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FEATURED Q&A

Is López Obrador's Security Strategy Failing in Mexico?



A recent spate of violence in Mexico has led critics to question President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's security strategy. // File Photo: Mexican Government.

Q In violent rampages this month in northern Mexico, gang members killed at least 11 people in Ciudad Juárez and set some 20 vehicles on fire and blocked roads in Tijuana and Mexicali. These incidents followed other eruptions of violence in Mexico's Jalisco and Guanajuato states, where gang members torched vehicles and businesses and were involved in shootouts with security forces. What are the reasons behind the flare-up in violence in Mexico? How effective is President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's security strategy, and why have authorities been unable to significantly reduce Mexico's homicide levels? How effective is Mexico's use of the military for domestic policing, and what would be achieved by López Obrador's possible move to put the National Guard under the control of the army?

A Nicolás Mariscal, member of the Advisor board and chairman of Grupo Marhnos in Mexico City: "The national media was alarmed at the recent string of violence with due reason. Nevertheless, it reported events as part of a national story, when each had its local causes. As Alejandro Hope wrote in a recent article, the attacks in Ciudad Juárez were intended to create chaos to better assault particular people; in Jalisco and Guanajuato, there was a failed attempt to capture leaders of the New Generation Jalisco Cartel; and in Baja California, attacks against public transportation were due to extortion practices. The good news is homicide levels have plateaued; the bad news is they have plateaued at very high levels. In the past, there were serious institution-building efforts in the security apparatus, notably

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Peruvian President Pedro Castillo on Wednesday swore in new ministers of defense, environment, and women and vulnerable populations.

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Luma Energy Vows to Improve Service in Puerto Rico

Luma Energy, which operates in the electricity transmission and distribution system in Puerto Rico, vowed to improve service amid persistent outages.

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Chile's Boric Pushes Legislation to Trim Hours in Workweek

Chilean President Gabriel Boric announced that he will seek to advance legislation to reduce the number of hours in the country's workweek to 40 from the current 45 hours.

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Boric // File Photo: Chilean Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Peru's Castillo Replaces Three Ministers in Shakeup

Peruvian President Pedro Castillo on Wednesday swore in three new cabinet ministers in the latest of shakeup of his team amid expanding corruption investigations, state news agency Andina reported. Richard Washington Tieno Quispe replaces José Luis Gavidia Arrascue as defense minister. Claudia Liliana Dávila Moscoso was sworn in as new minister of women and vulnerable populations. She succeeds Diana Mirian Miloslavich Tupac in the post. Former lawmaker Wilbert Gabriel Rozas Beltrán has become the new environment minister. But Castillo has kept Geiner Alvarado, his embattled transport minister, whom prosecutors allege has led a "criminal organization" from within the government alongside Castillo, Reuters reported. Castillo is facing six criminal investigations, including for alleged obstruction of justice and over alleged irregularities in the naming of military officials. His sister-in-law, Yenifer Paredes, is facing a potential three years in pre-trial detention for alleged influence peddling, with a judge expected to rule on her case this week. Castillo's wife, Lilia Paredes, has also been targeted in the probe. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the June 13 issue of the Advisor.]

ECONOMIC NEWS

Chile's Boric Pushes Legislation to Trim Hours in Workweek

Chilean President Gabriel Boric announced Tuesday that he will seek to advance a bill that would reduce the South American country's work week to 40 hours from 45 currently, El País reported. The president has given the bill "urgency," which requires lawmakers to

consider it as soon as possible. The bill was originally presented in 2017 by then-deputy and now presidential spokesperson Camila Vallejo but never advanced. It calls for gradually reducing the country's workweek to 44 hours in the first year, to 42 hours in the third year and to 40 hours five years after it is approved. Boric's government has also made a series of changes to the previous bill that include shortening the workweek to additional categories of workers, including domestic employees and public transport drivers, Reuters reported. In 2017, the bill received pushback from parts of the business community, which argued that it would have a negative impact on unemployment, productivity and wages. However, more recently, some unions and employees in Chile have reached agreements for 40-hour work weeks in certain sectors. On Tuesday, Boric called for the measure to be implemented "with caution and responsibility with regards to the effects it could have on the economy, protecting employment and remuneration." The most recent reduction of the work week in Chile occurred in 2001, when the administration of Ricardo Lagos won passage of a bill to reduce the work week from 48 to 45 hours as of 2005, El Mercurio reported.

Mexico's Annual Rate of Inflation Rises to 8.62 Percent

Consumer prices in Mexico rose 0.42 percent in the first two weeks of August, according to data from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (Inegi) statistics agency, El Economista reported on Wednesday. The figure marked the highest inflation rate recorded in a 15-day period since late 2000 and brings Mexico's average annual inflation to 8.62 percent. The latest reading exceeded market expectations that year-on-year inflation would reach 8.51 percent through early August. At the same time, the core price index, which does not include some volatile food and energy prices, increased 0.49 percent in the first half of August to bring annual core inflation to 7.97 percent, Reuters reported. The statistics have generated

NEWS BRIEFS

Judge Orders Ex-Mexican Attorney General Murillo Karam to Stand Trial

A Mexican judge on Wednesday ordered former Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam to stand trial in connection with an alleged cover-up surrounding the case of 43 students who vanished and are presumed to have been killed in Guerrero state in 2014, the Associated Press reported. Murillo Karam stands accused of creating a false version of the events surrounding the students' disappearance, but he has said that in the time since the incident, no one has been able to prove a different version of what occurred.

Cuba Begins Selling Hard Currencies to Public Under New Exchange Rate

Cuba's government this week began implementing a new foreign exchange policy, meant to help combat the illegal market in hard currency, whereby individuals can buy up to \$100 in cash per day at a rate of 123.60 pesos to the dollar, the Associated Press reported. The official rate used by government entities that dominate the communist economy remains 24 pesos to the dollar.

Consumer Confidence Rises in Brazil: Survey

Consumer confidence in Brazil rose 4.1 points to 83.6 points in August, the highest mark for the closely followed ICC index compiled by the Getulio Vargas Foundation since March 2020. "There is a more favorable view of the economic environment in the short term, which may be influenced by the improvement in the labor market and deceleration of inflation," said Viviane Seda Bittencourt, who coordinates the monthly survey. However, consumer satisfaction with the economy remains at levels that are still low in historical terms and lower than the pre-pandemic period, she added.

expectations that Mexico's central bank, Banxico, will again raise its benchmark interest rate at its September meeting after having raised it to a record 8.4 percent in August as inflation remains above policymakers' official target of 3 percent plus or minus one percentage point and does not show signs of slowing down. Inflation in Mexico is at a two-decade high, and the most recent figures raise concerns about stagflation, Gabriela Siller, an economist at Banco BASE, told Reuters.

BUSINESS NEWS

Luma Energy Vows to Improve Service in Puerto Rico

Luma Energy, which operates Puerto Rico's electricity transmission and distribution system, on Wednesday said it would dedicate more resources to improve service on the island, the Associated Press reported. The U.S. territory has seen persistent power outages, and the company's vow to improve service followed the Puerto Rican Senate's launch of a hearing to scrutinize the commonwealth's contract with Luma, which is a consortium made up by Canada's Atco and Houston-based Quanta Services, the AP reported. Luma said Wednesday that it would bolster its response teams by 5 percent over the next month and also remove vegetation that covers 20 percent of the island's most critical transmission lines, as well as conduct more aerial inspections of transmission lines. Additionally, the company said it would hold more inspections of power substations after eight caught on fire over the past year. "We have made mistakes. We recognize our faults," said Duke Austin, Quanta Services' chief executive officer. Also on Wednesday, the Coalition for Energy Thought, or COPE, a citizens' group that aims to promote understanding of options for the administration of Puerto Rico's electrical service, called for a protest against Luma outside of La Fortaleza, the governor's residence, El Nuevo Día reported.

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with the Federal Police. Nevertheless, the project was discontinued, and the National Guard took its place. As the new security force comes into being, the armed forces, one of the most solid institutions in the country, needs to combat organized crime. However, a transition calendar needs to be established, where the army and navy leave policing to the National Guard as it solidifies its position, while also transitioning to civilian control. What is needed the most are state policies, as opposed to federal government policies, to build security and justice institutions."

Amanda Mattingly, managing director at ACM Global Intelligence: "The recent wave of violence in Mexico is evidence that President López Obrador's 'hugs not bullets' strategy is not working. The violence in Guadalajara, Jalisco and Guanajuato, followed by violence in Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana and Mexicali, underscore how ill-conceived López Obrador's security policy was from the start. Since 2018, he has argued for a holistic approach to crime, believing that the way to deal with the drug cartels is to address the underlying causes of poverty that push the vulnerable into organized crime. But the Jalisco and Sinaloa cartels clearly see López Obrador's approach as permissive. The recent rampage is a signal to federal- and state-level officials that the cartels still hold power and are willing to use violence—even against civilians—to maintain that power. As evidence, the violence by the Jalisco cartel came as retaliation against the government for trying to arrest one of its senior leaders. Even before the recent spate of violence, the administration could hardly say the security situation had improved. In 2021, Mexico saw approximately 44,000 homicides. López Obrador claims the National Guard has had many successful operations and arrests against the cartels and that the recent violence and chaos were desperate signs from weakened organizations. But this is not the

case. A poor reorganization of the security forces, the lack of intelligence gathering capabilities and the decreased coordination with the United States have only emboldened the cartels. Indeed, the recent violence is just a reminder that the cartels still hold power in Mexico—and will continue to until a new president steps in with a more robust security plan for the country."

A Ruben Olmos, president of Global Nexus in Washington: "The recent security situation should be seen through the lens of the ongoing institutional-political changes occurring under President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration, coupled with the global economic challenges post-Covid, inflationary pressures and ongoing shifts in the U.S.-Mexico relationship, particularly in the security sphere. While there has been a long debate about AMLO's 'hugs not bullets' approach toward criminal groups and an important number of reasons on specific actions or motivations for this policy shift, Mexico's army, navy and the new National Guard have demonstrated significant capabilities. This, despite the new tasks assigned by the president and the constant budget cuts and reorientation of funds for his pet projects. AMLO has decided to use his political capital to move the National Guard under the jurisdiction of Mexico's army per top leadership in the armed forces and will use the legislative-judicial process and his executive powers to do so. The recent violent acts in northern states are related to the dynamics among criminal groups and new elected authorities and the decision-making process by AMLO and his security cabinet, which comes down to him deciding where the security priorities are. This trend is likely to continue during the 2023-2024 election cycle. Finally, despite some of AMLO's actions effectively limiting security cooperation with the United States and the shift from the Mérida Initiative to the new bicentennial framework, our security co-

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operation remains strong at the institutional level and should remain given the current challenges, including immigration, port and border security and the overall business climate.”

A **Cecilia Farfán-Méndez, co-founder of the Mexico Violence Resource Project:** “While we have seen this type of violence before in other parts of the country, what matters is the impact they will have in the short and long terms among the population. For instance, research from Ciudad Juárez shows that even when you are not a direct victim of violence, living in these contexts can take a severe toll on your mental health. The question that we should focus on is: when does violence pay? This violence does not come at no cost to criminals and could in fact be detrimental to criminal businesses that rely on protection rackets to generate income. Reducing homicide levels has been a challenge faced by the Calderón, Peña Nieto, and López Obrador administrations. The reality is that committing a murder in Mexico goes largely unpunished. Research shows that impunity for intentional homicides in Mexico is 89.6

percent. A key area that the López Obrador administration needs to pay attention to is lethal violence against women. Homicides of women have increased during his administration and, as academics and activists have pointed out, this is not an unstoppable trend.

“The reality is that committing a murder in Mexico goes largely unpunished.”
— Cecilia Farfán-Méndez

Using the armed forces for domestic policing was meant to be a temporary solution while civilian law enforcement agencies with high capacity and low levels of corruption were developed. Research shows that using the armed forces for domestic policing can have serious consequences, including higher lethality levels and human rights violations. This is because the armed forces are not trained for public safety tasks.”

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gene.kuleta@thedialogue.org.

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What's Keeping You Up at Night?

LATIN AMERICA ADVISOR

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