five Years

Brazil's level of foreign direct investment, or FDI, in January hit its highest level in five years, central bank data showed on Friday, Reuters reported. Last month, FDI totaled \$6.9 billion, its highest level since 2018 when it amount-

NEWS BRIEFS

Ecuadorean Indigenous Organization Says it Will End Talks With Gov't

Ecuadorean Indigenous organization Conaie said Friday that it will end talks with the country's government, saying it has failed to comply with accords, Reuters reported. Conaie also called for President Guillermo Lasso to resign. The government has said it has reached dozens of accords with Conaie, including the suspension of mining concessions on ancestral Indigenous territory.

Panama Suspends Migrant Bus Services Following Fire, Deadly Plunge

Panama's government temporarily suspended bus services on Sunday that transfer migrants from the Darién Gap after two serious accidents occurred aboard the vehicles, the Associated Press reported. The country's authorities said the services would be halted until transportation authorities reviewed the bus lines and ensured their safety. On Saturday, a bus carrying migrants caught fire, but no deaths were reported. Earlier this month, a bus fell off a hillside, killing more than three dozen migrants.

Colombia's Ecopetrol Reports Highest Level of Reserves in Eight Years

Colombian state-run energy company Ecopetrol held reserves equivalent to 2.01 billion barrels of oil in 2022—its highest figure in eight years, the company said Friday, Reuters reported. The reserves include oil, natural gas and condensates. "The increase of reserves achieved in 2022 is one of the pillars of Grupo Ecopetrol's strategy to guarantee its long-term stability," Ecopetrol said in a statement. Fields in Colombia accounted for 89 percent of the reserves, the rest was located in its projects in the United States.

ed to \$8.3 billion. However, the total for last month was slightly lower than the \$7.1 billion that economists in a Reuters poll had forecast. Last year, Brazil's level of FDI reached \$90.6 billion, its highest level in a decade. "Out of that \$91 billion, only \$37 billion (or 40 percent) of the total corresponds to new capital in the Brazilian economy," Ernesto Revilla, head of Latin America economics at Citigroup, told the Advisor in a [Q&A](#) published Feb. 14. "This is still significant, as it increased 23 percent versus the \$30 billion of 2021," he said.

BUSINESS NEWS

Medellín Seeking to Freeze Empresas Públicas Utility Bills

Colombia's second largest city, Medellín, is seeking to freeze household bills charged by utility company Empresas Públicas de Medellín to mitigate inflation pressure, according to city mayor Daniel Quintero, Bloomberg News reported Friday. Quintero published a letter Friday on Twitter, directed at President Gustavo Petro, asking for authorization for the move. In the letter, the mayor highlighted the soaring inflation and cost of living crisis which he said is exacerbated by "irrational" rises in household bills. "If this is carried out, it will be a respite for millions of Colombian families," Quintero told Blu Radio. The Colombian utility, which provides energy, water, gas and telecommunications services, covers some 35 percent of the nation's population. Inflation is currently running at a two-decade high, and Petro has already signaled he wants to cut power costs, Bloomberg News reported. This month he signed a decree granting him control of the energy and gas commission, as well as the water and basic sanitation commission, for the next three months, which would allow him to approve Quintero's request. Colombia's inflation increased to 13.25 percent in January, from 13.12 percent in December, as a result of wage growth, and higher foods, transportation and gasoline prices, Reuters reported.

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by providing equipment to fight the gangs and will send ships to patrol Haitian waters. That follows a Canadian military surveillance plane which, for two days earlier this month patrolled the skies, collecting intelligence on gang activities, especially around the capital. Also, Canada has sanctioned 15 powerful individuals, including two former presidents, two former prime ministers and legislators for corruption and their financing of gangs, but not Dr. Henry, their alleged associate. Moreover, Canada will provide \$10 million for the migration office and \$12.5 million of humanitarian aid. That's far from the Marshall Plan for Haiti that Barbados was to introduce at the summit."

A **Keith W. Mines, director for Latin America at the United States Institute of Peace:** "One of the historical challenges Haiti has faced is a chilling isolation, so any statement of support by Caricom, its most immediate regional 'family,' is welcome and helpful. The Caricom statement comes on the heels of an announcement by Jamaica that it would be willing to participate in a multinational security assistance deployment to Haiti. But the limits of a regional organization like Caricom were also on display—Jamaica would never be able to mount a security mission absent a leadership role by the United States, so its offer of support is safely contingent. And Caricom may have missed an opportunity in the tepid support it offered to the Dec. 21 agreement, 'acknowledging' its adoption but suggesting it needs to be 'more inclusive.' With the demise of the Montana Group and the continuing struggle by the Henry government to achieve legitimacy and to exercise even the most fundamental tasks of governance, this proposal appears to be the most promising thing on the table. It could improve governance by enhancing the technical capacity of ministries, draw out the views and expertise of a large swath of Haitian society and guide the country to a

free and fair election, all by broadening the inclusion Caricom insists on. It could also be the arrangement many international partners are waiting for to directly support a reset of security. But the accord will only work if it receives full support and resources from an international community that has to date hid behind the mantra of 'Haitian-led solutions.' There are those Haitian-led solutions that still need a lot of help from Haiti's friends to succeed."

A **Vanda Felbab-Brown, senior fellow for foreign policy at the Brookings Institution:** "The conveners of the Caricom summit had hoped to make progress on topics that have troubled the Caribbean region for years, such as drug trafficking and crime, as well as more recent issues the United States has been emphasizing, such as health care, food security and climate change. Yet the summit ended up dominated by the crisis in Haiti. The country's unelected government has been seeking foreign intervention to subdue highly violent gangs. But an intervention would also be militarily very complex with prior interventions running into large problems. Thus, neither the United States, nor Canada or Brazil have been keen to intervene. Within Haiti itself, a foreign intervention remains controversial. An ironic dynamic thus emerged at the summit. For years, various Caribbean countries have felt put upon by the U.S. preoccupation with migration and insistence that regional governments stem the flow of migrants. This time, it was the Caribbean countries burned by Haitian migrants seeking to escape the brutal violence and intense food insecurity that added calls for an external intervention. But Canada responded to the pressure merely by increasing the number of intelligence assets it deploys around Haiti and the number of gang leaders and politicians linked to them on whom it has imposed economic sanctions. Jamaica even volunteered troops for an intervention, provided that external

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funding and logistical support can be obtained. Yet Jamaica's record in arresting the drug trafficker Dudas Coke in 2010 and retaking control of the Tivoli Gardens neighborhood in Kingston should be a cautionary note, and the challenges in Haiti would be of far greater scale and complexity than the Dudas Coke operation."

A **Michaëlle Jean, former governor general of Canada and steering committee member of Think Tank Haiti, a joint project of the Inter-American Dialogue and Quisqueya University:** "All Caribbean countries are concerned about the exponential proliferation of gangs. Between 100 and 200 heavily armed ones have been in control of the Haitian capital and have plunged it into terror. These thugs were granted total impunity by both Presidents Michel Martelly and Jovenel Moïse, who paid for this pact with his life. The gangs are an extension of transnational criminal networks that want to further expand their arms, drugs and human trafficking operations. They are masters in destabilizing states through corruption, violence and infiltration of all circles of power, including politics, business and law enforcement. The problem is continental. Hence the mobilization of the Caribbean states and governments meeting in Nassau and their joint declaration in favor of decisive and coordinated action with substantial financial and logistical support, they hope, from Canada. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau responded, but still too timidly, according to general opinion. The heads of government nevertheless noted the various forms of security assistance provided by the Canadian government, with a focus on strengthening the capacity of the Haitian National Police. However, many of its officers are being recruited by gangs, thousands more have quit because they are underpaid, poorly trained, inadequately equipped, dangerously exposed and discouraged by seeing many of their colleagues massacred. A real plan with incentives is needed to retain them.

The promise of two Canadian naval vessels to patrol and intercept the traffickers' boats may have an impact, as should the aircraft delivered for aerial surveillance to track the gangs' movements."

A **Georges Fauriol, fellow at the Caribbean Policy Consortium and senior associate at the Center for Strategic & International Studies:** "With Caricom governments' frustrations at the absence of a vigorous international response to Haiti's crisis, the attention at the Bahamas summit shifted to Canada. Prime Minister Trudeau's presence triggered expectations of a breakthrough. On balance, that did not happen; the expansion of the occasional Canadian overflight of Haitian territory for intelligence purposes now coupled with a two-ship deployment stationed off Port-au-Prince could be construed as the building blocks of an expected robust multinational security response—but there were no signals from either Canada or the United States that this was forthcoming. Alternatively, the aspect of the Caricom summit worth watching is what appears to be a two-part push directed to go beyond the generalities of the Bahamas meeting: convening a meeting of 'stakeholders' in Jamaica, and Caricom's participation in presumably a synchronized discussion in Haiti with Haitian stakeholders to firm up a plan of action. None of this is straightforward. Like much of the international community, Caricom is anchoring its hopes to the Dec. 21 'consensus,' the caveat being that its political bases be widened. The timing is critical—days and weeks—or lasting damage to Haiti and the Caribbean region will emerge. To the degree that Haiti's civil society and varied democratic actors retain political space and individual endurance, viable paths forward out of the crisis will persist, but the margins have narrowed dramatically. Otherwise, this will then belatedly trigger an inevitable and less than optimal security response from the United States, Canada and other actors."

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