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FEATURED Q&A

Will Colombia's Troop Surge Bring Order to the Border?



Colombian President Iván Duque said a new troop deployment would combat drug trafficking, organized crime and terrorism. // File Photo: Colombian Government.

Q Colombia's government on Oct. 6 deployed a new unit of 14,000 military personnel in order to assert authority in Norte de Santander province, where several armed groups have been fighting for control of cocaine production. The deployment of the unit, known as CENOR, is the largest in recent history in Colombia. What factors are at the root of the unrest in the province, and will the military deployment succeed? To what extent will the deployment increase tensions with Venezuela, which borders on Norte de Santander? How effective have President Iván Duque's efforts been at combating drug trafficking and strengthening security in Colombia?

A Paul J. Angelo, fellow for Latin America studies at the Council on Foreign Relations: "Norte de Santander has long been a haven for Colombia's illegal armed groups due to the ease with which they grow and transport coca. The department hosts the largest area of coca cultivation in the country, protected by a constellation of criminal factions such as the ELN, the EPL, FARC dissidents and the Clan del Golfo. These groups make use of the proximity to Venezuela to export their illicit products and abscond from Colombian forces. The 2016 peace accord with the FARC stipulated investments in places such as Catatumbo, but the Duque administration's lethargic implementation of the agreement, especially on the provision of subsidies and technical expertise to farmers seeking to abandon coca cultivation, has allowed continued marginalization and conflict. Recurring displacement, assassinations of social leaders and the detonation of a car bomb on a Colombian army base in July underscore the unfulfilled

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Social Media Companies Block Bolsonaro Video

Facebook and Instagram removed a video broadcast that Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro delivered, saying it violated their policies over the spread of misinformation about vaccines.

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ECONOMIC

Airline Industry Sees Higher Taxes, Lack of Support

The head of the International Air Transport Association decried the lack of direct financial support from governments in Latin America and singled out several countries for new taxes and fees.

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POLITICAL

Peru's Castillo Reverses Stance on Gas Sector

President Pedro Castillo on Monday urged Peru's Congress to draft a bill for the "nationalization" of Peru's natural gas sector, reversing previous statements in which he said he would not nationalize parts of the economy.

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Castillo // Photo: Agencia Andina.

POLITICAL NEWS

Social Media Firms Take Down Video of Brazil's President

Social media platforms Facebook and Instagram on Monday removed a broadcast that Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro delivered in which he said people in the United Kingdom who have received two coronavirus vaccine doses are developing the AIDS disease faster than expected, the Associated Press reported. The comments violated the companies' policies over the spread of misinformation about vaccines. "Our policies don't allow claims that Covid-19 vaccines kill or seriously harm people," Facebook said in a statement. Bolsonaro contracted the Covid-19 virus last year and



Bolsonaro Live Broadcast // Photo: Agência Brasil.

remains unvaccinated. The broadcast had been delivered live last Thursday, and a recording was still available to users, state-run news agency Agência Brasil reported. In a statement released on Saturday, the HIV/AIDS Committee of the Brazilian Society of Infectious Diseases said that "no relationship is known" between any vaccine against Covid-19 and the development of AIDS, according to the report. "We reject any false news that circulates and mentions this non-existent association," the statement said. On Monday during a radio interview, Bolsonaro dismissed criticism over spreading fake news with his claim about AIDS, saying he had merely read a news article published last October in Brazil, citing an article in Exame from 2020. Monday marked the first time Facebook removed one of Bolsonaro's weekly live broadcasts that serve as a direct

channel of communication with his supporters. [Editor's note: See also the Dialogue's [report](#), "Content Moderation and Self-Regulation Mechanisms: The Facebook Oversight Board and its Implications for Latin America."]

Peruvian President Calls on Congress to Take Over Gas Sector

President Pedro Castillo on Monday urged Peru's Congress to draft a bill for the nationalization of Peru's natural gas sector, reversing previous statements in which he said he would not seek a state takeover of parts of the economy, Reuters reported. "We have just signed the supreme decree on gas recovery and from here we urge Congress to make a joint law on the nationalization ... of Camisea gas," Castillo said during an event in Amazonas, El Comercio reported. "It is necessary to give Peruvians what the people have produced." A socialist, Castillo campaigned on a far-left platform that included the nationalization of the gas and mining sectors. However, in the face of pressure to preserve and attract foreign investment, he had since said that he would keep industries in private hands and incentivize private investment. Castillo's statements also contradicted comments earlier on Monday from his new prime minister, Mirtha Vásquez, who said that the Castillo administration respects private property. Under Peru's constitution, private companies can be nationalized only with congressional approval. Peru's Congress, in which Castillo's coalition does not hold a majority, is unlikely to back the nationalization push, Reuters reported. Earlier this month, Castillo dismissed his controversial far-left prime minister, Guido Bellido, replacing him with Vásquez, a moderate leftist and former interim president of Congress. Political observers said the cabinet shakeup helped calm markets in the short term but alone would not bring assurances of a more predictable business climate. "Investors will not be confident unless Castillo's words and deeds are consistently more moderate," George Washington University professor Cynthia McClintock told the [Advisor](#).

NEWS BRIEFS

Far-Right Candidate Takes Lead in Chile Presidential Election: Cadem Poll

Far-right candidate José Antonio Kast, of the Republican Party, has been gaining traction in recent polls ahead of Chile's presidential election, scheduled for Nov. 21, EFE reported Monday. According to the Plaza Pública survey of pollster Cadem, Kast is now the front-runner, with 23 percent of support, two percentage points higher than last month and ahead of leftist candidate Gabriel Boric, who received 20 percent of support. A runoff is slated for Dec. 19 if no candidate receives a first-round majority vote.

Itaú Unibanco Economists See Brazil's Economy Shrinking Next Year

Economists at Itaú Unibanco on Monday revised their 2022 economic growth forecast for Brazil from slight growth to a slight contraction, Reuters reported. The new forecast sees Latin America's largest economy contracting by 0.5 percent next year, as opposed to a previous estimate of 0.5 percent growth. The economists expect Brazil's benchmark interest rate to climb to 11.25 percent next year in the face of inflation fears.

Kansas City Southern Plans Auto Distribution Development in Mexico

Kansas City Southern on Monday announced plans to develop the Central Bajío Vehicle Distribution Center, a railroad and transportation terminal for the shipment of finished vehicles near Querétaro, in the heart of Mexico's largest automobile manufacturing region. The partners in the project include Suministros Industriales Potosinos and TransDevelopment Group. The facility will have a capacity for up to 10,000 vehicles when completed. No financial details were disclosed.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Airline Industry Sees Higher Taxes, Lack of Direct Gov't Support

The head of the International Air Transport Association, or IATA, on Monday lamented the lack of direct financial support for his industry from governments in Latin America and the Caribbean and singled out several countries for levying new taxes and fees. Willie Walsh, director general of the IATA, told an industry conference in Bogotá that, globally, \$243 billion was made available to airlines due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but he noted that “sadly, in [the Latin America] region not a single government provided direct financial support to

Since the pandemic, Latin America and the Caribbean has become the most indebted region in the developing world.

airlines.” Walsh also singled out several countries for “an increasing trend ... in the aviation value chain to increase taxes and fees,” citing Argentina for implementing extra taxes on ticket sales in local currency, as well as increasing the international departure tax by about 10 percent. Walsh also noted that Costa Rica is planning to increase the airport security fee at San José airport by more than 70 percent, and that the Dominican Republic and El Salvador both plan to add fees. “These are unacceptable in this time of crisis. And we cannot tolerate others following in their footsteps,” he said. Governments around the region are looking for ways to reduce fiscal deficits and cut debt levels. Since the pandemic, Latin America and the Caribbean has become the most indebted region in the developing world and the region with the highest external debt service relative to exports of goods and services, Alicia Bárcena, the executive secretary of the United Nations’ ECLAC, said earlier this year.

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promise of peace. FARC dissidents also executed a small-arms attack on President Duque’s helicopter near the departmental capital, Cúcuta, demonstrating the brazen confidence of the area’s criminals. CENOR may help the government regain territory, but a purely militarized approach is apt to fuel additional strife. A decapitation strategy that prioritizes neutralizing drug kingpins, as has occurred in the past, could spawn new cycles of armed competition. Likewise, the concentration of so many soldiers near Venezuela will escalate tensions at a time when the two sparring governments were making progress on reopening the border after a three-year closure. Colombian troops should exercise caution to avoid perceived or actual violations of Venezuelan sovereignty, which would play into Maduro’s hand and raise the prospect of cross-border conflict.”

A **Stephen Johnson, former U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense for Western Hemisphere affairs (2007-2009):**

“Norte de Santander province faces the busiest part of the border where hundreds of Venezuelan migrants pour in every day—part of the largest exodus of unhappy and desperate citizens in the hemisphere at present. That movement and accompanying chaos has provided plenty of opportunity for smuggling and attendant crimes. This on top of the fact that remnant groups from Colombia’s decades-old civil conflict continue to operate in the vicinity, crossing back and forth between the two countries, attacking military and police outposts, smuggling drugs and gold and vying for territorial dominance. Now, as Venezuela reopens its border stations across from Cúcuta (closed since 2019), an increase in the migrant flow could complicate Colombia’s security problems. Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro can seek to score propaganda points out of Duque’s troop deployment. But who will listen? CENOR’s mission was announced months

ago, and Maduro still decided to open the gates. One dissident FARC group, the Tenth Front, even poses problems for Maduro, having kidnapped eight of his soldiers on the border last spring and threatening to embark on an urban campaign. At first blush, Duque’s 14,000-troop deployment might seem excessive and accompanying development initiatives misplaced given the ongoing pandemic. But considering his desire to curb the activities of remnant rebels numbering in the thousands along with those of various criminal actors, plus deal with a growing migration crisis, that number seems about right. However, if Venezuela’s collapse accelerates, that figure should be considered conservative.”

A **Erin McFee, postdoctoral teaching fellow at the University of Chicago:** “Deploying CENOR in Norte de Santander certainly makes sense geographically given the concentration of nonstate armed groups (NSAGs) and bidirectional flow of bodies and black markets in the region. The sizeable retinue of 14,000 soldiers might also be partially explained as a necessary state response to recent rebel attacks against both Duque’s helicopter and a military base, as well as an opportunity for Duque to demonstrate his mustering capabilities on the 200th anniversary of the Colombian Armed Forces and during a pre-election cycle. Launching it one day after Venezuelan President Maduro fully opened the borders of the country for the first time since 2015, however, is symbolically unfortunate for bilateral relations between the two estranged ‘brother’ countries. Furthermore, official assertions that CENOR will attack NSAGs who find ‘refuge’ in Venezuela and ‘ensure that there is no collusion’ between them and the Maduro government evidence a strong co-accompanying message to Venezuela. They are also consistent with Duque’s current hardline stance against recognizing Maduro as a legitimate leader. Will

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the military deployment succeed? Probably not. The only force that seems to have any substantive impact on trafficking is a global pandemic that has co-crippled (il)licit economies worldwide. Oppressive tactics, such as *mano dura*/war on drugs policies have long been demonstrated to be ineffective. And the poverty alleviation and crop substitution programs mentioned in some sources as accompanying this initiative remain vague, suggesting a lack of the clarity and political will required to produce meaningful results. Possible alternatives might be arrangements such as the proposed Humanitarian Accord by the Catatumbo Humanitarian and Peacebuilding Committee, which has called on all armed actors—state-backed and otherwise—to cease hostilities to protect the lives of the civilian populations in the region.”

A Sergio Guzmán, director of Colombia Risk Analysis: “Addressing the growing insecurity in Catatumbo is problematic for the government on two fronts. First, it is well known that Venezuela provides refuge for insurgent and criminal groups in border areas, including FARC dissidents and the ELN, making it harder to confront them head-on, as doing so would be interpreted as an act of aggression against Venezuela—which seems eager to pick a fight with Colombia to divert attention from the recent extradition of Alex Saab and his ongoing judicial proceedings in the United States. Illegal groups continue to thrive in their illegal activities, which include extortion, kidnapping, contraband of people and goods, and drug trafficking. The lack of cooperation between Venezuela and Colombia on this front—or any of them to be honest—is likely to be a boon for illegal business. Second, the government’s programs to provide alternative development programs in Catatumbo, as promised in the peace agreement with the FARC, have fallen short of expectations. The government has been unsuccessful at curbing coca cultivation, providing food security (both among local communities and migrants) and building trust among local communities. Locals have

visibly lost faith in the government’s ability to deliver a safe and secure environment, provide economic opportunities and expand the state’s presence beyond a military one. Despite a growing state presence and a long-term plan to address the region’s ills through the PDET program, the government is likely to execute poorly as its implementation track record suggests.”

A Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli, director for the Andes at the Washington Office on Latin America: “Militarization will not resolve the structural problems that generate violence and conflict and fuel the illicit economies of northern Santander. Civil society has made it clear that what will improve security and help to address illegal armed groups is the integral implementation of the 2016 peace accord with the FARC as originally signed by the parties and the acceptance of a humanitarian accord for Catatumbo. In terms of the peace accord, the area requires that implementation of Chapters 1 and 4 is done properly and with the sufficient amount of political will, financing and integration of civil society. To address the other illegal armed groups, the mechanisms of the peace accord to dismantle such groups and a dialogue with the ELN are required. To get there, you need all parties to accept humanitarian minimums. Economic development initiatives for this region need to be done with the locals determining its course, not from Bogotá to please economic and political interests. For Venezuelan migration and Colombia’s internal displacement to be properly addressed, peace, dismantling of illegal groups and sustainable economic development that fits the needs of this region are required. Otherwise, migrants will only get caught up in Colombia’s internal violence and not have their needs met, and xenophobia will deepen.”

[Editor’s note: The commentaries above were submitted before Colombia on Sunday announced the capture of most-wanted drug lord “Otoniel.”]

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