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FEATURED Q&A

Why Are Rights Activists Targeted in Colombia?



Colombia last year recorded its highest-ever rate of killings of human rights activists. // File Photo: Radio Nacional de Colombia.

Q Colombian officials recorded 215 killings of human rights activists and social leaders last year, country's highest rate ever, the nation's human rights ombudsman, Carlos Camargo, said Jan. 23. Last year's toll rose from 145 in 2021. What are the main reasons behind the escalation in killings of human rights activists and social leaders in Colombia, and why are they being targeted? How much is Colombian President Gustavo Petro's government doing to protect rights activists, and what more should it do?

A Elizabeth Dickinson, senior analyst for Colombia at International Crisis Group: "The rise in assassinations of social leaders is one of several trends in Colombia's violence that point to an acute worsening of the conflict. Following their rapid expansion during and after the pandemic, armed and criminal groups used 2022 to cement their territorial control by subjugating and terrorizing civilian populations. These armed organizations use targeted violence, together with handouts and economic opportunities, to build a compliant base for their illicit activities. Targeting social leaders is a way to silence the community: by threatening or killing local leaders, they broadcast the potential repercussions facing for anyone who dares speak out. Other methods of intimidation include curfews and forced confinement, which reached its highest recorded level ever last year. Simultaneously, they are recruiting heavily among adolescents and children, with promises of economic support. This potent mix of carrots and sticks enables armed and criminal groups to wield control over community life, potentially entrenching them for years in rural areas. The Petro government's total peace plan

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China Says it Owns Balloon Seen Over Latin America

China's government said today that it owns a balloon spotted over Latin America. The object is similar to a suspected spy balloon that the U.S. military shot down on Saturday.

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Mexico Planning Hubs to Produce Electric Vehicles

Mexico is planning to build multiple hubs to manufacture electric vehicles. BMW and Tesla are planning to produce electric vehicles in the country.

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POLITICAL

At Least 24 People Killed as Wildfires Rage in Chile

At least 24 people have been killed in a series of wildfires that have scorched some 270,000 hectares in Chile. President Gabriel Boric vowed to provide needed assistance to the affected area.

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Boric // File Photo: Chilean Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

At Least 24 Killed, 1,000 Injured as Fires Rage in Chile

At least 24 people have been killed amid a series of wildfires in Chile, Reuters reported Sunday. In addition to those killed, more than 1,000 have reportedly been injured. President Gabriel Boric issued emergency declarations for the Biobio, Nuble and Arucania regions where numerous fires are raging. More than half of the number of people killed were in Biobio, which, similarly to Nuble and Arucania, has extensive forests and farms that grow fruit for export. Boric said his government would provide all needed resources for the area. "I've seen the resiliency of our people, and it's exactly that spirit that has to guide us during this difficult time," Boric said in the city of Puren in Arucania, Reuters reported. "All together, we'll come out of this ahead," he added. International assistance, including planes and expert firefighting teams, started to arrive on Sunday from countries that have pledged to help crews in Chile battle the wildfires. Spain, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Venezuela and Portugal are among the countries that have sent assistance, authorities said. The blazes have scorched some 270,000 hectares, officials said Sunday. That area is approximately the size of the U.S. state of Rhode Island. The fires have been happening amid record high temperatures, the Associated Press reported. "The thermometer has reached points that we have never known until now," Interior Minister Carolina Tohá said at a news conference, the AP reported. Tohá added that the wildfires should serve as a wake-up call about the consequences of climate change. "Chile is one of the countries with the highest vulnerability to climate change, and this isn't theory but rather practical experience," said Tohá. In all, approximately 260 fires are raging in Chile, Interior Ministry officials said Sunday, Reuters reported. Twenty-eight of those fires are particularly dangerous, officials added, according to Reuters.

China Says it Owns Balloon Spotted Over Latin America

China's government said today that a balloon spotted over Latin America belongs to it and that the object was used for flight tests before it "seriously deviated" from its planned course, CNN reported. Last Friday, Colombia's military confirmed a sighting in its airspace of the balloon, Reuters reported. "It was determined that it did not represent a threat to national security," Colombia's air force said in a statement. Costa Rica's Civil Aviation Authority also confirmed what appeared to be the same object over its territory, CNN reported. The balloon is similar to a suspected spy balloon that was seen last week over parts of Canada and the United States. U.S. military jets shot down that balloon on Saturday off the coast of South Carolina, drawing a strong rebuke from China. "The U.S. used force to attack our civilian unmanned airship, which is an obvious overreaction. We express solemn protest against this move by the U.S. side," said Tan Kefei, a spokesman at China's Defense Ministry, CNN reported. China "reserves the right to use necessary means to deal with similar situations," he added. U.S. officials said the balloon that was shot down on Saturday was being used for surveillance, though Chinese authorities said it was a weather balloon that had been blown off course. The object floating over Canada and the United States passed over the U.S. state of Montana, which is the location of Malmstrom Air Force Base and dozens of nuclear missile silos, the Associated Press reported.

Canada Sends Military Plane to Patrol Over Haiti

Canada's government said Sunday that it has sent a military plane to patrol the skies over Haiti in an effort to help fight gangs in the Caribbean country, the Canadian Press reported. In a joint statement, National Defense Minister

NEWS BRIEFS

Ecuadoreans Vote on Allowing Extraditions in National Referendum

Ecuadoreans headed to the polls on Sunday to vote in a referendum that asked whether citizens linked to organized crime should be extradited, Agence France-Presse reported. No results were announced on Sunday, and officials have 10 days to tally the ballots. President Guillermo Lasso proposed allowing extraditions in order to fight escalating crime. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Jan. 26 issue of the Advisor.]

Colombia's Oil Production Falls by 49,500 Barrels Per Day Amid Roadblocks

Colombia's oil output dropped by 49,500 barrels per day as a result of roadblocks in the country's Meta province, Reuters reported today. The blockade, which has been ongoing for a week, is obstructing movement between Puerto Gaitán and Rubiales, and preventing fuel from reaching oil operations, energy companies operating in the country, including state-owned company Ecopetrol, said in a joint statement. "The social and economic impacts are enormous," the statement read.

Trinidad & Tobago in Negotiations With Venezuela Over Gas Field

Trinidad and Tobago's prime minister, Keith Rowley, on Friday told Parliament that negotiations with Venezuela will begin soon, following a U.S. license granted to start developing a gas field, Reuters reported. The U.S. Treasury Department last month issued a two-year license allowing Trinidad to jointly develop an offshore gas field on the Venezuelan side of the border. Shell, which produces in the Caribbean nation, could operate the Dragon field if Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro extends a license allowing it to do so.

Anita Anand and Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly said the CP-140 Aurora aircraft would assist Haitian authorities in disrupting gang activity. The plane will patrol over Haiti “for a number of days” in order to assist with surveillance and intelligence efforts. “The deployment of a Canadian patrol aircraft will strengthen efforts to fight criminal acts of violence and to establish the conditions necessary for a peaceful and prosperous future,” said Anand.

BUSINESS NEWS

Mexico Planning Hubs for Electric Vehicle Production

Mexico is planning to build multiple manufacturing hubs for electric vehicles across the country, Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard said in an interview, Reuters reported Friday. Mexico is seeking to capitalize on the global shift from combustion to electric vehicles and wants to “attract all that we can,” Ebrard told the wire service. Several auto companies, including General Motors and Audi, have expressed interest in producing in the country. Tesla is looking to build a plant in the country, while BMW is already investing 800 million euros (\$866 million) to boost production of high-voltage batteries and “Nueve Klasse” electric cars in the central Mexican state of San Luis Potosí, Reuters reported. BMW is planning on shifting more than half of its sales into all-electric cars by 2030, and its latest expansion in Mexico is expected to create some 1,000 jobs. “We will start building, constructing the extensions and the new battery assembly in the beginning of 2024, and we will start [to ramp up] production at the beginning of 2027,” plant head Harald Gottsche told the wire service. Mexico’s solar park project is also set to launch in April, further promoting the country’s transition away from fossil fuels. Environmentalists have criticized President Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s energy policies for being retrograde and nationalist, and for prioritizing state company Pemex.

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beseches armed and criminal groups not to kill, torture or disappear in order to begin talks with the state. Though formal talks have only begun with the rebel National Liberation Army, or ELN, and legal challenges have at least temporarily limited the scope of talks with criminal organizations, the administration says its priority is to reduce the humanitarian toll of violence. The government’s enticements toward dialogue have reduced homicides in some areas, but they have not yet managed to curb the types of violence, including social leader assassinations, that armed and criminal groups consider central to their strategy for territorial control. In initial conversations with these groups, the government should pay particular heed to these types of violence to ensure that armed groups do not merely stop killing but also soften their asphyxiating hold over many communities.”

A **Juan F. Vargas, professor of economics at Universidad del Rosario:** “Human rights activists and social leaders have long been targeted in Colombia, especially during periods when traditional rural elites see their monopoly on political power threatened by left wing newcomers—in most cases after political reforms that attempt to democratize the political arena. The cleansing of the Patriotic Union party in the 1980s and 1990s, which the Inter-American Court recently recognized as a state-led genocide, is an infamous example. The recent peace process with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and ultimately the peace agreement that the government reached with that insurgency in 2016, which entailed mechanisms for the political participation of former combatants, intensified the targeting of activists and leaders. Former FARC strongholds have been particularly vulnerable. More recently, the victory of the first left-wing president, Gustavo Petro, in Colombia’s 200 years as an independent nation exacerbated the trend as powerful

elites saw their power menaced by Petro’s campaign promises of political and economic redistribution. Unfortunately, due to its recent ascent, its conflictive relationship with

“**President Petro has diverged his policy priority to a naive energetic transition that will most likely carry large fiscal and political costs...**”

— Juan F. Vargas

the armed forces and the state’s known lack of capacity to control the entire territory, the new government hasn’t been able to improve the security of local leaders and activists. Instead, President Petro has diverged his policy priority to a naive energetic transition that will most likely carry large fiscal and political costs.”

A **Julia Zulver, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellow at the University of Oxford, and Kiran Stallone, Ph.D candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley:** “We are gender and conflict scholars whose work focuses on violence against social leaders in Colombia. Our research shows that armed groups see social leaders as a threat because of their public-facing work, which often involves justice-based demands, speaking out against violence, attempts to document atrocities and sometimes even directly challenging the spaces where armed groups operate. Social leaders who pursue peacebuilding and environmental agendas are at particularly high risk. Our research focuses on how women activists are targeted in distinct ways when compared to men activists. Last year, we interviewed 40 Colombian social leaders and human rights activists about the threats

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they receive from armed groups. Unlike their male counterparts, women leaders received threats of sexual violence and threats that challenged their position in the public space. They were told that as women, they belonged at home performing domestic duties. Male leaders, although they were killed in higher numbers, did not receive such threats. This leads us to believe that women are being targeted and punished not only for their leadership, but also for transgressing the gender norms that armed groups establish in the territories they control. We also found that many social leaders requested protection measures from Colombia's National Protection Unit and were either declined or received nothing due to high demands and limited resources. Moreover, we found that when protection measures were provided, they did not meet leaders' needs. Both women and men leaders told us the transportation they are assigned estranges them from their communities, and that their security details don't adequately protect their families and children. And in the case of women leaders specifically, we learned they are assigned bulletproof vests that don't fit their bodies. President Petro has promised to assess and reform Colombia's national protection system, but we are not yet seeing comprehensive results. We insist that any actions to protect social leaders must take women's and men's different experiences into account, and must create spaces for both to voice their specific—and gendered—protection needs."

A **Gwen Burnyeat, junior research fellow in anthropology at the University of Oxford:** "The increase in killings reflects the continuation of a trend in rising violence against civilians, largely attributable to inadequate implementation of the 2016 peace accord with the FARC guerrilla, particularly by the Duque administration. Within this context of increasing insecurity, 2022 was an election year, and many

political activists were threatened, especially those campaigning for Petro. Additionally, some armed groups ramped up activities to demonstrate their power and obtain greater leverage in eventual negotiations with the Petro administration. Other killings suggest a backlash to the increased participation of

“**The increase in killings reflects the continuation of a trend in rising violence against civilians...**”

— Gwen Burnyeat

social movements in the national agenda under Petro, such as the Regional Dialogues that give agency to local actors. Petro has taken important steps to address this violence, including restarting the National Commission for Security Guarantees which was inactive under Duque, and implementing an emergency plan to protect the lives of social leaders. But his main objective is to end the conflict with the remaining armed groups and achieve 'total peace.' His government has begun peace talks with the National Liberation Army guerrilla and has created the legal framework for negotiations with other armed groups such as the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC) and dissident FARC factions that either did not sign the 2016 peace accord or rearmed after demobilization, and cease-fire agreements are under development with many of these groups. Reducing violence in Colombia will depend on successfully synchronizing shorter-term mechanisms to prevent targeted assassinations with the long-term strategy of ending the conflict with all groups and building sustainable peace."

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

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