

Filing Country Conditions Evidence for your Asylum Case

Evidence about your home country can help you win your asylum case. This type of evidence is called “country conditions” evidence. Country conditions evidence can help show the Immigration Court why you are afraid to go back to your home country and help you to tell your story. They also help to show the Immigration Court why other people in your situation would fear returning to their home country, and to show the Immigration Court the danger and lack of protection which exists in your home country. Country conditions evidence can be **filed at the same time or after** filing your Form I-589 Application for Asylum.

Make sure you file your Country Conditions Packet by the deadline set by the Immigration Judge: IF NO OTHER DATE SET, SUBMIT AT LEAST 15 DAYS BEFORE YOUR HEARING!

Step by Step Instructions:

- (1) **Download a Country Conditions Packet that has information about your country and why you and others in your situation are afraid to return to your home country;**
- (2) **Make sure you know where your court is, who your judge is, and when your hearing date is, which you can find by clicking the link below and entering your A Number:**
 - a. EOIR Portal Link: <https://acis.eoir.justice.gov/en/>
- (3) **On the first page of your Country Conditions Packet, you will need to:**
 - a. Write your complete name, A Number, and the complete names and A Numbers of any family members who are part of the case, such as your spouse or children; and
 - b. Write the city and state of the Immigration Court, the name of the judge, and the time and date of your Individual Hearing (which you can check at the EOIR Portal link above).
- (4) **On the last page of your Country Conditions Packet, you will need to:**
 - a. Write your name, the date that you are filing your Country Conditions Packet, and the address of the ICE Attorney’s office (OPLA) who has jurisdiction over your case, which can be found by looking through the OPLA directory at: <https://www.ice.gov/contact/field-offices?office=12>; and

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- b. Sign the line at the bottom of the page – this is an important step, as it proves to the Immigration Court that you are also mailing a copy to the ICE Attorney!

(5) Print (3) copies of your Country Conditions Packet: you will need 1 copy for Immigration Court, 1 copy for ICE, and 1 copy for yourself;

(6) Filing with Immigration Court:

- a. Submit the first copy of your Country Conditions Packet directly to the Immigration Court that has your case, which you can find by clicking the link below and entering your A Number: EOIR Portal Link: <https://acis.eoir.justice.gov/en/>. This can be submitted in person to the Immigration Court or by mail.
 - i. If file in-person, ask the court clerk to also stamp your copy – this is your proof that you submitted your country conditions packet!
 - ii. If you file by mail, make sure you mail the packet via USPS certified mail and keep proof of your tracking number.
 - iii. The court closes at 4pm – if you have arrived in line to submit your packet before 4pm, the court has to accept it that same day!

(7) Filing with ICE:

- a. Mail your second copy to the ICE Attorney at their OPLA office address
 - i. This will be the same address that you have written on the last page of the Country Conditions Packet (which can be found at the OPLA directory link above).

(8) Your copy:

- a. Keep the third copy, your copy, stamped by the Immigration Court, as your proof that you submitted your country conditions packet and to have at your Individual Hearing. This is important because you will need to bring this to your final hearing, which is called an “Individual Hearing.”

(9) The Individual Hearing:

- a. If asked by the Immigration Judge whether you have submitted “country conditions” or “evidence” to support your case, say YES, and show them your stamped copy of the packet as proof!

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PRO SE

NON-DETAINED

Name/Nombre: _____

Address/Direccion: _____

Phone/Telefono: _____

**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
EXECUTIVE OFFICE FOR IMMIGRATION REVIEW
IMMIGRATION COURT**

(City, State of Immigration Court/Ciudad, Estado de Corte de Inmigracion)

_____)
In the Matter of:)
_____)
(Name/Nombre))
_____)
(Name/Nombre))
_____)
(Name/Nombre))
_____)
_____)
_____)
_____)
_____)
The Respondent(s))
_____)

File No. A: _____
(A Number/Numero A)

File No. A: _____
(A Number/Numero A)

File No. A: _____
(A Number/Numero A)

IN REMOVAL PROCEEDINGS

Immigration Judge: _____
(Name of Judge/Nombre del Juez)

Hearing Date: _____
(Hearing Date/Fecha de la Proxima Audiencia)

**PRO SE RESPONDENT'S EVIDENCE IN SUPPORT OF APPLICATION FOR
ASYLUM AND FOR WITHHOLDING OF REMOVAL**

**APPENDIX OF COUNTRY CONDITIONS IN SUPPORT OF
APPLICATION FOR ASYLUM AND WITHHOLDING OF REMOVAL ON FORM I-589**

Date	Article Summary	Tab	Pages
	COUNTRY CONDITIONS IN ECUADOR DEMONSTRATING PERVASIVE GANG VIOLENCE AND CONTROL		
2023	<p><u>Ecuador 2022 Human Rights Report</u> <i>U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor</i></p> <p>Available at: https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/415610_ECUADOR-2022-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf</p> <p>“Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: torture and abuse by police officers and prison guards; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media, including violence against journalists and the existence of criminal libel laws; serious government corruption; lack of investigation of and accountability for violence against women and children; and restrictions on workers’ freedom of association.”</p> <p>“Police attributed a large part of the country’s homicide rate to increased drug trafficking and conflicts among drug gangs fighting over trafficking routes. On August 14, media outlets and law enforcement authorities reported a bomb attack in the Cristo del Consuelo neighborhood in Guayaquil killed five persons, injured 17 others, and destroyed seven houses.”</p> <p>“Local media reported organized criminal groups attacked a judge and four public prosecutors during the year.”</p>	A	1-38
2024	<p><u>Can a War on Crime Bring Relief to Ecuador?</u> <i>International Crisis Group</i></p> <p>Available at: https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/ecuador/can-war-crime-bring-relief-ecuador</p>	B	39-44

	<p>“After grappling with worsening insecurity for several years, Ecuador witnessed a terrifying spike in violence in the first half of January. Criminal groups have shot civilians; looted stores; and set off car bombs and other explosions in the capital Quito and Guayaquil, a major port city on the Pacific coast.”</p> <p>“While Ecuador was formerly one of Latin America’s more peaceful nations, the violence is the culmination of a several-year trend. The country’s geography plays a role: sandwiched between Colombia and Peru – Latin America’s top producers of cocaine – Ecuador has emerged as a key transport and logistics link in the global drug supply chain. Hyper-violent gangs have buttressed their ranks by recruiting among communities impoverished by COVID-19. Meanwhile, a shortfall in security investment during the Lenin Moreno administration, in part due to IMF-backed budget cuts, have starved the state’s security forces.”</p> <p>“The combination of a weak state and strong criminal forces has led to a near-doubling of homicides each year since 2020. The nation’s murder rate for last year – around 40 murders per 100,000 people – is the highest in its history, and makes the country one of the most violent in Latin America.”</p> <p>“According to Ecuadorian intelligence, thousands of troops and police officers collude with criminal groups. Indeed, these bands permeate public institutions at all levels, implicating current and former judges, police officers, prison guards, lawyers, mayors, and even former National Assembly deputies.”</p>		
2023	<p><u>A Surge in Crime and Violence Has Ecuador Reeling</u> <i>Council on Foreign Relations, Will Freeman</i></p> <p>Available at: https://www.cfr.org/blog/surge-crime-and-violence-has-ecuador-reeling</p> <p>“Across the country, extortion networks are strangling businesses large and small—even in the remote Galapagos Islands.”</p> <p>“For many Ecuadorians long accustomed to relative safety compared to neighboring states, the crime surge has turned life upside down. For decades, Ecuador was one of Latin America’s least violent countries. Now it has the region’s fourth-highest homicide rate—higher even than Mexico.”</p>	C	45-55

	<p>“Now, the country looks increasingly like its neighbors at their most violent—only with a much weaker state that increasingly bears the hallmarks of criminal cooptation.”</p>		
2024	<p><u>Treasury Sanctions Ecuador’s Notorious Los Choneros Gang and Its Leader</u> <i>U.S. Department of the Treasury</i></p> <p>Available at: https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2082</p> <p>“Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned one of Ecuador’s most violent gangs, Los Choneros, and its leader, José Adolfo Macías Villamar (also known by the alias “Fito”), pursuant to counter narcotics authorities. OFAC’s action follows a steep rise in violence in Ecuador attributed to the actions of Los Choneros and other drug trafficking gangs in the country.”</p> <p>“Drug trafficking gangs such as Los Choneros, many with ties to powerful drug cartels in Mexico, threaten the lives and livelihoods of communities in Ecuador and throughout the region,” said Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian E. Nelson. “</p> <p>“Los Choneros, one of Ecuador’s most violent criminal organizations, has been involved in drug trafficking in Ecuador since the 1990s and is a key driver of the escalating violence that has plagued Ecuador since 2020. Los Choneros has also been running operations from inside state and federal penitentiaries throughout the country. With support from the Sinaloa Cartel, Los Choneros gained control of key cocaine trafficking routes through Ecuador. In return, Los Choneros allegedly provided security and logistics services to the Sinaloa Cartel.”</p>	D	56-58
2023	<p><u>Ecuador: Events of 2023</u> <i>Human Rights Watch</i></p> <p>Available at: https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/ecuador</p> <p>“In a context of fragile democratic institutions, Ecuador has seen a sharp increase in violence and activity by organized crime, which took homicide rates to unprecedented levels.”</p>	E	59-66

	<p>“Ecuador’s homicide rate surged from 13.7 per 100,000 people in 2021 to 25.9 in 2022. In 2023, it escalated further to about 45, placing Ecuador among the top three most violent Latin American countries, alongside Venezuela and Honduras.”</p> <p>“Two large gangs—the Choneros and the Lobos—collaborate with Colombian, Mexican, and Albanian drug traffickers supplying Ecuador. Fighting for territorial control, the gangs have escalated their use of extreme violence, including decapitations and dismemberments, car bombings, and attacks on and killings of judges, prosecutors, journalists, and political candidates.”</p>		
2023	<p><u>“We should treat it as a war:” Ecuador’s descent into drug gang violence</u> <i>The Guardian, Dan Collyns</i></p> <p>Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/12/ecuador-violence-bloody-drug-war</p> <p>“In recent years, the South American country has experienced a nightmarish descent into violence, with successive governments proving unable to rein in organized crime factions.”</p> <p>“Businesses, big and small, are also targeted for extortion – and risk kidnapping if they refuse to pay. This June, an Italian restaurant owner, Benny Colonico, was snatched at gunpoint from its premises by kidnappers dressed as police officers.”</p> <p>“Arturo Carpio was just 24 years old when he was shot at a late night gathering outside his family home in July. He died from his injuries days later in hospital. CCTV footage shows the killers running from the scene and fleeing in a white vehicle but his bereaved partner, who also asked not to be named, said his murder was not reported to the police “out of fear that they would do to his family members what they did to him”. “There would be no point trying to make some kind of complaint,” said the 19-year-old college student, alleging that the same gang that carried out his murder infiltrated the police force. She too fears for her life, as the murderers – known to her and the family – are still at large. The couple had been together for three years, and dreamed of a future together outside Ecuador, she said.”</p>	F	67-75

2023	<p><u>AP Photos: Surge in Gang Violence upends life in Ecuador</u> <i>Rodrigo Abd, Associated Press</i></p> <p>Available at: https://apnews.com/article/ecuador-violence-gangs-photo-gallery-f75d89c67d79f2f564abc883cc09b2cc</p> <p>“Dismembered limbs lie on the street next to playing children. Prisons are arenas of gang warfare. Bloodshed keeps schools shut down. And a presidential candidate is assassinated in broad daylight.”</p> <p>“Authorities documented 4,603 homicides in 2022, nearly doubling the toll of the previous year and making Ecuador one of the most dangerous countries in Latin America.”</p> <p>“Residents walk past police tape that marks off a crime scene to reach their home in Duran, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, after midnight, Thursday, Sept. 28, 2023. According to police, a driver was shot and taken to the hospital.”</p> <p>“Gunshots regularly ring out, their sounds reverberating over multi-colored homes that wind up into the mountains overlooking the nearby Pacific.”</p>	G	76-104
2022	<p><u>Ecuador police to investigate grisly deaths potentially tied to drugs bust</u> <i>Yury Garcia, Reuters</i></p> <p>Available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/ecuador-police-investigate-grisly-deaths-potentially-tied-drugs-bust-2022-02-14/</p> <p>“Violence and crime, including within the prison system, have exploded in Ecuador since the end of last year, with the government blaming drug-trafficking gangs which use the country to export narcotics to the United States and Europe.”</p> <p>“Families of the victims - who local media reported were found with their hands and feet tied, with their heads wrapped in adhesive tape - reported them missing on Friday, Cortez said.”</p> <p>“President Guillermo Lasso is fighting the crime wave with legal reforms and increased presence of police and soldiers on the streets, but so far the measures have not succeeded.”</p>	H	105-113

2024	<p><u>Adolfo Macías Villamar: Curfew in Ecuador after infamous gang leader 'Fito' vanishes from cell</u> <i>Vanessa Buschschluter & Robert Plummer, BBC</i></p> <p>Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-67912235</p> <p>“A 60-day state of emergency has begun in Ecuador after a convicted gang leader vanished from his prison cell.”</p> <p>“Adolfo Macías Villamar, better known as "Fito", is the leader of Los Choneros, a powerful gang which is thought to have been behind some of the deadly prison riots in recent months.”</p> <p>“He often defies the authorities, most recently by releasing a "narcocorrido", a slick music video glorifying his criminal exploits, which was partly recorded inside the jail.</p> <p>“The gang, which is named after its power base in the town of Chone, mainly engages in drug trafficking and extortion and has forged links with Mexico's powerful Sinaloa cartel.”</p>	I	114-119
2024	<p><u>Gangs, gunmen and cartels running amok. As terror grips the streets of Ecuador, even the armed forces live in fear</u> <i>David Culver, Abel Alvarado, and Carlos Martinelli, CNN</i></p> <p>Available at: https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/25/americas/ecuador-gangs-terror-cartels-intl/index.html</p> <p>“Musician Diego Gallardo was killed when going to pick up his son amid the violence of January 9 when armed gunmen took over a local TV studio. His death was one of multiple violent incidents taking place in the country that week, which saw a gang leader escape from Guayaquil prison complex, prompting the government to call for a state of emergency.”</p> <p>“Days earlier, one of the country’s most notorious gang leaders – José Adolfo Macías, or “Fito” – had escaped from his prison cell in Guayaquil, prompting the government to declare a state of emergency. That declaration provoked criminal groups to unleash fury in the city on January 9 – marking a turning point in Ecuador’s fight against the gangs.”</p>	J	120-132

	<p>“Ecuadorians' confidence in police and the judicial system has fallen over the past 10 years. In 2022, only two in five expressed trust in local police and only one in four in courts.”</p> <p>“On the front lines, while there is determination, there is also hesitation. Among the police and military tasked with conducting raids and preemptive strikes, some fear what will happen to them or their families if terrorists link them to the crackdown efforts.”</p> <p>“Locals are tired of living in fear and being extorted for protection money, says Carlos Jimenez, an urban planner who studied in the US and is now living in his native Ecuador. “These people are in the middle of gunfights in their neighborhoods, what would you do? You’re not going to want to stay there.”</p>		
2024	<p><u>Ecuador Faces a Tangled Web in Its War on Gangs</u> <i>Anastasia Austin, InsightCrime</i></p> <p>Available at: https://insightcrime.org/news/ecuador-faces-tangled-web-war-on-gangs/</p> <p>“Ecuador’s numerous gangs boast significant territorial presence and a diversity of funding streams that will pose a formidable challenge to the country’s weak institutions in what will likely be a drawn-out conflict between organized crime and the state.”</p> <p>“Noboa faces fragmenting criminal structures with diverse income streams, and the gangs have made it clear that they maintain a presence beyond traditional criminal hotspots.”</p> <p>“The gangs also have an expansive geographical reach that could stretch government resources thin. Over the past week, bombings and other acts of intimidation have taken place in areas traditionally considered secure, including the capital, Quito, the major transport hub of Riobamba, and Cuenca, Ecuador’s third-largest city.”</p> <p>“Complicating the government’s response further is that these groups — which initially thrived off drug trafficking profits — have since diversified their income streams, making it difficult to cut off money funding the gangs’ side of the war.“</p> <p>“In starting a war with Ecuador’s gangs, Noboa has given little indication of his exit strategy, and there is growing evidence that Ecuador will become bogged down in a long-term conflict.”</p>	K	133-140

2024	<p><u>‘You cannot play with the mafia.’ Ecuador’s escalating gang violence is broadcast live as masked gunmen storm TV studio</u> <i>Allen Panchana and Gonzalo Solano, PBS</i></p> <p>Available at: https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/you-cannot-play-with-the-mafia-ecuadors-escalating-gang-violence-is-broadcast-live-as-masked-gunmen-storm-tv-studio/</p> <p>“Schools and stores sat shuttered, many people stayed home and soldiers roamed the streets of Ecuador’s biggest cities Wednesday, the day after armed gang members who invaded a television station during a live broadcast aroused new levels of fear in a nation experiencing a wave of criminal violence.”</p> <p>““We are on air, so you know that you cannot play with the mafia,” one of the assailants is heard saying.”</p> <p>“Ecuadorian officials said Tuesday that another gang leader, Fabricio Colón Pico of the Los Lobos group, had escaped from a prison in the town of Riobamba. Colón Pico was captured Friday as part of a kidnapping investigation and has also been accused of trying to kill one of the nation’s lead prosecutors.”</p> <p>“Located on South America’s Pacific coast between Peru and Colombia, the world’s largest cocaine producers, Ecuador has become a key transit point for the drug in recent years. Much of the violence suffered by the country comes as drug gangs fight each other and the government for control of ports and smuggling routes.”</p>	L	141-143
2023	<p><u>How Gang Violence Is Shaking Up Ecuador’s Election</u> <i>Anna Gordon, TIME</i></p> <p>Available at: https://time.com/6306577/ecuador-election-gang-violence-safety/</p> <p>“Ecuador now has the fourth highest homicide rate in Latin America—behind only Venezuela, Honduras, and Colombia. The violence has been devastating for residents who are about to head into a presidential election on Sunday.”</p> <p>““In Ecuador, violence right now is very unpredictable. A crime can happen anywhere,” says Freeman. “In the Western Pacific Coast, which has it the worst, I think it’s dangerous just to leave your house regardless of [whether] it’s Election Day or not.””</p>	M	144-152

	<p>“The combination of high sovereign debt, a growing gang population, and a surging demand for cocaine across the world left Ecuador in a vulnerable state when the FARC disbanded in 2017.”</p>		
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ECUADOR 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ecuador is a constitutional, multiparty republic with an elected president and unicameral legislature. In April 2021, voters elected President Guillermo Lasso Mendoza from a center-right alliance of the Creating Opportunities Movement, the Social Christian Party, and other selected members of the National Assembly in elections that observers deemed free and fair.

The National Police maintains internal security and law enforcement and is under the authority of the Ministry of Interior. The military is under the authority of the Ministry of Defense. Police and military forces share responsibility for border enforcement, with the military also having limited domestic security responsibilities. The military may complement police operations to maintain and control public order when expressly mandated. Migration officers are civilians and report to the Ministry of Interior. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces. There were reports that members of the security forces committed some abuses.

Social and Indigenous movements' opposition to government economic policies led to widespread street protests and a shutdown of major city roads and provincial highways that lasted for 18 days in June, the most protracted protests in the country's history. Protest leaders ended the demonstrations on June 30 after reaching a peace agreement with the government that addressed some of their demands and agreeing to a 90-day dialogue period to resolve remaining matters. The protests paralyzed the country, significantly disrupting economic activity and medical services. Attacks by nongovernmental armed groups against security forces during the protests, and police and military responses to those attacks and protests, resulted in deaths and injuries among security forces and civilians.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: torture and abuse by police officers and prison guards; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media, including violence against journalists and the existence of criminal libel laws; serious government corruption;

lack of investigation of and accountability for violence against women and children; and restrictions on workers' freedom of association.

The government took steps to investigate and prosecute officials who committed human rights abuses or engaged in corruption.

Members of criminal gangs in prisons committed acts of torture and killed their rivals during prison disturbances. There were incidents of violence and threats of violence against politicians, journalists, prosecutors, and judges likely perpetrated by nongovernment actors. Members of society engaged in crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons. The government investigated these crimes, and prosecutions were pending.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. Human rights organizations, however, blamed excessive force by security forces for the deaths of some of the six protesters who died during the June demonstrations. Ministry of Interior officials indicated the causes of death of at least two protesters were due to "circumstance or accident" and had no direct relation with security force actions. Several national and international human rights organizations reported Byron Guatatuca Vargas was killed by a tear gas canister fired at close range, penetrating his skull. Government officials stated Guatatuca died from handling explosives. On June 22, the Attorney General's Office opened an ex officio investigation of the case. The Internal Affairs Unit of the National Police investigates police killings and refers cases to the Attorney General's Office to pursue prosecutions.

On November 23, the Ombudsman's Office presented its report and concluded security forces used "disproportionate force during the social protests." According to the report, the most serious abuses were the deaths of eight persons, including an armed forces officer. The report also called for the creation of a truth commission

to foster reconciliation and reparation to victims and victims' families.

On January 19, a court sentenced police officer Wilson Santiago Olmedo to three years and four months in prison for the crime of “exceeding the limits [of the use of force] in the execution of an act of service.” In June 2021, Olmedo killed two armed assailants as they attacked their victim during an attempted robbery in Riobamba while Olmedo was off duty. The court also ordered him to pay the equivalent of 10 minimum wages and \$10,000 to the victims' families as compensation. On August 25, a Chimborazo court accepted an appeal from the Attorney General's Office, which argued the original sentence did not correspond to sentencing guidelines, and increased his prison sentence to 13 years.

Police attributed a large part of the country's homicide rate to increased drug trafficking and conflicts among drug gangs fighting over trafficking routes. On August 14, media outlets and law enforcement authorities reported a bomb attack in the Cristo del Consuelo neighborhood in Guayaquil killed five persons, injured 17 others, and destroyed seven houses. On November 1-6, gangs orchestrated simultaneous attacks on police and public places in five cities in response to government plans to transfer prisoners to break up gang monopolies in Litoral Prison, the country's largest. The violence resulted in at least nine fatalities, including of five police officers, and at least 29 explosions, 17 shooting events, and eight unexploded ordnances in public places. The government attributed the attacks to drug gangs and stated criminal groups had “declared war on the State.” Following the August and November attacks, President Lasso declared “states of exception” establishing a police-military task force to combat gang-related crime in targeted cities and provinces and also allowing security forces to use proportional force depending on the threat.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

On February 17, a court ratified the nine-year prison sentence given to former intelligence director Pablo Romero for the 2012 kidnapping in Colombia of opposition legislator Fernando Balda. In 2020, the National Court of Justice found Romero guilty of planning the abduction at the order of then President Rafael

Correa, who was also indicted but fled to Belgium. By law, Romero may file an appeal but had not done so as of August 25.

On January 28, the country's representative to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights accepted the state's responsibility for the forced disappearance in Quito in 1990 of writer César Gustavo Garzón Guzmán. In October 2021, the court condemned the state for Garzón's forced disappearance. The court ordered the government to perform, within a reasonable time and with utmost diligence, an investigation to identify, prosecute, and punish those responsible for the crime. The agents responsible for Garzón's disappearance remained unknown.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and Other Related Abuses

While the law prohibits torture and similar forms of intimidation and punishment, there were credible reports police officers and prison guards tortured and abused suspects and prisoners.

Human rights activists reported that as of August 23, officials had not investigated claims alleging police kidnappings, torture, or other forms of degrading treatment during police interrogations related to the October 2019 protests. Human rights advocates said the Attorney General's Office continued to investigate alleged crimes against humanity in the protests that involved former President Lenin Moreno, former Minister of Defense Oswaldo Jarrin, and former Minister of Government Maria Paula Romo. Police stated their actions were aimed at restoring public order and did not result in human rights abuses.

As of August 25, the judiciary had not set a date for the retrial of 37 police officers sentenced in November 2021 to 106 days in prison each for excessive use of force in a 2016 operation to confiscate contraband from inmates in Turi Prison. The defendants appealed the ruling, and in 2020 an Azuay court annulled the 2021 trial and ordered a retrial.

While the law does not protect officials who commit human rights abuses, human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and others reported that the lack of prosecutions of police officers who allegedly used excessive force against

demonstrators during the October 2019 protests could be interpreted as impunity.

The Internal Affairs Unit of the National Police investigates whether police killings are justifiable and can refer cases to the Attorney General's Office to pursue prosecutions. An intelligence branch within the military has a role similar to the police internal affairs unit. The law states the Attorney General's Office must be involved in all human rights abuse investigations, including unlawful killings and forced disappearances. Human rights defenders reported the National Police Internal Affairs Unit and Attorney General's Office often failed to conduct adequate investigations, noting for example that follow-up on abuse claims was hindered by high staff turnover in the Internal Affairs Unit.

On August 6, the legislature passed the Organic Law that Regulates the Legitimate Use of Force. The law provides a legal framework to guide the actions of the National Police, armed forces, and Penitentiary Security and Surveillance Corps (prison guards) and regulates the specific circumstances in which the use of force is allowed during peaceful demonstrations or social protests to ensure respect for human rights. Broadly, the law makes the use of force a "last resort" self-defense measure and requires security forces to abide by internationally recognized use-of-force principles such as legality, necessity, proportionality, and accountability. It also explicitly authorizes the military to support the police and prison guards to control prison riots during declared states of exception and obligates the government to provide lawyers to defend police accused of using excessive force while carrying out their duties.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were harsh and life threatening due to gross overcrowding, gang violence, official corruption, food shortages, and inadequate sanitary conditions and medical care.

Abusive Physical Conditions: Prisons continued to be overcrowded, although the government reported a significant drop in the overcrowding rate. According to the National Service of Comprehensive Attention to Adults Deprived of Liberty and Adolescent Offenders, in 2021 the rate was 27 percent, compared with 8 percent as of August 8.

Access to and quality of food, potable and hot water, heating, sanitation, and medical care were inadequate. Officials confirmed inmates did not have safe and permanent access to nutritious food. An NGO reported authorities sometimes kept prisoners confined in cells for long periods without an opportunity for movement, exercise, or use of showers or sanitary facilities. An NGO reported that prison officials, including medical staff, often failed to adequately screen and segregate prisoners with mental and physical disabilities from the rest of the prison population.

Prison officials and human rights organizations agreed most violent deaths in prisons were linked to rivalries among criminal gangs with links to drug cartels. Fighting between drug-trafficking gangs in prisons led to 96 violent deaths through July 31. As of July, the prison death rate was notably lower than in 2021 (337 total deaths), although more than twice the rate in 2020 (51 total deaths). On May 9, a clash between drug gangs in a Santo Domingo prison left at least 44 dead. Authorities attributed the violence to overcrowding and the recent transfer into the prison of inmates from a rival gang. NGOs reported that criminal organizations operating within and without prisons intimidated prison staff while on and off duty, and inmates enlisted visitors and prison staff to smuggle contraband, including weapons, into prisons.

Administration: Authorities sometimes conducted investigations of credible allegations of mistreatment in prisons.

Human rights organizations continued to report that visitors faced degrading treatment during check-in at prison facilities, including the removal of clothing and illumination of genitalia by flashlights while being forced to jump naked.

Independent Monitoring: Civil society representatives continued to report restrictions to monitoring by independent NGO observers. According to the NGO Permanent Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, authorities failed to respond to many independent observers' requests to visit prisons. The NGO also noted restrictions to visits from the Ombudsman's Office and from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Improvements: On November 28, 1,360 new prison guards and 100 new

education inspectors graduated from training to reinforce prison security and education programs in 36 prisons nationwide.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention and provides for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court, but there were reports provincial and local authorities did not always observe these provisions. According to NGOs, illegal detentions continued to occur.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law requires authorities to issue specific written arrest orders prior to detention, and a judge must charge a suspect with a specific criminal offense within 24 hours of arrest. NGOs stated judges frequently did not determine a specific criminal offense, particularly for arrests of protesters. Authorities generally observed the time limit for charging a suspect, although in some provinces initial detention was often considerably longer.

Detainees have a constitutional right to an attorney. Those without financial means to pay for an attorney have the right to request a court-appointed attorney from the Public Defender's Office. Although court-appointed defenders were available, the number of cases and limited time to prepare for the defense continued to present a disadvantage to defendants using a public defender during trials.

The law entitles detainees to prompt visits by lawyers and family members, but NGOs continued to report delays depending on the circumstances and the willingness of local courts and prison guards to enforce the law.

Arbitrary Arrest: Media outlets and human rights organizations reported more than 150 arbitrary detentions of protesters during the June demonstrations, claiming that authorities failed to communicate the reasons for arrests and prevented lawyers from communicating with detainees.

Human rights organizations and activists reported the arbitrary detention in Cotopaxi on June 14 of Indigenous leader Leonidas Iza during the social protests that started on June 13. According to human rights organizations, Iza was held

incomunicado for nearly 15 hours without being notified of the reason for his detention. He was also transported from his home province of Cotopaxi to the province of Pichincha, where he was detained. On June 15, a judge ordered a charging process against Iza for allegedly paralyzing public services during the social protest; the court also ordered his release, directed him to report periodically to the Attorney General's Office, and forbade him to leave the country. On August 18, a judge granted Iza a special permit to travel to Brazil to attend an Inter-American Human Rights Court hearing concerning the rights of Indigenous persons. A judge dismissed the case against Iza on September 26.

Pretrial Detention: Corruption and general judicial inefficiency caused trial delays. The length of pretrial detention did not usually exceed the maximum sentence for the alleged crime.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

While the constitution provides for an independent judiciary, outside pressure and corruption impaired the judicial process. Legal experts, bar associations, and NGOs reported on the susceptibility of the judiciary to bribes for favorable decisions and faster resolution of cases.

The Judicial Council is the only government authority empowered to remove corrupt judges, but it encountered resistance when attempting to remove some judges. In December 2021, the Constitutional Court heard a request by a judges' association that reported irregularities in a 2019 removal process. That year, the Judicial Council sought to remove 23 of 36 judges who were deemed not to have met the minimum evaluation qualification threshold and replace them with temporary judges from lower courts. The court case followed the council's February 2021 appointment of 11 permanent replacement judges. The court affirmed the council's decision but also ordered the government to compensate the removed judges. In March 2022, the council announced a public call to appoint six more permanent judges and 11 acting judges. As of August 25, the government had not compensated the removed judges.

Three members of the Judicial Council and its former president faced a highly politicized impeachment trial in the legislature due to alleged "breach of duties."

A group of legislators aligned with former President Rafael Correa accused the four individuals of irregularities in the evaluation and removal of judges in 2019 and in the process that replaced those judges. On October 13, the legislature voted to dismiss the impeachment trial against council members.

On May 20, the Judicial Council suspended National Court of Justice president Ivan Saquicela due to alleged “gross negligence” for delaying processing the request to Belgium for former President Rafael Correa’s extradition.

Local media reported organized criminal groups attacked a judge and four public prosecutors during the year. On May 5, prosecutor Victor Hugo Alcivar was seriously injured in an apparent attempt on his life in Santo Domingo. On May 25, prosecutor Luz Marina Delgado and her assistant were shot and killed in Manta. Delgado led a money-laundering investigation into the spouse of a drug trafficker. On July 28, Guayas prosecutor César Peña’s car was hit by gunfire but he was uninjured. On August 15, prosecutor Federico Estrella was shot and killed in Los Rios. Estrella worked for the only office in Babahoyo that investigates violent deaths and drug-related cases. On August 25, judge Nelson Patricio Yáñez was killed in Lago Agrio. The Attorney General’s Office was investigating these crimes.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the right to a fair and public trial, and the judiciary generally enforced this right. While defendants have the right to free assistance from an interpreter, some defendants complained of the lack of an interpreter at court hearings, that this in turn made preparation of a defense problematic for non-Spanish speakers, and that the quality of translators was poor and caused problems when working with public defenders.

Judges reportedly rendered decisions more quickly or more slowly due to media and political pressure or fear in some cases. There were reported delays of up to one year in scheduling some trials. Prisoners reported lengthy delays in setting dates for preliminary hearings after their cases reached a higher court.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Amnesty: On March 10, the National Assembly granted amnesty to 268 persons who participated in the October 2019 social protests. On March 29, the government appealed the amnesty's constitutionality to the Constitutional Court; the appeal was pending as of November 15.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Civil courts and the Administrative Conflicts Tribunal, generally considered independent and impartial, handle lawsuits seeking damages for, or the immediate cessation of, human rights abuses. Individuals and organizations may appeal decisions domestically and to regional human rights bodies.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law prohibits such actions, and there were no reports the government failed to respect these prohibitions.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media

The constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but laws restrict this right.

Freedom of Expression: The law prohibits persons from using “discrediting expressions,” treated as a misdemeanor with a 15- to 30-day prison term. There were no reports the government invoked this law to restrict freedom of expression.

Violence and Harassment: Local government authorities and criminal organizations committed acts of violence and harassment against journalists. Fundamedios journalist Paul Zamora reported receiving an anonymous death threat against himself and his family in a letter dropped at his front door on July 14.

Zamora filed a complaint with the Attorney General's Office and was awaiting a response as of December 7. At least two other journalists reported receiving anonymous death threats related to their work via messaging platforms and anonymized telephone calls.

Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media: There were significant restrictions on media freedom. Journalists and NGOs said certain politicians and political parties continued to use the “press as enemy” trope and accuse the media of being “corrupt” and “liars.” Media watchdog Fundamedios said the government had not made substantial progress on freedom of expression rights, noting both the lack of progress on investigating and prosecuting high-profile past abuses and ongoing abuses.

The law limits media's ability to provide election coverage during the official campaign period, with no coverage allowed in the final 48 hours preceding a national election. A Constitutional Court ruling affirmed the right of the press to conduct interviews and file special reports on candidates and issues during the campaign period, but the ruling left in place restrictions on “direct or indirect” promotion of candidates or specific political views.

Fundamedios reported a case in which a Ministry of Education official called a school principal giving a live interview to a local media outlet in Cuenca on January 7 and forced him to abruptly suspend his participation.

Fundamedios reported several journalists practiced self-censorship when covering the June protests after protesters sought out and attacked journalists from specific outlets they perceived as “progovernment” (see Nongovernmental Impact below). Some journalists subsequently denied their press affiliation as a form of self-protection, while others began reporting from rooftops or from the inside of vehicles.

On July 21, the legislature approved a communications law reform described by Fundamedios as containing “extreme violations of freedom of expression and press.” The bill restored the government's capacity to sanction and control media and journalists, ultimately, according to Fundamedios, authorizing censorship. The

bill eliminated protections for media expression of “opinion,” protecting only media rights to provide “information.” The legislature’s version also granted the government the right to decide which information was “true” or “false.” After extensive consultation with civil society and journalists, President Lasso issued a partial veto on August 24 and referred other sections of the bill that he deemed unconstitutional to the Constitutional Court for review. On October 3, the Constitutional Court accepted most of the president’s objections, including on the elimination of protections for expressing “opinion” and on governmental determination of “truthful” or “false” information. The bill was returned to the legislature, where the relevant committee drafted a new bill to take into account the Constitutional Court’s ruling. On October 20, after the legislature’s failure to accept or override the president’s August 24 veto of other provisions, those changes entered into force.

As of September 1, the bidding process for the allocation of FM radio and broadcast television frequencies, announced in 2020, remained stalled. Fundamedios and other groups had criticized the Agency for the Regulation and Control of Telecommunications-administered bidding process as lacking transparency and allowing two particular bidders to accumulate a disproportionate number of frequencies. In addition, Fundamedios claimed a June report from the Comptroller General’s Office on the most recent tender for frequency concessions pointed to irregularities committed by telecommunications agency officials.

Libel/Slander Laws: Libel and slander are criminal offenses under the law, with penalties of up to three years in prison, plus fines. The law assigns responsibility to media owners as well as journalists, who are liable for opinion pieces or statements by reporters or others, including readers, using their media platforms. Monitoring organizations reported the national government did not prosecute journalists for libel during the year. Organizations reported seven cases, however, in which politicians initiated legal proceedings against journalists.

On August 2, Guayaquil Mayor Cynthia Viteri filed a slander complaint against the newspaper *Diario Expreso* and journalists who investigated her family circle. Viteri also delivered a speech criticizing the newspaper and journalists investigating her family.

Nongovernmental Impact: Unknown persons not presumed connected with authorities conducted attacks, often fatal, against journalists in July and August. Domestic and international media rights groups reported a gunman shot and killed journalist Mike Cabrera in the coastal city of Portoviejo on July 24. On August 10, two gunmen shot and killed journalist Gerardo Delgado in the coastal city of Manta. Police later detained two suspected gunmen, one of whom said that he was paid \$2,000 to kill Delgado. Prior to the attack, Delgado posted videos regarding crime and neighborhood news on a Facebook page that he founded called Ola Manta TV. The journalist was well known in Manta and had publicly announced his plans to run for city council in the 2023 local elections. As of August 22, the Attorney General’s Office continued investigating the crime to determine if the perpetrators were connected to criminal groups.

During the June social protests, Fundamedios registered 164 acts of violence against media outlets and reported 242 journalists were attacked. This was an increase in violence toward media compared with the mass protests in October 2019, when the NGO registered 182 attacks against journalists. In June, Fundamedios noted increased violent speech from protesters who characterized the media as the “enemy” and targeted journalists from specific outlets alleged to be more favorable to the government, including Ecuavisa and Teleamazonas.

In February, a Guayas court convicted and sentenced to prison six individuals for killing television presenter Efrain Ruales in January 2021. In April, four of the individuals appealed the court’s decision. Authorities began a trial in May against a seventh suspect. An underage suspect was under investigation but remained under house arrest with police protection.

Actions to Expand Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Media: On May 18, the government’s Communications Council launched a Protocol of Action Against Aggressions Toward Communication Workers. At the event, Communications Council president Jeannine Cruz emphasized the importance of “protecting the voices of journalists.” According to media organizations, the council also helped journalists refer attacks against them to the Attorney General’s Office.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority.

A government regulation requires that internet service providers comply with all information requests from the superintendent of telecommunications, allowing access to client Internet Protocol (IP) addresses and information without a judicial order. The law holds a media outlet responsible for online comments from readers if the outlet has no established mechanisms for commenters to register their personal data (including national identification number) or no system to delete offensive comments. The law also prohibits media from using information obtained from social media unless they verify the author of the information.

As of September 6, the government had not issued regulations for the application of the 2021 Personal Data Protection Law and had not appointed a data protection superintendent. Media watchdog groups such as Fundamedios had largely praised the law for establishing high standards for data and privacy protection while protecting freedom of expression.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The law provides for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights, although authorities imposed some restrictions during the street protests in June and at other times.

The government declared six states of exception throughout the year due to rising crime, violent social protests, and illegal mining. The related executive decrees included restrictions on freedom of assembly and association. The Constitutional Court may determine the legality of a state of exception or limit its scope and duration. The court suspended the June state of exception when the protests ended on June 30, arguing that the situation had “changed substantially” and the government had not fully justified the validity of the measure after protests ended.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The law provides for freedom of peaceful assembly, and the government generally respected this right. Public rallies require prior government permits, which authorities usually granted.

The Ombudsman's Office continued to investigate alleged police repression during March 8 demonstrations commemorating International Women's Day. Participants and media outlets denounced police abuses against women, children, and journalists during the demonstrations. Police allegedly used tear gas and pepper spray and shot pressurized liquid at close range at participants. In some cases, women reported that police hit them with clubs or other items. Police also blocked streets in downtown Quito with shields, horses, and motorcycles to prevent protesters from reaching the main square where the presidential palace is located. The National Assembly's Constitutional Guarantees and Human Rights Committee also continued to investigate reported abuses during the march.

Human rights organizations claimed security forces committed human rights violations and abuses during the June protests, which in many cases also involved violence on the part of protesters. Amnesty International reported harassment, excessive use of force, and arbitrary arrests, in addition to mistreatment and criminalization of demonstrators, journalists, and human rights defenders. The Alliance for Human Rights, comprising 14 human rights national and local organizations, reported police and military repression resulted in six deaths, 335 injured protesters, 155 detentions, and 77 human rights abuses. As of July 6, the Attorney General's Office opened 403 investigations related to the protests, of which 369 were in the investigation phase and 34 in the charging phase.

Freedom of Association

The law provides for freedom of association, and the government generally respected this right. Civil society representatives noted some policies enacted during the Correa administration remained in place and could enable the government to dissolve independent organizations for poorly defined reasons.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The law provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these related rights.

e. Protection of Refugees

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Organization for Migration, and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, and other vulnerable persons of concern. In addition, the human mobility law codifies protections granted to migrants in the constitution, advances the protection of refugees and asylum seekers, and provides for nonrefoulement, noncriminalization of irregular migration, and equal treatment before the law for migrants.

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees.

Abuse of Migrants and Refugees: Migrants and refugees, especially women, children, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) individuals, sometimes experienced sexual and gender-based violence and human trafficking, according to UN agencies and local NGOs. Authorities reported an increase in forced labor, sex trafficking, and the forced recruitment of migrants and refugees into criminal activity, such as drug trafficking and robbery, on the northern and southern borders, particularly by transnational criminal organizations and criminal groups that also operated in Colombia. Migrant and refugee arrivals at irregular crossings amid continued border closures complicated the government's ability to address and prevent abuses against migrants and refugees.

Access to Basic Services: The law provides for protection and access to health care, education, and other services to all individuals irrespective of their migration

status. Nonetheless, some Venezuelan migrant and refugee children remained out of the school system, according to official government statistics. According to NGOs, barriers to the enrollment and retention of refugee and migrant children in school included a lack of information regarding the right to access to education, hidden costs of schooling such as uniforms, lack of classroom space, and, in some instances, xenophobic attitudes towards Venezuelans. According to UN agencies and NGOs, refugees encountered discrimination in employment and housing. Recognized refugees received national identification cards that facilitated access to education, employment, banking, and other public services; however, refugees and migrants reported that at times employers did not recognize government-issued documents that establish their right to work.

Durable Solutions: The government accepted refugees for resettlement and offered naturalization to refugees but recognized very small numbers of Venezuelan refugees. Discrimination and limited access to formal employment and housing affected refugees' ability to assimilate into the local population.

Temporary Protection: On September 1, the Ministry of Interior opened the registration process to Venezuelan migrants who entered the country regularly, as well as all unaccompanied minors, regardless of nationality or migration status. Registration for an estimated 100,000 non-Venezuelans who entered the country regularly opened on November 16. Registration for an estimated 350,000 Venezuelans who entered the country irregularly was scheduled to open on February 16, 2023. Registration produces a certificate, which acts as a temporary residence permit and protects the holder from deportation on migration-related grounds or from incurring migration-related fines while the regularization process is underway. Registration, scheduled to continue through 2025, must be completed before an applicant can start the regularization process to receive a visa. Those who complete registration and receive a registration certificate may apply for a temporary residency visa from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In nationwide elections held in February 2021, citizens elected the president and vice president, 137 National Assembly members, and five representatives to the Andean Parliament. Creating Opportunities Party candidate Guillermo Lasso Mendoza defeated Union for Hope opponent Andres Arauz Galarza in an April presidential runoff election. International observers from the Organization of American States, Inter-American Union of Electoral Organisms, and accredited diplomatic missions concluded the electoral process was orderly and peaceful, and they did not note any significant incidents.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No laws limit participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process, and they did participate.

Social media harassment of women politicians and candidates continued. The NGO Participación Ciudadana found 9,960 derogatory tweets against 33 sampled women in politics and government in a study of tweets posted between December 2019 and July 31, 2021. According to the study, 79 percent of derogatory tweets contained messaging dealing with the objectification of women and perceived roles of women in society.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, and the government took steps to implement the law effectively. There were numerous reports of government corruption throughout the year.

Corruption: The government launched or continued multiple investigations, judicial proceedings, and legislative audits of officials accused of corruption related to state contracts and commercial endeavors that reached the highest levels of government.

On July 28, the Attorney General's Office raided the Cotopaxi prefecture offices and arrested Prefect Jorge Guamán and eight other government officials on

corruption charges. Guamán allegedly received millions of dollars in kickbacks in exchange for prefecture contracts and positions in the prefecture. The investigation continued as of August 31.

High-profile prosecutions and investigations continued of alleged public-health sector corruption at the national, provincial, and municipal levels during the COVID-19 crisis. In August, the trial of former Ecuadorian Institute of Social Security (IESS) board president Paul Granda and two former IESS hospital managers on organized crime charges began. Granda was also accused of irregularities in medical supply acquisition contracts during the COVID-19 emergency.

On April 21, the president of the National Court initiated the extradition process of former President Rafael Correa, wanted by the government for his alleged participation in the Sobornos (bribes) corruption scheme that illicitly financed Correa's Alianza PAIS party in exchange for public contracts from 2012 to 2016. On April 22, the Belgian government confirmed it had granted asylum to the former president and his family. On May 6, Belgium rejected Ecuador's extradition request.

On August 5, judge Banny Molina granted what legal experts termed a "dubious" habeas corpus to former Vice President Jorge Glas, Daniel Salcedo, and Christian Araujo after Molina judged the prisoners' rights to health and safety had been violated. Glas had been imprisoned since his 2017 conviction on bribery and corruption charges. Salcedo had been serving a 13-year sentence for embezzlement, while Araujo had been serving a 13-year sentence for murder. The government identified irregularities in the review, including that Molina acted without jurisdiction or competence, and appealed the decision. On August 10, a judge ordered an investigation of Molina, citing malfeasance, and placed him under house arrest. A judge overturned Molina's decision to grant Glas, Salcedo, and Araujo habeas corpus on August 26, and they remained in prison as of September 1.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human

Rights

A number of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were often cooperative and responsive to their views. A human rights organization reported some cases in which the government was reluctant to cooperate with local human rights NGOs while they conducted investigations.

Retribution Against Human Rights Defenders: On July 28, Amnesty International said that NGO Amazon Frontlines lawyer and human rights activist Lina Maria Espinosa received death threats while she provided legal support to the Indigenous communities that participated in the June protests.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The Ombudsman's Office is an administratively and financially independent body focused on human rights and subordinate to the Transparency and Social Control branch of government. The Ombudsman's Office regularly presented cases to the Public Prosecutor's Office. Human rights groups generally viewed the Ombudsman's Office as independent and effective.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape of men or women, including spousal and intimate partner rape, and domestic violence. The government enforced the law, although victims were sometimes reluctant to report these crimes. Rape is punishable with penalties of up to 22 years in prison. The law includes spousal rape under crimes against sexual and reproductive integrity. The penalty for rape where death occurred is 22 to 26 years' imprisonment. Domestic violence is punishable with penalties ranging from four days to seven years in prison and a substantial fine for "damages, pain, and suffering," depending on the severity of the crime. Penalties for physical, psychological, and sexual violence were enforced.

According to local experts, reporting rapes and other forms of violence continued to be a traumatic process, particularly for female minors. For example, a rape victim must file a complaint at the Public Prosecutor's Office and submit to gynecological evaluations akin to rape kits administered by medical experts. Many individuals did not report cases of rape and sexual assault due to fear of retribution from the perpetrator and social stigma.

The law provides for reparations to victims of gender-based violence. The law defines rape, including spousal rape or incest, forced prostitution, sexual harassment, and other analogous practices, as forms of sexual violence. It also entitles victims to immediate protective measures designed to prevent or stop violence, such as police surveillance, placement in shelters, and awareness programs for the victim and family. These measures were generally enforced.

According to human rights organizations, victims were generally reluctant to press domestic violence charges. Judges lacked specialized training for dealing with gender-based violence, and the court system was insufficiently staffed to deal with the caseload. Rights organizations also reported local protection-board officials at times discouraged victims from reporting their aggressors.

In June, the Attorney General's Office, in cooperation with the Judicial Council, National Police, Human Rights Secretariat, and other relevant offices, launched an interactive tool to unify national femicide statistics. As of September 11, the Attorney General's Office reported 61 femicides, on track to exceed the 70 total femicides in 2021. As of October 25, the Attorney General's Office reported the judiciary had not issued sentences in any of the 61 cases. The NGO Latin American Association for Alternative Development counted 206 women killed (under any circumstances) through September 3. The difference between statistics was due to a broader definition of "femicide" used by the association and civil society groups that reported to it.

On September 11, Lieutenant Coronel German Caceres, a senior police officer, allegedly killed his spouse, Maria Belen Bernal, on the campus of the police academy in Quito. Authorities found the victim's remains on September 21, buried on the slope of a volcano near the academy. The autopsy revealed the cause of death was asphyxiation by strangulation. Investigators questioned Caceres on

September 14 and then released him. Caceres disappeared soon afterwards and remained at large as of October 25. An investigation of the killing was underway.

Sexual Harassment: The law criminalizes sexual harassment and provides for penalties of one to five years in prison. The law defines sexual harassment and other analogous practices as forms of sexual violence and mandates that judges prohibit contact between the aggressor and the victim to prevent revictimization and intimidation, and the law was generally enforced. Despite the legal prohibition of sexual harassment and government implementation of the law, women's rights organizations said that victims tended not to report alleged harassment and that harassment remained common in public spaces.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Some women's rights activists complained that a lack of comprehensive sex education limited individuals' ability to manage their reproductive health and that ineffective distribution of birth control reduced access to contraception.

Emergency contraception was available as part of methods for family planning; however, the Roman Catholic Church's stance against contraceptive use and social stigma discouraged women from seeking family planning services.

A 2019 study found income status affected equity in sexual and reproductive health access and outcomes, with low income and rural individuals having significantly less access. UN agencies reported that vulnerable populations, including Afro-Ecuadorians, Indigenous groups, rural inhabitants, LGBTQI+ individuals, persons with disabilities, HIV-positive persons, and migrants faced, limited access and discrimination regarding the provision of reproductive health services.

CARE International observed there was less access to sexual and reproductive health resources for survivors of sexual violence than in previous years, and specifically, a lack of availability of emergency contraception as part of the clinical management of rape. International organizations said public hospitals were still restocking emergency contraception materials after a drop in national stock levels during the pandemic, caused by the government's focus on pandemic-related

issues.

In 2021, Secretary of Human Rights Bernarda Ordóñez stated 70 percent of girls ages 10 to 14 who became pregnant were most likely sexually violated. Ordóñez added that many of these adolescents also suffered from sexually transmitted diseases, urinary tract infections, and other health complications.

While the law prohibits discrimination against girls who become mothers, NGOs reported some faced discrimination and subsequently left school. A lack of resources also resulted in young mothers discontinuing their education to pursue work.

Discrimination: The constitution affords women the same legal status and rights as men. Nevertheless, discrimination against women was prevalent, particularly with respect to economic opportunities for older women and for those in the lower economic strata. Women continued to face wage disparities compared with men. NGOs said women also faced discrimination in job recruitment, housing access, and some judicial proceedings, namely, in reporting and filing charges in cases of alleged sexual abuse.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

The constitution declares the state to be plurinational and affirms the principle of nonviolence and nondiscrimination by recognizing the rights of Indigenous, Afro-Ecuadorian, and Montubio (an independent ethnic group of persons with a mixture of Afro-Ecuadorian, Indigenous, and Spanish ancestry) communities. It also mandates affirmative action policies to provide for the representation of minorities. NGOs and civil society representatives said those provisions were not effectively enforced.

Citing official data for 2021, media reported Indigenous, Afro-Ecuadorian, and Montubio populations experienced the highest poverty rates in the country. Among those populations, the most affected were Indigenous children, followed by Montubio girls.

Afro-Ecuadorians, who accounted for approximately 7 percent of the population, according to the most recent census (2010), suffered pervasive discrimination,

particularly regarding educational and economic opportunity. Afro-Ecuadorian organizations noted that, despite the absence of official discrimination, societal discrimination and stereotyping in media continued to result in barriers to employment, education, and housing. A national gender survey published in 2019 found Afro-Ecuadorian women were particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence and harassment based on racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes.

Attorney General Diana Salazar reported that on January 18, she received derogatory messages referencing her Afro-Ecuadorian ethnicity during a virtual meeting.

Indigenous Peoples

There were isolated reports of restrictions on Indigenous persons and their institutions in decisions affecting their property or way of life.

The law provides Indigenous persons the same civil and political rights as other citizens. The constitution recognizes Kichwa and Shuar as “official languages of intercultural relations.” The constitution obligates the state to consult local communities and Indigenous persons prior to initiation of projects on their lands through a process that is free, informed, and culturally appropriate, although Indigenous peoples’ organizations noted public- and private-sector actors often ignored prior consultation. Despite the legal obligation, the government had yet to pass a national community consultation law.

The constitution also allows Indigenous persons to participate in the economic benefits that natural resource extraction projects may bring and to receive compensation for any damages that result. In the case of environmental damage, the law mandates immediate corrective government action and full restitution from the responsible company, although some Indigenous organizations asserted a lack of consultation and remedial action. The law recognizes the rights of Indigenous communities to hold property communally, although the titling process remained incomplete in parts of the country.

A February 4 Constitutional Court ruling recognized the right of Indigenous communities to have the final decision over oil, mining, and other extractive projects that affect their lands. The ruling stems from the A’i Kofan community of

Sinangoe's 2018 lawsuit seeking the annulment of 52 gold-mining concessions granted by the government along the community's most important river. Considering numerous violations of the right to prior consultation, the Constitutional Court selected this case to establish a precedent requiring the government to obtain the consent of the affected communities before undertaking oil, mining, or other extractive plans or projects, based on Indigenous persons' rights to self-determination. The court also indicated in its ruling that reparation measures "are mandatory and immediately enforceable."

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship is acquired through birth in the country, birth to an Ecuadorian mother or father abroad, or by naturalization. Birth registration was provided on a nondiscriminatory basis. According to UNICEF, families with limited economic resources, especially in rural areas and in the northern border provinces, continued to show registration rates significantly lower than those of other groups, which led to a national 10 percent nonregistration rate. The main causes were the long distances that families had to travel to register their children and the lack of information available for parents that demonstrated the importance of registration. Government teams occasionally traveled to remote rural areas to register families and persons with disabilities. While the law prohibits schools from requesting civil registration documents for enrollment, some (mostly public) schools continued to require them. Other government services, including welfare payments and free primary health care, require some form of identification. Migrant children were particularly affected by this requirement, which prevented adequate access to these services.

Education: The lack of schools in some areas specifically affected Indigenous and refugee and migrant children, who must travel long distances to attend school.

Child Abuse: The law criminalizes child abuse and provides penalties of 30 days to 26 years in prison, depending on the severity of the abuse.

According to UNICEF, citing a 2019 national survey, more than 45 percent among adolescents between 15 and 17 years of age had suffered sexual violence in their lifetime. In 2020, the UN Human Rights Council study revealed that most of the

gender-based violence against children and adolescents occurred in the family environment and that the aggressors were relatives and persons close to the family (65 percent) or linked with the education system (17 percent).

Bullying remained a problem in schools and increasingly occurred on social media. In April 2021, reforms to the Intercultural Education Law took effect, aiming to prevent and combat digital sexual violence and strengthen the fight against cybercrimes by making online bullying punishable. Despite regulations, media outlets covered several cases of bullying and cyberbullying that were reported to the Attorney General's Office, which had not responded to them a year or more after receiving the report.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The legal marriage age is 18. There were reports of early and forced marriage in rural and poor areas. According to UNICEF and Plan International, poor girls and adolescents were at higher risk of child, early, or forced marriage. Both agencies also identified cases in which the girls' parents promoted early marriages to improve their social and economic status. This practice commonly led to other social problems such as gender-based violence, early pregnancy, leaving school prematurely, and unemployment.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The age of consent is 14. The law prohibits sexual exploitation of children, including child pornography, with penalties of 22 to 26 years' imprisonment. The penalty for human trafficking, including child sex trafficking, is 13 to 16 years in prison. Authorities did not criminalize all forms of child sex trafficking. The criminal code requires proof of force, fraud, or coercion as essential elements of a trafficking crime, neglecting to recognize that anyone younger than age 18 is unable to provide informed consent.

Child sex trafficking remained a problem, despite government enforcement efforts. Between January and June, the Attorney General's Office registered 53 reports of different forms of trafficking in persons, of which 93 percent involved children.

Infanticide, including Infanticide of Children with Disabilities: UNICEF and media outlets reported a case of infanticide of a baby age seven months in April in Ibarra. A provincial judge ordered pretrial detention for the three suspects in the crime.

Displaced Children: Humanitarian organizations expressed concern that an increasing number of unaccompanied refugee and migrant children entered the country via irregular crossings. International organizations remained concerned unaccompanied children and adolescents were vulnerable to harassment, exploitation, and trafficking by criminal groups. Under a presidential decree issued on June 1, unaccompanied migrant children have access to regularized migration status (see section 2.e.).

Antisemitism

There is a small Jewish community, including an estimated 450 individuals in Quito, 40 individuals in Guayaquil, and 10 individuals elsewhere in the country. The Jewish community reported no attacks or aggression as of August 13.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or Sex Characteristics

Criminalization: No laws exist to criminalize same-sex conduct or gender identity or expression.

Violence against LGBTQI+ Persons: LGBTQI+ organizations reported the killing of two LGBTQI+ individuals in January, one in Guayaquil and the other in the province of Cotopaxi. The NGO Silueta X characterized both deaths as transfemicides, defined as killings of transgender women by individuals motivated by antitransgender bias. The digital news outlet *GK* said one of the victim's relatives reported the killing to the Attorney General's Office but did not receive a response. LGBTQI+ organizations claimed government institutions in general failed to properly register and categorize violent acts against the LGBTQI+ community, leading to underreporting. LGBTQI+ groups claimed police and prosecutors did not thoroughly investigate deaths of LGBTQI+ individuals,

including when there was suspicion that the killing was motivated by anti-LGBTQI+ bias. The NGO Fundación Ecuatoriana Equidad, a sexual health and LGBTQI+ advocacy group, cited police and prosecutors' lax attitude and the lack of technical capacity and knowledge about LGBTQI+ individuals to explain insufficient investigations into crimes committed against LGBTQI+ persons.

Discrimination: The constitution includes the principle of nondiscrimination with respect to gender identity or sexual orientation. The law prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The law also prohibits hate crimes, but LGBTQI+ activists asserted that since the legal codification of hate crimes in 2008, there had been no hate crime convictions for crimes against LGBTQI+ persons. LGBTQI+ persons continued to suffer discrimination from both public and private entities, particularly in education, employment, and access to health care. LGBTQI+ organizations reported transgender persons suffered more discrimination because they were more visible.

LGBTQI+ persons continued to report that the government sometimes denied them equal access to formal education. Fundación Ecuatoriana Equidad indicated the government did not comprehensively apply policy provisions to prevent and combat discrimination. LGBTQI+ students, particularly transgender students, sometimes were discouraged from attending classes and were more susceptible to bullying in schools. Human rights activists argued the Ministry of Education and school administrators were slow to respond to complaints regarding harassment, discrimination, or abuse against LGBTQI+ persons.

LGBTQI+ persons involved in the commercial sex trade reported abusive situations, extortion, and mistreatment by security forces.

In December 2021, the navy publicly apologized to Diocles Daniel García Zambrano for committing a discriminatory act by discharging him based on his sexual orientation without respecting the guarantees of due process. The navy assumed responsibility for the act and pledged not to discriminate based on sexual orientation, whether real or perceived, of all persons entering active service.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: The law prohibits changing gender on identity documents for LGBTQI+ persons younger than 18, even with parental

consent. As of August 17, a decision remained pending in a case before the Constitutional Court to determine the age at which transgender underage individuals may change their identity information.

On May 5, the Constitutional Court ruled that the Office of the Civil Registry may change an individual's sex on record at the person's request without requesting any additional documents. An LGBTQI+ organization reported that despite the ruling, the Office of the Civil Registry had not yet implemented the ruling. The court also ordered the National Assembly to "discuss and approve a bill to regulate the procedure for changing the sex of transgender persons." The legislature's Constitutional Guarantees and Human Rights Committee members began drafting a law in July.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices Specifically Targeting LGBTQI+ Individuals: An LGBTQI+ organization reported the existence of clandestine private treatment centers confining LGBTQI+ persons against their will to "cure" or "dehomosexualize" them despite the illegality of such treatment. LGBTQI+ organizations reported that the practice persisted under the guise of religious or "wellness" retreats or drug addiction treatment centers. According to one LGBTQI+ organization, the Ministry of Public Health had some success in identifying and closing such institutions. Another LGBTQI+ organization claimed the Attorney General's Office had not taken any action against the individuals who ran these establishments.

According to the advocacy NGO Dialogo Diverso, many individuals confined to the "clinics" were afraid to report the activity because in most cases their own family members forced them into the "treatments." LGBTQI+ organizations also reported relatives took LGBTQI+ persons to neighboring countries, where clinics reportedly used violent treatments, including rape, to attempt to change LGBTQI+ persons' sexual orientation.

Additionally, an intersex organization reported infants and children born with nonbinary sex characteristics were subjected to unnecessary irreversible genital surgeries in an attempt to "normalize" their gender appearance.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly:

An LGBTQI+ organization claimed that despite the law protecting freedom of expression, major television networks systematically censored LGBTQI+ individuals and granted more space to conservative views.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities. The law stipulates persons with disabilities have the right to health care and health insurance; to employment and job security; to education, including programs for scholarships and student loans; and to access buildings, transport, and communications. The government did not fully enforce its provisions.

By law, children with disabilities may attend specialized schools, but all educational establishments must accommodate students with disabilities. An advocacy NGO for persons with disabilities said nonspecialized institutions lacked the capacity and staff to accommodate the range of disabilities. The NGO said children with disabilities attended primary and secondary education at similar rates to other children, but they attended higher education at lower rates due to a lack of access to quality support and accessible infrastructure. According to the NGO, the lack of interagency coordination especially in the public sector hampered the possibility for persons with disabilities to transit smoothly from high school to universities or technical institutions and then to an independent life.

The law requires that 4 percent of employees in all public and private enterprises with more than 25 employees be persons with disabilities, and it gives the Ombudsman's Office responsibility for following up on alleged violations of the rights of persons with disabilities, stipulating fines and punishments for lack of compliance. As of 2021, 52 percent of enterprises complied with the law, 3 percent fewer than in 2020.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Fundación Ecuatoriana Equidad said that although HIV-positive individuals were registered with the social security system, diagnosis, follow-up testing, and treatment continued to be inadequate due to perceived poor management by the

Ministry of Health and general corruption.

Although Ministry of Labor regulations prohibit discrimination against hiring HIV-positive individuals and bans HIV tests as entry requirements for a job, LGBTQI+ organizations argued many employers continued requiring tests.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law, with some exceptions, provides for certain rights of workers to form and join trade unions of their choice, to bargain collectively, and to strike. The law requires a minimum of 30 workers for the creation of an association, work committee, or labor union, regardless of the total number of employees in the workplace. The law does not allow foreign citizens to serve as trade union officers.

The law prohibits the dismissal of union members from the moment a union notifies the labor inspector of its general assembly. Employers are not required to reinstate workers fired for union activity but are required to pay such workers compensation and a fine of one year's annual salary for everyone wrongfully dismissed. Individual workers still employed may take complaints against employers to the Labor Inspection Office. Individuals no longer employed may take their complaints to courts charged with protecting labor rights.

Unions may take complaints to a tripartite arbitration board established to hear their complaints. Despite the legal obligation to begin mediation within 48 hours of issuing a complaint, these procedures often were subject to lengthy delays because the Ministry of Labor lacked the skills and staff to address all arbitration requests and appeals. Private-sector representatives alleged that boards exhibited conscious bias in favor of employees.

All private employers with unionized employees are required to negotiate collectively when the union so requests.

Ministerial resolutions allow for the use of certain types of labor contracts, with specific provisions for the flower, palm, fishing, livestock, and construction

sectors. Unions alleged these could be used to undermine the right to organize. For example, employers may refuse to renew a short-term or temporary contract to a worker who is attempting to organize a union, or they may outsource workers to prevent collective bargaining. The Ministry of Labor denied registration of a gig workers union,

The right for workers to organize at a sectoral level was recognized by the courts but not was not always implemented. In May 2021, a provincial court ordered that the Ministry of Labor recognize the Trade Union Association of Agricultural Banana Workers and Peasants (ASTAC) as a sector-wide union for banana workers, and the court tasked the Ombudsman's Office with monitoring the decision's implementation. This decision followed requests by the International Labor Organization (ILO) to permit sector-wide union organizing in compliance with international labor standards. On January 11, the ministry recognized ASTAC as a sector-wide union but failed to comply with other provisions of the court's decision, including the issuance of implementing regulations for collective bargaining at the sectoral level and guaranteeing the right of future sector-wide unionization. ASTAC representatives affirmed that without implementing regulations, their right to collective bargaining was limited. The union submitted its case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in August.

The law provides for the right of private-sector employees to strike and conduct three-day solidarity strikes or boycotts on behalf of employees in other industries. The law also establishes, however, that before most strikes, collective labor disputes must be referred to courts of conciliation and arbitration.

The law requires a 10- to 20-day "cooling-off" period from the time a strike is declared before it can take effect. During this time, workers and employers must agree on how many workers are needed to ensure a minimum level of service; at least 20 percent of the workforce must continue to work to provide essential services. The law provides the employer may contract substitute personnel only when striking workers refuse to send the number of workers required to provide the minimum necessary services. Contracting substitute personnel was effectively impossible, however, as the law does not provide for time-limited, seasonal, hourly, or part-time contracts.

The law prohibits formation of unions and restricts the right to collective bargaining and striking of public-sector workers in a long list of “strategic sectors,” including environmental sanitation, education, justice, social security, electrical energy, hydrocarbon production, fuel processing, transport and distribution, public transportation, and postal service and telecommunications sectors, which exceeds the ILO standard for essential services. Workers in these sectors attempting to strike may face charges with penalties of two to five years’ imprisonment. The government effectively enforced the law on “strategic sectors.”

All unions in the public sector fall under the Confederation of Public Servants. Although most public-sector workers also maintained membership in labor-sector associations, the law does not allow such associations to bargain collectively or to strike. The law specifies that only the private sector may engage in collective bargaining.

The government did not effectively enforce all applicable law. Penalties were commensurate with those for other laws involving denial of civil rights, such as discrimination. Penalties were rarely applied against violators.

Employers did not always respect freedom of association and collective bargaining, and labor rights advocacy groups said that influential business interests tied to local officials sometimes used criminal proceedings to restrict workers’ right to unionize. It was estimated that approximately 3 percent of the total workforce was unionized, with the number of public and private unions registered by the Ministry of Labor decreasing by half since 2017.

Unions reported the Ministry of Labor delayed unions’ requests to update their boards of directors, which led to delayed registration. Labor unions and associations reported difficulties and delays in registering unions in the ministry due to excessive and ever-changing requirements – sometimes not stated in the regulations – and ministry staff shortages.

There were several cases in which the leaders of new unions were fired by their employers while the former were awaiting ministry registration. Even if a court supported a union’s registration efforts, dismissed leaders were entitled only to compensation, not reinstatement, which undermined the union’s ability to form. In

addition, dismissed union leaders cannot turn to the Ministry of Labor but must go through the courts. Javier Burgos was elected ASTAC secretary general in 2011, but ASTAC did not receive its registration until 2021, and Burgos was fired in November 2021. Although illegally fired, Burgos was not able to obtain severance as he could not afford the court procedure.

Independent union leaders alleged that at least two unions were controlled by the government and thus received preferential treatment in administrative processes as well as invitations to roundtables to discuss labor policies.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits and criminalizes all forms of forced or compulsory labor, including all forms of labor exploitation. The government did not effectively enforce the law. Limited presence in parts of the country and inadequate victim services hampered the effectiveness of police and prosecutors. NGOs and media outlets continued to report that children were victims of human trafficking in forced criminality, particularly drug trafficking and robbery.

Reports of forced labor by children (see section 7.c.) and women persisted. Observers most frequently reported women as victims of domestic servitude. In 2021, police arrested 65 suspected traffickers. Authorities prosecuted 47 individuals in 17 trafficking cases and convicted and sentenced 13 traffickers. In 2021, the government identified 51 victims of human trafficking and aided some through witness protection services, shelter placement, and repatriation.

Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorians, Venezuelan migrants, and Colombian refugees (see section 7.d.) were particularly vulnerable to forced labor and human trafficking. Traffickers often recruited children from impoverished Indigenous families with false promises of employment; these children were then forced to beg or to work as domestic servants, in sweatshops, or as street and commercial vendors within the country or in other South American countries.

Local men, women, and children were exploited in forced labor in domestic service; forced begging; on banana, hemp, and palm plantations; street vending; illegal mining; and other areas of the informal economy. According to international organizations, income loss due to the economic crisis caused by

COVID-19 increased the vulnerability of at-risk groups to human trafficking, particularly migrants and those working in the informal sector.

Men, women, and children were exploited in forced labor abroad, including in the United States and other South American countries, particularly Chile and Colombia.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The law and regulations prohibit employment discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, national origin, sex (including pregnancy), ethnicity, gender, disability, language, age, sexual orientation or gender identity, migratory condition, HIV or other communicable disease status, or socioeconomic status. The government did not effectively enforce these laws and regulations. Penalties were commensurate with laws related to civil rights, such as election interference, but were rarely applied against violators. An NGO reported that Ministry of Labor representatives were frequently unprepared for administrative cases regarding discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity due to a lack of familiarity with LGBTQI+ issues.

Employment discrimination against women was prevalent (see also section 6), particularly with respect to older women and the poor. According to union leaders, employers continued to assign women heavier workloads, forcing them to “clean up” workstations afterhours, especially in the agricultural sector. A workers’ association alleged this also occurred in a textile factory where women regularly worked overtime and did not receive minimum wage. Official statistics showed that in June the average monthly income for an employed man was 19 percent higher than for an employed woman.

Afro-Ecuadorians reported that employers often profiled them based on their job application photographs and racial stereotypes.

Migrants faced abuses such as overtime work without due pay, especially in the growing digital platform sector. According to a union, 80 percent of digital platform workers were migrants.

Indigenous and LGBTQI+ individuals as well as persons with disabilities also experienced employment discrimination.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: The law provides for a minimum monthly wage, which was above the poverty income level. The law limits the standard work period to 40 hours a week, eight hours a day, with two consecutive days of rest per week. Miners are limited to six hours a day and may work only one additional hour a day with premium pay. Overtime is limited to no more than four hours a day and a total of 12 hours a week. Mandatory overtime is prohibited. Different regulations regarding schedule and vacations apply to live-in domestic workers. The law mandates prison terms for employers who do not register domestic workers with the Social Security Administration.

A law on COVID-19's impact allows employers and employees to enter into force majeure agreements, although the dismissal of an employee is permitted only if the business ceased operations permanently. The law also permits employers to reduce working hours and salaries by up to 50 and 45 percent, respectively, by signing "emergency contracts" with their employees to prevent job losses. Citing government data, media reported that as of June 20, companies had enrolled 111,826 workers under "emergency contracts"; most were in the agriculture, manufacturing, and trade sectors. Unions and labor organizations said the law enabled precarious work conditions, reduced wages below the minimum wage, and allowed unfair dismissals without due compensation because of employers' leverage over employees desperate to keep their jobs during the COVID-19 economic slowdown. In December 2021, the Constitutional Court declared the force majeure provision unconstitutional, arguing it was "incompatible with the right to legal certainty recognized in the Constitution." In June, the National

Assembly approved a partial repeal of the law, but the president vetoed the repeal on July 20, which prevents the legislature from addressing it for a one-year period. Labor unions filed a lawsuit with the Constitutional Court the same month challenging other provisions in the law.

Labor leaders and NGOs said there were no specific sectors with a concentration of alleged violations of wage, hour, or overtime laws. They reported that the number of complaints against public and private companies in the service, agricultural, and manufacturing sectors, however, was rising because of perceived unfair dismissals, mostly under “emergency contracts” as provided in the COVID-19 law. They said that women and young workers were sometimes vulnerable to wage exploitation in the informal sector, and that domestic and service-sector workers sometimes had to accept conditions including unpaid or underpaid overtime.

Occupational Safety and Health: The law provides for the health and safety of workers and outlines occupational safety and health (OSH) standards, which are current and appropriate for the country’s main industries. Authorities may conduct labor inspections by appointment, after a worker complaint, or through unannounced visits. If a worker requests an inspection and a Ministry of Labor inspector confirms a workplace hazard, the inspector then may close the workplace. Labor inspections generally occurred because of complaints, not as a preventive measure. In some cases, violations were remedied, but other cases were subjected to legal challenges that delayed changes for months.

Workers in the formal sector could generally remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, and authorities effectively protected employees in this situation. Labor representatives from the agricultural sector said they registered cases in which employers forced workers to return to the plantations shortly after fumigations took place, risking illness or bodily harm. There were no reported deaths due to fumigation practices, in large part, according to union leaders, because doctors were afraid to sign any document confirming a direct link to pesticide exposure.

In July 2021, the Labor Ministry issued guidelines for the progressive return to work activities in the public and private sectors. Due to a COVID-19 surge in mid-year, the Emergency Operations Committee ordered a reduction in in-person work

by public officials. The committee instructed public institutions to issue internal regulations to determine positions eligible for optional telework. The ministry prioritized telework for pregnant and nursing women, persons with disabilities, persons with catastrophic diseases and their caregivers, and senior workers.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: The Ministry of Labor is responsible for enforcement of wage, hour, and OSH laws. The government did not effectively enforce the laws. Inspectors have the authority to make unannounced inspections. The ministry issues fines for wage and hour law and OSH violations. Penalties were commensurate with those for similar crimes, such as fraud or negligence, but were rarely applied to violators. The government's 117 total reported labor inspectors in 2021 were fewer than ILO standards recommend for the country's population and labor force size. The ministry continued its enforcement reforms by increasing the number of workers protected by contracts and minimum wage standards and eligible for social security benefits.

Informal Sector: Wage, hour, and OSH regulations and standards were not applied to part-time workers or those in the informal sector, which employed 52 percent of the working population as of July. These workers were not registered in the social security system nor eligible to receive other legally mandated benefits.

OSH problems were more prevalent in the informal sector. The law singles out the health and safety of miners, but the government did not enforce safety rules in informal, often illegal, small-scale mines (frequently linked to local community leaders and organized criminal groups), which made up the vast majority of mining enterprises. Migrants and refugees were particularly vulnerable to hazardous and exploitative working conditions. According to media and labor associations, local organizations reported complaints of Venezuelans receiving below the minimum wage, particularly in the informal sector. Gig workers reported conditions that did not follow wage, hour, and safety laws.

B



Can a War on Crime Bring Relief to Ecuador?

Spiking violence in Ecuador has led recently-inaugurated President Daniel Noboa to declare an “internal armed conflict” with criminal groups. In this Q&A, Crisis Group expert Glaeldys González explains how the South American country arrived at this point and the potential consequences of the government’s crackdown.



Glaeldys González
Calanche

Giustra Fellow, Latin
America
Bogota

What has happened in Ecuador?

After grappling with worsening insecurity for several years, Ecuador witnessed a terrifying spike in violence in the first half of January. Criminal groups have **shot civilians**; looted stores; and set off car bombs and other explosions in the capital Quito and Guayaquil, a major port city on the Pacific coast. Gunmen stormed a Guayaquil TV studio during a live news broadcast. Rioting inmates overran a number of the country’s prisons and held more than 150 prison guards

hostage for almost a week. Overall, at least nineteen people have been **killed** since the criminal uprising began on 8 January. The mayhem represents an unprecedented challenge for Daniel Noboa, Ecuador's youngest-ever president, who assumed office in November 2023 following victory in a run-off poll. With public alarm soaring in the face of a seemingly unbridled criminal rampage, the government imposed on 9 January a state of exception. A day later it declared that the country was in an "**internal armed conflict**", and would deploy lethal force and military assets to combat 22 criminal groups, now labelled terrorists.

The sequence of events that culminated in this unusual move began in the first week of the new year. On 7 January, Ecuadorian authorities reported the disappearance of José Adolfo Macías Villamar, also known as Fito, one of the nation's most notorious gangsters, from the Guayaquil Regional prison. The government had planned to transfer him to a high-security jail, La Roca, as part of a broader effort to crack down on criminal groups in prisons. But that plan must have been leaked, because Fito was nowhere to be found when security forces came looking for him. The reigning leader of Los Choneros, the country's largest and most brutal crime group, Fito had been serving a 34-year sentence since 2011 for a litany of offences, including robbery, murder and drug trafficking.

After his disappearance, chaos unfolded on the streets of the country's major cities. The government commenced a hunt involving over 3,000 police and army officers. Simultaneously, rival criminal factions – sensing an opportunity to capitalise on the chaos and show their clout – unleashed a wave of violence. **Los Lobos**, the second-largest gang in Ecuador and the main competitor to Los Choneros, orchestrated uprisings on streets and in prisons, triggering riots in at least six jails under its control that led to the killing of one prison guard and the kidnapping of 178 others.

As pandemonium engulfed urban centres ... the president [of Ecuador] opted to redouble the state counter-offensive through declaration of an armed conflict.

After the gangs threw down the gauntlet, Noboa initially followed his predecessor Guillermo Lasso's approach. Faced with outbursts of criminal violence, Lasso had declared states of exception **over ten times** between 2021 and 2023. While in some cases these were limited to jails or specific geographical regions, on other occasions they were national in scope: after the assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio on 9 August 2023, for example, a state of exception was declared across the entire country. Noboa followed suit and on 8 January declared a 60-day state of exception. The move allows the government to mobilise the armed forces in support of the police, impose a nationwide curfew, and suspend freedom of assembly. But as pandemonium engulfed urban centres, and with the gang raid on TC Televisión in Guayaquil gaining worldwide media coverage, the president opted to redouble the state counter-offensive through declaration of an armed conflict. (The consequences of this declaration are discussed below.)

While Ecuador was formerly one of Latin America's more peaceful nations, the violence is the culmination of a several-year trend. The country's geography plays a role: sandwiched between Colombia and Peru – Latin America's top producers of cocaine – Ecuador has emerged as a **key transport and logistics link** in the global drug supply chain. Hyper-violent gangs have buttressed their ranks by recruiting among **communities impoverished by COVID-19**. Meanwhile, a shortfall in security investment during the Lenin Moreno administration, in part due to IMF-backed budget cuts, have starved the state's security forces. During his tenure, from 2017-2021, the government cut prison budgets by 30 per cent, eliminated the Justice Ministry, and froze the

security budget. The combination of a weak state and strong criminal forces has led to a near-doubling of homicides each year since 2020. The nation's **murder rate** for last year – around 40 murders per 100,000 people – is the highest in its history, and makes the country one of the most violent in Latin America.

What led criminal groups to carry out this violent campaign?

As noted, the attempted transfer of a notorious criminal boss appears to have served as a trigger for the recent spike in violence. Criminal groups use jails as strongholds, places where they charge inmates for their survival, smuggle in weapons and drugs, and clash with other gangs vying for control of narcotics trafficking and contract killing. Past transfers of inmates have often sparked unrest in and outside jails as these groups resist what they perceive as the state's efforts to regain control.

Security interventions, above all those targeting high-ranking members, can also upset the delicate equilibrium between feuding criminal factions. It appears this was precisely the effect of Fito's transfer on the Choneros' main foe, Los Lobos. One of the Lobos' leaders, Fabricio Colón Pico, also known as "El Salvaje" (the wild one), had been arrested in Quito on 5 January for his alleged participation in a kidnapping while also facing accusations of planning an attack on Ecuador's Attorney General Diana Salazar. Fito's escape implied a realignment of criminal forces on the streets and inside jails, alarming Los Lobos. In response, the group mounted riots in prisons they control, seized guards and exploited the ensuing turmoil to further their interests. In the early hours of 9 January, a mass **jailbreak** in Riobamba, the capital of Chimborazo province, saw Colón Pico escape. As a result, two senior figures from the country's most powerful criminal organisations, both vying for control of the drug trade, are now fugitives.

Even so, the uprising that followed Noboa's declaration of a state of exception stemmed from more than factional rivalries or a defence of criminal control over jails. In its scale, visibility and coordination, the violence posed a direct challenge to the government's effective authority and its ability to protect the public. By provoking havoc on the streets and forcing cowering citizens into the confines of their homes, criminal groups appeared to be engaging in mass blackmail of the Ecuadorian government and broader society. Their public show of might intended both to signal the state's inability to cope with their threats, as well as issue a warning as to what would lie in wait if the government implements the reforms it has been trying to push forward.

Criminal groups obviously took note when Noboa unveiled a series of proposals in early January aimed at curbing their influence.

Criminal groups obviously took note when Noboa unveiled a series of proposals in early January aimed at curbing their influence. Specifically, he proposed a national referendum on security policies such as imposing harsher sentences for serious crimes like homicide and arms trafficking; allowing the armed forces greater powers to stamp out criminal organisations and control prison access; and permitting extradition of Ecuadorians accused of carrying out crimes in other countries, thus paving the way to indictment and transfer to the U.S. In combination, these measures could threaten these groups' use of prisons as safe havens and command centres for their major rackets – above all drug trafficking, which intelligence reports suggest generates earnings of \$500 million a year for the country's gangs.

The state's capacity to intercept criminals and incarcerate them was also poised to grow. Noboa's security plans seek to assert military control over borders and ports, create a centralised intelligence hub, and equip law enforcement and military forces with cutting-edge technology and weaponry. Construction is also about to begin on two **maximum security prisons** in the

Amazon and on the Pacific coast, to be handled by the same Mexican-Salvadoran consortium that built a new jail in El Salvador during President Nayib Bukele's anti-gang offensive, with a reported capacity for 40,000 inmates. (To be sure, Ecuador's new jails are to be far smaller, and its entire **prison population** is currently 31,300.)

Despite its ambitious proposals, Noboa's government is hardly a juggernaut. Noboa entered office only two months ago and his administration faces a host of challenges, from its fragile alliances in the National Assembly to the nation's struggling economy. The timing of the attacks appeared to be a calculated attempt to exploit these vulnerabilities, with the aim of deterring some of the government's planned reforms. The wave of violence, moreover, has not relented. On 17 January, prosecutor César Suárez, who was investigating the attack on the television channel, was shot dead while driving his car in Guayaquil.

Although Ecuador's criminal groups seem bent on using the tactics of extreme intimidation, that approach may well backfire, both in terms of its escalatory effects and the cohesion it appears to have fostered among the nation's political leaders. The government's elevation of its fight against crime into an armed conflict came as a surprise to many observers and likely to the gangs as well. Also surprising was the level of unity shown by Ecuador's traditionally fragmented and polarised political forces in condemning the gangs and supporting the young president. Indeed, Noboa's declaration of armed conflict was approved unanimously in the National Assembly on 10 January.

What impact could the declaration of armed conflict have?

This is the first time in Ecuadorian history that government officials have declared an **internal armed conflict**. Moreover, aside from Colombia, it is now the only country in Latin America with an officially acknowledged conflict. The **decree** announcing the move mandates the mobilisation of the police and military across the nation with the stated aim of "safeguarding sovereignty and territorial integrity against transnational organised crime, terrorist organisations, and belligerent non-state actors". It also authorises the armed forces to conduct military operations to neutralise the 22 groups cited in the decree, in compliance with international humanitarian law and human rights principles.

Under the dual provisions of the state of exception and the declaration of armed conflict, Ecuador's security forces are authorised to employ lethal force against the members of groups designated by the government as parties to that conflict. Until now, the police and military have not sought to target gang members with deadly violence, but instead to locate and capture them as part of their role as law enforcement authorities. This is not unlike anti-crime crackdowns elsewhere in Latin America, which rely largely on mass arrests of suspects, restrictions on civil rights and use of armed patrols, although casualties in shootouts with security forces or in other, more opaque circumstances are not uncommon. But a shift towards status-based killing of gang members and direct armed confrontation between security forces and specific criminal factions could result in far larger casualties on both sides, while also harming civilians. This is especially the case in communities where these criminal groups have established their bastions and where residents might find themselves caught in the crossfire.

Beyond the very real escalation risk, crossing this line raises both legal and operational questions. Even internal wars have rules, and under international humanitarian law the parties to a conflict are required to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants, and use force in a manner that is proportionate. Other rules and safeguards for the protection of the civilian population, and for detained combatants, also apply. Operationalising these constraints in a conflict where fighters often blend in with the civilian population and may not fit within clear chains of command can be quite difficult. The Colombian government has extensive experience with these issues, as does the International Committee of the Red Cross, and would be good

resources for Quito as it plots its path forward. For now, at least some humanitarian experts are also unconvinced that Ecuador's criminal outfits fit the profile of organised armed groups that international law would recognise as a conflict party.

The government's new approach [to gang violence] may also raise issues of domestic law.

The government's new approach may also raise issues of domestic law that create hurdles to implementation even if the requirements of international law are satisfied. Both for purposes of legality and legitimacy it will be important that these issues be aired and resolved by justice authorities and reviewed as appropriate by the nation's courts, including the Constitutional Court.

Ensuring both international and Ecuadorian law are respected is not, of course, the only prerequisite for a successful military campaign against the gangs. Practical obstacles are also likely to impinge on the outcome. According to Ecuadorian intelligence, thousands of troops and police officers collude with criminal groups. Indeed, these bands permeate public institutions at all levels, implicating current and former judges, police officers, prison guards, lawyers, mayors, and even former National Assembly deputies. These webs of influence may have recently been laid bare in the “[metastasis case](#)”, which uncovered a systematic plan to allegedly secure impunity for indicted suspects, simulate police operations to protect the properties of a financier of the drug trade, and recruit more agents for their network. Among the 29 people arrested in December 2023 as part of this probe was Wilman Terán, the president of the Judiciary Council, the body responsible for selecting, evaluating, promoting, and sanctioning judges and other judicial officials. (Terán has protested his innocence, calling his arrest “illegal and arbitrary”.)

The success of the new measures also hinges on the government's ability to regain full control of prisons. Without this, military or police campaigns to capture members of criminal groups risk inadvertently bolstering the gangs' ranks by funnelling more individuals into their operational hubs, thereby perpetuating the cycle of violence.

Lastly, there are financial concerns. To fund the security plan, the government proposed on 12 January a three-point increase in the value-added tax (VAT), from 12 to 15 per cent. This measure, however, is unpopular and likely to place an additional financial burden on Ecuadorians. Economic constraints have already driven two waves of mass protests over the past five years.

What should be done?

The recent declaration of an internal armed conflict is a response to acute public alarm, and has been warmly greeted by many Ecuadorians. While the offensive mobilisation of police and military may yield short-term relief and serve to break up some crime groups, it nevertheless remains a stopgap solution at best, as [Crisis Group has previously argued](#), and could also bring significant harm to the civilian population if safeguards are not carefully constructed and implemented. For any improvements in security to last and withstand the likely reconfiguration of criminal groups and their lucrative rackets, it is essential that authorities find ways to strengthen the integrity of state institutions, staunch the tide of escalating corruption, and reinforce intelligence-led law enforcement. A singular emphasis on military force and attacks or

raids on criminal groups, to the exclusion of other critical reforms, could potentially exacerbate the nation's struggle with organised crime.

The government should not lose sight of the longer-term reforms that could provide enduring relief from insecurity.

In short, the government should not lose sight of the longer-term reforms that could provide enduring relief from insecurity. A crucial first step should be to build on the initial show of cross-party unity in the wake of last week's events and forge a consensus among political forces on the mainstays of security reform. Priorities should include regaining control over ports and prisons, and addressing corruption within state security institutions, notably the judiciary, police forces, customs and the prison system. The government should also consider comprehensive security sector reform, with a particular emphasis on enhancing the intelligence apparatus. Strengthening the judicial system should also be high on the agenda. This includes ensuring that judges and prosecutors working on organised crime and corruption cases have the security they need to carry out their work.

While national initiatives are crucial, they alone are insufficient to combat transnational organised crime and the nexus between Ecuadorian gangs and international trafficking operations. Regional collaboration, particularly with neighbouring countries such as Peru and Colombia, is essential. Granted, it will not be easy to develop these networks: distrust between security forces and national capitals – often caused by the perception that corruption could cause sensitive information to leak – continues to vitiate the flow of critical criminal intelligence. Foreign backing, above all from the U.S. and the EU, could play a significant role in this respect, and should encompass technical assistance, training and support for regional security platforms such as Ameripol. The EU would also be well-positioned to support the design and implementation of projects in poor communities that enjoy few alternative livelihoods to crime.

Lastly, Ecuador's emergence at the heart of global drug trafficking, despite the fact that it has never traditionally produced drugs and was for long more peaceful than its neighbours, should rekindle **concern** as to the unwanted effects of the war on drugs. Exactly 40 years after Colombia **declared** the "war on drugs" for the first time, militarised counter-narcotic policies have not provided viable legal livelihood alternatives to those involved in the production and trafficking of illicit drugs (many of them amongst the poorest and most vulnerable populations in Latin America), nor have they limited the violence surrounding this business. Governments would do well to reassess these security policies, and pursue measures that are realistic and avoid causing greater harm to local communities – for example, by targeting those who drive the business and reap the largest profits from it, namely international financiers and traffickers.

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from Latin America's Moment and Latin America Studies Program

A Surge in Crime and Violence Has Ecuador Reeling

Ecuadorians say crime and public authorities' inability, or unwillingness, to stop it is what they are most worried about.



Security forces keep guard outside the National Assembly after Ecuador's President Guillermo Lasso dissolved the Assembly in a decree, bringing forward legislative and presidential elections. REUTERS/Karen Toro

Blog Post by Will Freeman

via World Politics Review [🔗](#)

June 14, 2023 3:57 pm (EST)

Ecuador might be caught up in a political crisis, with President Guillermo Lasso having dissolved the opposition-led National Assembly and called snap presidential and legislative elections for later this year. But if you ask most Ecuadorians what they are

worried about, they won't tell you politics.

They will say crime and public authorities' inability, or unwillingness, to stop it.

Spend a few days in any major Ecuadorian city, and it won't take long to understand why. In the port cities of Guayaquil and Esmeraldas, where the violence is most intense, massacres, targeted assassinations of police and public officials, and car bombs have become weekly occurrences.

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In parts of Quito, the capital, shops now close early, and police stop patrolling at night. Across the country, extortion networks are strangling businesses large and small—even in the remote Galapagos Islands.

For many Ecuadorians long accustomed to relative safety compared to neighboring states, the crime surge has turned life upside down. For decades, Ecuador was one of Latin America's least violent countries. Now it has the region's fourth-highest homicide

rate—higher even than Mexico.

Gone are the days when Ecuador was known as “the island of peace” due to its location between historically war-torn Peru and Colombia. Now, the country looks increasingly like its neighbors at their most violent—only with a much weaker state that increasingly bears the hallmarks of criminal cooptation.

From ‘Island of Peace’ to Epicenter of Violence

Ecuador’s violent crime surge began in earnest in 2020 with a series of prison massacres carried out by competing gangs—an eerie harbinger of what was to come outside the prison walls.

But the country’s transformation into a crime hub was by that time years in the making—partly the result of bad luck and partly of bad policy.

Several chance factors aligned to make Ecuador a hot spot for organized crime after 2016. That year, the government of Colombia signed a peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, which officially ended the guerilla group’s 53-year-old insurgency.

The peace accord contributed to a period of stability for Colombia, but it had quite the opposite impact on Ecuador. The FARC had long maintained a de facto monopoly on lucrative cocaine trafficking routes from southern Colombia to Ecuador’s Pacific ports, where it tended to keep violence to a minimum.

The group’s demobilization opened up a power vacuum, even as Colombian coca production reached an all-time high. Ecuadorian groups began to battle to fill the void. Sensing opportunity, foreign criminal groups soon followed suit. The Sinaloa and Jalisco

Nueva Generacion cartels, already in open war in Mexico, recruited local proxies in an effort to seize the upper hand in Ecuador. The Albanian mafia, which had long helped the FARC ship its cocaine to Europe, established a presence of its own in the country.

For criminal groups, Ecuador's high-quality road network, dollarized economy and lack of visa requirements for foreign nationals also lowered the costs of doing business.

A devastating earthquake on the country's Pacific coast in 2016 brought an influx of soldiers and first responders to the area, unintentionally causing criminal groups that had until then been concentrated there to scatter across the country and open new fronts in the battle for control of illicit activities. Then, to make matters worse, a drop in the price of oil—the country's main export—and the steep economic downturn due to the COVID-19 pandemic fed criminal groups a steady supply of young, jobless recruits.

As intergang feuds picked off once-powerful criminal bosses, the criminal landscape grew increasingly anarchic. Violence intensified.

One Wrong Move After the Other

The policy choices of successive Ecuadorian government made the problem worse.

During his decade in office from 2007 to 2017, populist former President Rafael Correa reduced Ecuador's homicide rate to a historic low through a combination of increasing policing, reducing poverty and inequality, and allowing the countries' gangs to transform themselves into cultural associations if they left behind violence.

But Correa also planted a ticking time bomb by weakening Ecuador's capacity to confront transnational narco trafficking, which he regarded as a problem for drug-consuming countries like the U.S. and European Union member states, not Ecuador.

In the name of standing up for national sovereignty, Correa closed a U.S. military base in Manta, Ecuador, and ended cooperation with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency. As a result, Ecuador's maritime exclusive economic zone—the fifth-largest in South America, covering over 1 million square kilometers of ocean—was left effectively free of surveillance.

Long-serving members of the police, security experts and an ex-Correa government official all told me that narcotrafficking vessels began flocking to the area from better-policed Peruvian and Colombian waters.

It wasn't Correa's only blunder. Contrary to his image as a fierce critic of neoliberalism, Correa also put Ecuador's ports and airports into concession to private owners, making it difficult for the state to enforce rules mandating the screening of inbound and outbound cargo. He dismantled an elite investigative team of the national police that he regarded as disloyal. In fairness, the unit habitually escaped civilian control, but it was by far Ecuador's most professional when it came to criminal investigations.

But the real test came under Correa's successors—and they did no better. Former President Lenin Moreno, his immediate successor from 2017 to 2021, had served as Correa's vice president but broke with him once in office. He then focused his term on purging Correa's loyalists from the state, loosening the presidency's control over other state institutions and steering Ecuador back into the geopolitical orbit of the United States.

Security policy came as an afterthought—and it showed. Moreno scrapped Correa's Ministry of Justice, habitually used to control judges, and replaced it with an agency that quickly lost control of the country's mega-prisons housing tens of thousands of inmates. Those prisons then became forward operating bases for organized crime groups and the staging ground for their turf wars. Since February 2021, more than 400 inmates have been killed inside prison walls.

Meanwhile, a prolonged economic downturn and a shift toward fiscal austerity has resulted in cuts to social spending, which tore at Ecuador's social safety net. Violent mass protests against austerity measures, which erupted in 2019 and 2022, further chipped away at public order and state legitimacy.

There are now disturbing signs that organized crime has coopted parts of the state. No one can account for why stockpiles of grenades and high-powered weapons seem to freely enter prison walls, but several security experts and police officials I interviewed cited alleged corruption by prison authorities and the private companies they contract.

Provincial judges grant writs of habeas corpus to release suspects in organized crime cases from provisional detention at alarming rates. High-ranking members of the police and judiciary attest to the existence of "armies of lawyers" in every Ecuadorian province who have finessed the art of procuring impunity.

Criminal Capture

By the time Lasso, a "small government" conservative, was elected president in 2021, Ecuador was hurtling into the eye of the storm.

But Lasso failed to change course and avert disaster. He spent virtually all of his very limited political capital pushing economic reform bills through a hostile, opposition-led National Assembly. Meanwhile, he seemed to see rising violence as a war between Ecuadorians and the criminals, as he described it in a since-deleted tweet. In contrast, Ecuadorians saw a paralyzed state, unwilling or unable to help them. Cases of vigilante justice, often captured in grainy smartphone footage, began to spread.

By the time Lasso did act, it was too little, too late. In February, he called a referendum on constitutional reforms related to the fight against crime, but muddied its content by tacking on self-serving institutional reforms. The referendum went down in defeat,

hobbling Lasso politically and contributing to the sequence of events that led him to dismiss the assembly last month.

Lasso later legalized the individual possession of firearms for self-defense and decreed several criminal groups terrorist organizations, granting the military a larger role in the anti-crime fight. But both measures are largely cosmetic. Very few Ecuadorians make enough money to afford handguns. And the military is loath to take on the task of knocking down doors and fighting criminals on city streets, given the risk of facing prosecution for rights abuses.

Most alarming of all, the Albanian mafia is alleged to have coopted members of Lasso's inner circle. In January, the digital media outlet La Posta published a report based on a leaked police intelligence document attesting to an investigation into the possible mafia ties of several top government appointees. Two police generals were subsequently caught on tape discussing closing the investigation into the allegations in order to protect the president.

A legislative commission formed to investigate the case alleged Lasso knew about the investigation since July 2021, but remained silent. Lasso has since asked for the police generals' resignations, and the Attorney General's office reopened the investigation in question. Even if Lasso is completely innocent, the scandal speaks to an alarming lack of vetting at the highest levels of the state. More concerning, since the scandal broke, one top suspect has become a fugitive from justice. Another turned up dead, with signs of torture.

Elsewhere, organized crime appears to be making inroads fast. Multiple experts and public officials I interviewed spoke of rampant criminal financing in provincial and local elections held earlier this year, particularly in the coastal province of Manabi. An

ex-director of the police's anti-narcotics unit lost his U.S. visa after the U.S. ambassador, Michael Fitzpatrick, alleged the existence of "narco-generals," an accusation echoed by several other high-ranking members of the security forces.

Even the military has been implicated. In 2018, a ton of cocaine was discovered in a car inside the military base in Manta, in what the air force described as an "isolated case." Last November, 25 air force officials were sanctioned for damaging radar equipment purchased to stop narco-traffickers from operating within Ecuadorian airspace. The navy has been hit with one scandal after another related to alleged criminal collusions.

Ecuador's political instability is doing the security situation no favors. Each new government tends to rebuild its security plan from scratch, while the criminal actors remain the same. With two general elections scheduled to take place in the next two years—the one to replace Lasso and the National Assembly later this year, followed by the regularly scheduled elections in 2025—there is even more uncertainty on the horizon.

For now, the top two contenders—Correia loyalist Andres Arauz and Indigenous leader Yaku Perez—have not focused heavily on crime. That could be their shared Achilles' heel. Jan Topic, who has molded his image off that of El Salvador's tough-on-crime president, Nayib Bukele, has already entered the fray. More are likely to come. But it remains doubtful whether any candidate has a comprehensive plan to reverse cooptation and collusive behavior in the military, judiciary and police—the most serious obstacle in Ecuador's path.

"In 10 years, this could be a failed state," one adviser to Foreign Minister Juan Carlos Holguin told me. If Ecuador doesn't change course quickly, that time horizon might be overly optimistic.

from Latin America's Moment *and* Latin America Studies Program

Latin America This Week: June 12, 2023

Mexico's 2024 campaign season officially begins; Petro's window for reform narrows further; Latin American economies will stagnate through 2025.



Mexico City's Governor Claudia Sheinbaum walks past Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador during a news conference in Mexico City, Mexico, January 20, 2023. REUTERS/Henry Romero

Blog Post by Shannon K. O'Neil and Will Freeman

June 12, 2023 12:01 pm (EST)

Mexico's 2024 campaign season officially begins. With State of Mexico and Coahuila gubernatorial elections over, voters next head to the polls on June 2, 2024, to elect a new president and congress, as well as nine governors—including Mexico City's—, thirty

state legislatures, and hundreds of mayors. The PRI, for decades the hegemonic political party, fell a step closer to irrelevance losing the governorship of its longtime bastion, the State of Mexico. It sets back not just the party's presidential hopefuls, but also the perceived value of the PRI for an opposition coalition. On Morena's side, Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard succeeded in leveling the playing field at least a bit vis-à-vis Mexico City Governor Claudia Sheinbaum's anticipated advantage for the presidential nomination, as all aspirants will now be required to step down from their day jobs by this Friday, June 16, to run for the party's nomination. Ebrard had already announced his exit from the Foreign Ministry, effective today. Sheinbaum and the others will need to hasten their resignation plans if they want to run.

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Petro's window for reform narrows further. Colombian President Gustavo Petro's legislative agenda was already in trouble: an April 25 cabinet reshuffle splintered his inner circle and congressional bloc. His labor, health, and pension reforms had stalled and his approval rate sat around thirty percent. Now, facing a wiretapping scandal and allegations of illicit campaign finance, his governing coalition is likely gone for good. Sergio Guzmán, director of Colombia Risk Analysis, lays out how Petro's government

may survive, albeit significantly weaker. The president may have already chosen his path: last week, he took to the streets decrying a soft coup, and signed a temporary ceasefire with the ELN—one of few promises on which he can make headway alone.

Latin American economies will stagnate through 2025. The rise in food and energy prices in 2022, knock-on effects of the war in Ukraine, unexpectedly bolstered aggregate growth in Latin America's largest economies according to the OECD's latest Economic Outlook. Economists expect lesser tailwinds for 2023, with regional GDP predicted to rise just 1.5 percent. Few anticipate much dynamism in the years to come, growth settling in at below three percent.

By contrast, emerging economies in Southeast Asia will see growth rates of up to 6.5 percent through 2025.

Why has Latin America lagged as other emerging regions advanced? Last week's *Economist* lays out a set of explanations, informal labor markets, poor education, and corruption among them. Amherst College professor Javier Corrales adds a few more: low taxes, high crime, and the rise of populist parties. Latin America's economic woes are seemingly overdetermined; the question is whether they can be overcome.

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY

Treasury Sanctions Ecuador's Notorious Los Choneros Gang and Its Leader

February 7, 2024

WASHINGTON — Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned one of Ecuador's most violent gangs, **Los Choneros**, and its leader, **José Adolfo Macías Villamar** (also known by the alias "Fito"), pursuant to counter narcotics authorities. OFAC's action follows a steep rise in violence in Ecuador attributed to the actions of Los Choneros and other drug trafficking gangs in the country.

"Drug trafficking gangs such as Los Choneros, many with ties to powerful drug cartels in Mexico, threaten the lives and livelihoods of communities in Ecuador and throughout the region," said Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian E. Nelson. "We stand in support of Ecuador in its fight to combat drug trafficking, curb the proliferation of prison gangs and prison violence, and take back its streets."

SITUATION IN ECUADOR

Ecuador is experiencing record levels of gang-driven violence, including the August 2023 assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio, a January 2024 armed attack on a local TV network while it was broadcasting live, and the subsequent assassination of the prosecutor investigating that attack and widespread corruption. Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel and Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación have further fueled the violence by backing rival drug trafficking gangs within Ecuador as they battle to control trafficking routes in the country.

The latest wave of violence broke out in January 2024, just two days after the Government of Ecuador discovered **José Adolfo Macías Villamar (Macías Villamar)**, the head of the Ecuadorian gang **Los Choneros**, missing from his prison cell—just ahead of his planned move to a maximum-security facility. In response to his escape, the Government of Ecuador declared a 60-day state of emergency, which sparked additional prison riots and gang attacks across the country, including kidnappings and bombings. On January 9, 2024, Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa declared Ecuador to be in a state of internal armed conflict.

TARGETING A PROMINENT CRIMINAL ORGANIZATION

Los Choneros, one of Ecuador’s most violent criminal organizations, has been involved in drug trafficking in Ecuador since the 1990s and is a key driver of the escalating violence that has plagued Ecuador since 2020. Los Choneros has also been running operations from inside state and federal penitentiaries throughout the country. With support from the Sinaloa Cartel, Los Choneros gained control of key cocaine trafficking routes through Ecuador. In return, Los Choneros allegedly provided security and logistics services to the Sinaloa Cartel.



A wanted poster for Macías Villamar posted by the Government of Ecuador

Macías Villamar, also known by the alias “Fito,” is a founding member of Los Choneros and has been the group’s sole leader since 2020. In 2011, the Government of Ecuador sentenced him to 34 years in prison for crimes that included murder and drug trafficking. In prison, Macías Villamar enjoyed access to cell phones and internet, which enabled him to continue to direct the activities of Los Choneros and publish external communications, including a music video posted to social media challenging the Ecuadorian government.

OFAC designated Los Choneros and Macías Villamar pursuant to Executive Order 14059 for having engaged in, or attempted to engage in, activities or transactions that materially contributed to, or pose a significant risk of materially contributing to, the international proliferation of illicit drugs or their means of production.

Separately, a \$5 million reward offer from the U.S. Department of State remains in place for information leading to the arrest or conviction of co-conspirators and masterminds behind the August 2023 assassination of Ecuadorian presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio. The U.S. Department of State issued this reward on September 28, 2023, under the Transnational Organized Crime Rewards Program. For more information, see this [link](#).

SANCTIONS IMPLICATIONS

As a result of today's action, all property and interests in property of the designated persons described above that are in the United States or in the possession or control of U.S. persons are blocked and must be reported to OFAC. In addition, any entities that are owned, directly or indirectly, individually or in the aggregate, 50 percent or more by one or more blocked persons are also blocked. Unless authorized by a general or specific license issued by OFAC, or exempt, OFAC's regulations generally prohibit all transactions by U.S. persons or within (or transiting) the United States that involve any property or interests in property of designated or otherwise blocked persons. U.S. persons may face civil or criminal penalties for violations of Executive Order 14059.

Today's action is part of a whole-of-government effort to counter the global threat posed by the trafficking of illicit drugs into the United States that is causing the deaths of tens of thousands of Americans annually, as well as countless more non-fatal overdoses. OFAC, in coordination with its U.S. government partners and foreign counterparts and in support of President Biden's National Drug Control Strategy, will continue to target and pursue accountability for foreign illicit drug actors.

The power and integrity of OFAC sanctions derive not only from OFAC's ability to designate and add persons to the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List (SDN List), but also from its willingness to remove persons from the SDN List consistent with the law. The ultimate goal of sanctions is not to punish, but to bring about a positive change in behavior. For information concerning the process for seeking removal from an OFAC list, including the SDN List, please refer to [OFAC's Frequently Asked Question 897 here](#). For detailed information on the process to submit a request for [removal from an OFAC sanctions list, please click here](#).

[For more information on the individual and entity designated today, click here](#)

E

Ecuador

Events of 2023

Soldiers are deployed on streets as early voting begins in Quito, Ecuador, August 20, 2023. Elections took place in a violent context, including the killing of one candidate, journalist and former legislator Fernando Villavicencio.

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AVAILABLE IN



In a context of fragile democratic institutions, Ecuador has seen a sharp increase in violence and activity by organized crime, which took homicide rates to unprecedented levels.

Longstanding, unaddressed structural problems, including limited enjoyment of social rights, have led to chronic protests and led a growing number of migrants and asylum seekers to leave Ecuador and head north.

In an October 15 runoff election, Ecuadorians chose businessman and former legislator Daniel Noboa, of Acción Democrática Nacional, as their next president. Elections were marked by violence, including the killing of journalist and former legislator Fernando Villavicencio, who was running for president.

On August 20, Ecuadorians voted in a nationwide referendum to halt current and future oil drilling in the heart of Yasuní National Park in the Amazon rainforest.

transgender (LGBT) people remain serious concerns.

Violence and Crime

Ecuador's homicide rate surged from 13.7 per 100,000 people in 2021 to 25.9 in 2022. In 2023, it escalated further to about 45, placing Ecuador among the top three most violent Latin American countries, alongside Venezuela and Honduras.

Two large gangs—the Choneros and the Lobos—collaborate with Colombian, Mexican, and Albanian drug traffickers supplying Ecuador. Fighting for territorial control, the gangs have escalated their use of extreme violence, including decapitations and dismemberments, car bombings, and attacks on and killings of judges, prosecutors, journalists, and political candidates.

Extortion by criminal groups continues to grow. Between January and June 2023, the National Police received over 4,600 extortion reports, doubling the number in the same period in 2022.

On July 23, armed men killed Agustín Intriago, mayor of the western city of Manta.

On August 9, an assailant shot and killed presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio, of the Construye party, as he was leaving a campaign event in Quito, the country's capital. Villavicencio had, for years, exposed government corruption and abuses by organized crime.

Gang violence in the streets of Ecuador is related to violence inside prisons, where overcrowding and lack of state control has enabled gang members to launch around 14 massacres that have taken the lives of more than 600 people since 2019, according to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Comité Permanente por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (CDH). Overcrowding is rooted in punitive drug policies, delays in granting prison benefits, and excessive use of pretrial detention. Prison guards are poorly trained and insufficient for containing violence.

In response to the surge in violence, then-President Guillermo Lasso declared a range of localized and some nationwide states of emergency, suspending constitutional rights. The government deployed the military, conducted prison raids, and authorized civilian use of guns.

Democratic Institutions and the Rule of Law

of trial delays, lack of due process, and improper pressure and disciplinary sanctions on courts and judges continued.

In May, then-President Lasso, who was facing an impeachment vote on corruption allegations, invoked an article in the Ecuadorian Constitution to dissolve the legislative National Assembly and call for new elections for president, vice president, and legislators. The constitution allows presidents to govern by decree until a new president takes office, but only on “urgent economic” issues. The Constitutional Court annulled several decrees passed by then-President Lasso during this period.

In September, the president of the Council of Citizen Participation, an independent branch of the government, announced an investigation into the 2019 appointment of constitutional court magistrates. The court, whose members were selected through an independent and transparent process, issued multiple rulings upholding basic human rights. The investigation appeared to be politically motivated and, according to Ecuadorian lawyers, the council lacked the legal mandate to conduct it. On October 6, the Constitutional Court removed the council’s president.

Environmental Protection and Indigenous Peoples’ Rights

After decades of organizing led by a coalition of Indigenous peoples, youth, and activists, Ecuadorians voted in an August 20 referendum to halt current and future oil drilling in the Ishpingo, Tambococha, and Tiputini (ITT) area of Yasuní National Park—a United Nations World Biosphere Reserve. The ban would help protect the Amazon and the rights of the Taromenane, Tagaeri, and Dugakaeri Indigenous peoples, who live in voluntary isolation, but then-President Lasso and his Energy and Mines Ministry cast doubts on whether the government would comply with the referendum.

Voters also chose to ban all mining in the Chocó Andino reserve, near Quito.

Eduardo Mendúa, an Indigenous leader, was shot dead on February 26 outside his home in the Ecuadorian Amazon. At time of writing, one suspect was on trial while two others remained fugitives. Mendúa opposed oil drilling in an Indigenous community in Sucumbíos province.

Migrants, Asylum Seekers, and Refugees

Joblessness, low income, general insecurity, and gang threats and violence are some of the factors causing people to leave.

As of late September 2023, over 201,000 foreigners, including over 193,000 Venezuelans, had registered for the regularization process launched in 2022 by then-President Lasso, for Venezuelans who had entered irregularly and for others who had overstayed their visas. Ecuadorian authorities had issued over 78,000 temporary exception residence visas (VIRTE), including over 77,000 for Venezuelan nationals. As of September, about 477,000 Venezuelan migrants and refugees lived in Ecuador.

Ecuador has recognized over 55,800 refugees between 2007 and 2023, most of them Colombian.

Children's Rights

Sexual violence remains a problem in public and private schools. In nearly 26 percent of 20,000-plus sexual violence reports received by the Ministry of Education between January 2014 and July 2023, alleged perpetrators were within the national education system.

In June 2023, Ecuador's Ombudsperson's Office opened a non-judicial investigation, in collaboration with COCASEN, a coalition of civil society organizations working on children's rights, into institutional sexual abuse against adolescents and other children.

In August, the education ministry launched the National Strategy on Comprehensive Sexuality Education, a step toward prevention of sexual violence in schools, in response to the ruling of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in the case of Paola Guzmán Albarracín.

Ecuadorian human rights organizations and UN experts warned that, in the absence of jobs and education, an increasing number of children are being recruited by criminal groups, subjected to sexual exploitation, and coerced to engage in violence.

Women's and Girls' Rights

Abortion is criminalized in Ecuador, except when a pregnancy threatens a person's health or life or results from rape.

report rapes to authorities, and parental or guardian consent for girls. In 2023, the Constitutional Court maintained a temporary suspension of these measures. A final decision by the court was pending at time of writing.

Stigmatization, mistreatment, fear of criminal prosecution, and a narrow interpretation of the health exception to the abortion ban remain barriers to access.

The Attorney General's Office reported 77 femicides—murders deemed gender-related—between January and September, more than in the same period in 2022. Civil society groups reported 238 femicides between January and the end of September.

Disability Rights

Institutional and social discrimination continued to restrict access for people with disabilities to work, education, and health care.

Ecuador adopted specific procedures in 2022 for responding to emergencies related to people with disabilities.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The National Assembly has yet to comply with Constitutional Court orders to revise civil marriage provisions to include same-sex couples, allow self-determination in gender recognition procedures, regulate assisted reproduction methods, and allow same-sex couples to register children with their surnames.

The constitution discriminates against same-sex couples by excluding them from access to adoption.

Freedom of Expression

Increased violence and political instability have hampered the work of journalists and media outlets.

Attacks against media workers increased, according to the free speech organization Fundamedios. Death threats and mailed explosive devices to several journalists and media outlets forced five journalists to flee Ecuador between January and September 2023.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk visited Ecuador in January, identifying challenges, including socioeconomic inequality, poor prison conditions, and security issues linked to transnational crime. Later, he expressed concerns about rising violence and the killing of Fernando Villavicencio. Various UN experts echoed his concerns, highlighting attacks on justice officials and linking poverty to the increasing violence and insecurity.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights condemned “severe instances of violence” during the election campaigns and granted protective measures to Christian Zurita, who became Construye’s presidential candidate following the assassination of Villavicencio, and his team.

On August 8, during the first day of an Amazon Summit, Ecuador, along with seven other Amazon countries, signed the Belém Declaration, establishing a collective agenda to protect the Amazon.

Ecuador became a member of the UN Security Council in January 2023 and assumed the presidency in December. Ecuador’s draft resolution to strengthen the mandate of the UN Integrated Office in Haiti was adopted unanimously. Ecuador has used its Security Council seat to speak out forcefully on issues like Russian abuses in Ukraine and the importance of cross-border humanitarian aid for northwest Syria. Ecuador has been helping to lead the Security Council’s work on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine.

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The Human Rights System Is Under Threat: A Call to Action



Tirana Hassan

Executive Director

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'We should treat it as a war': Ecuador's descent into drug gang violence

Successive governments have been unable to rein in violence as South American country became cocaine superhighway

by [Dan Colllyns](#) in Guayaquil

A bulletproof glass at Auto Express security company's workshop in Quito as car owners pay fortunes to bulletproof them against gang violence. Photograph: Martin Bernetti/AFP/Getty Images

The police captain looked strung-out and exhausted as he reached for the can of energy drink on his desk and took a swig. Leading the unit in charge of finding disappeared people in Ecuador's main port city, Guayaquil, was taking its toll.

Hundreds of disappearances have been reported this year, said the officer, who asked not to be named for security reasons. Forensic anthropologists are increasingly called upon to exhume human remains. Graphic footage of gangland killings is uploaded on social media - sometimes with a reggaeton soundtrack.

A maze of islands in the delta of the Guayas River - which gives the city and the surrounding province its name - has become a graveyard for the victims of a bloody drug war between gangs and the collateral victims of kidnapping for ransom.

"It's like a cemetery with human body parts left strewn about," said the police captain, swiping through gruesome videos on his mobile phone.

In recent years, the South American country has experienced a nightmarish descent into violence, with successive governments proving unable to rein in organized crime factions. Last month, the cartels showed their power with a [mass hostage-taking in six prisons](#), in an apparent response to the prison transfer of a senior gang leader.

Before that, the [presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio](#) was shot dead in broad daylight less than two weeks before the election's first round.

Ecuador will go to a [runoff vote on 15 October](#) between the frontrunner, Luisa González, who has promised to revive the social programmes of former president Rafael Correa, and Daniel Noboa, the son of a prominent banana businessman and five-time presidential candidate.



Military forces stand guard outside the Guayas 1 prison where a wave of clashes between prisoners of rival gangs claimed six lives, in the port city of Guayaquil on 25 July. Photograph: Marcos Pin/AFP/Getty Images

"At the moment we are totally invaded by narco-terrorism and we have to fight it with all the strength we have," Noboa, the scion of one of Guayaquil's wealthiest families, told the Guardian after the first round of voting.

"The violence and death rates we are facing are like those in a warzone - so we should treat it as a war and treat these narco-terrorist groups as our enemy," he said.

But the country's armed forces and police appear to be losing the battle against the narcos who have turned the country into a cocaine superhighway

as gangs – both inside and outside the weak and overcrowded [prison system](#) – vie for drug trafficking routes, with backing from powerful Mexican cartels.

Drug trafficking is not new in Ecuador, thanks to its location – sandwiched between the world’s main cocaine producers, Colombia and Peru – its porous borders and major Pacific Ocean ports. The amount of cocaine seized at the country’s ports has tripled since 2020 to 77.4 tonnes last year.

But in recent years, the scale of the accompanying violence has rocketed. Ecuador saw 4,600 violent deaths in 2022, double the previous year, and the country is set to break the record again with 3,568 violent deaths in the first half of 2023. Of those, nearly half were in Guayas, the province that includes Guayaquil, where [nearly 1,700 people have been murdered so far this year](#).

“Every night we go on patrol. We don’t know if we’ll come back,” said Capt Luis Paredes as he and fellow police officers searched vehicles entering Isla Trinitaria, a dangerous port district. A steady stream of lorries carrying shipping containers trail through its congested streets, heading for the port terminals.

A few hours later, on the other side of town, a squad of soldiers stopped and searched motorbikes and cars in the outlying Monte Sinaí neighbourhood, as watchful parents escorted their uniformed children on to buses and bakers and grocers opened up in the dim dawn light.



Benny Colonico, an Italian restaurant owner, was snatched at gunpoint from its premises by kidnapers dressed as police officers in June. Photograph: Marcos Pin/AFP/Getty Images

“It’s a very violent zone, dominated by organised crime groups,” said squad leader Lt Carlos Hernández, referring to the gangs – Los Choneros, Los Lobos and Los Tiguerones – which are fighting a turf war in the sprawling grey suburb.

As he opened the boot of his blue saloon for inspection, the driver Santos Veloz said he wished there were more army checkpoints – adding drily that these days you were more likely to be stopped by thieves than soldiers.

“The criminals come on motorbikes to rob you. You can’t do anything because they’ll kill you,” he said.

Extortion was rife, he added. Every home must pay protection money of about \$5 a week, known as “vacunas” or vaccines – or face the consequences.

“If you don’t pay they’ll come at midnight and plant a bomb or they’ll wait at the corner and shoot you,” the trader said.

Businesses, big and small, are also targeted for extortion – and risk kidnapping if they refuse to pay. This June, an Italian restaurant owner,

Benny Colonico, was snatched at gunpoint from its premises by kidnappers dressed as police officers.

“Every day I was thinking in which moment they will kill me”, said Colonico, 49, who bargained for his freedom by offering to pay part of the million-dollar ransom. “When I got out I said: God give me another chance of life.”



Arturo Carpio, was shot outside his family home and died outside his home in Guayaquil, Ecuador. His partner, who asked not to be identified, said that the gang which the killers belonged to have also infiltrated the local police force. Photograph: Dan Collyns/The Guardian

But for young men looking for a life outside the gangs, there is no escape. Arturo Carpio was just 24 years old when he was shot at a late night gathering outside his family home in July. He died from his injuries days later in hospital.

CCTV footage shows the killers running from the scene and fleeing in a white vehicle but his bereaved partner, who also asked not to be named, said his murder was not reported to the police “out of fear that they would do to his family members what they did to him”.

“There would be no point trying to make some kind of complaint,” said the 19-year-old college student, alleging that the police force was infiltrated by the same gang that carried out his murder.

She too fears for her life, as the murderers - known to her and the family - are still at large. The couple had been together for three years, and dreamed of a future together outside Ecuador, she said.

Thousands of other Ecuadorians, driven also by poverty and unemployment, are leaving.

A [United Nations report](#) released on Friday said the surge in violence in Ecuador was a wake-up call to urgently address poverty. “A lack of job opportunities and poor education have made young people easy recruits for criminal gangs,” said Olivier De Schutter, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights.

“These gangs are in turn fuelling poverty by extorting small businesses, taking hold in schools and disrupting children’s education, and creating such fear and despair that a growing number of Ecuadorians are simply leaving the country. This vicious cycle can only be broken if the country invests more in its people,” De Schutter added.

More than 822,000 between the ages of 18 and 45 left in the first half of this year and 1.4 million Ecuadorians migrated in 2022. Record numbers have attempted to go through the perilous Darién Gap - [nearly 35,000 so far this year](#) - according to Panama’s migration office.

Wary of trusting politicians’ promises of jobs and prosperity and with a drugs war raging on their doorstep, many thousands will likely follow, risking all to

seek a future far from home.

I hope you appreciated this article. Before you move on, I wanted to ask if you would consider supporting the Guardian's journalism as we enter one of the most consequential news cycles of our lifetimes in 2024.

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AP PHOTOS: Surge in gang violence upends life in Ecuador



The legs of a dismembered man protrude from a bag on the street where children play and dogs roam in the Colinas de La Florida neighborhood in Guayaquil, Ecuador, early evening Sunday, Oct. 1, 2023. The legs laid there for hours before being picked up by authorities and the rest of the man's body parts were found scattered a few blocks away. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd)

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BY RODRIGO ABD

Updated 12:02 AM EST, October 13, 2023

DURAN, Ecuador (AP) — Dismembered limbs lie on the street next to playing children. Prisons are arenas of gang warfare. Bloodshed keeps schools shut down. And a presidential candidate is assassinated in broad daylight.



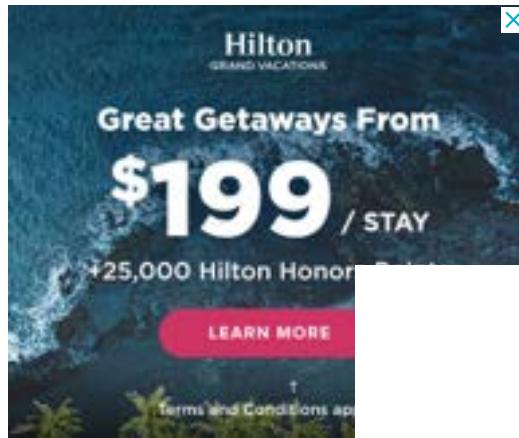
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This is the new Ecuador.

The South American nation of 18 million people was long a spot of calm in a region shaken by political upheaval, economic turmoil and guerrilla warfare. But a wave of criminal violence has surged in recent years, upending life for Ecuadorians.

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The bloodshed is a product of narco gangs tiring of playing cat-and-mouse with the authorities in more militarized countries like Colombia and Mexico. They are seeking out smuggling routes in new countries with less vigilance.

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Authorities documented 4,603 homicides in 2022, nearly doubling the toll of the previous year and making Ecuador one of the most dangerous countries in Latin America.

This year, violence and drug seizures have only continued to soar in the lead-up to the country's presidential run-off election Oct. 15.



Residents walk past police tape that marks off a crime scene to reach their home in Durán, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, after midnight, Thursday, Sept. 28, 2023. According to police, a driver was shot and taken to the hospital. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd)


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Broken bottles line the top of a home's outer wall, as a way to deter break-ins, over a campaign mural supporting presidential hopeful Daniel Noboa, in Duran, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, Friday, Sept. 29, 2023. An heir to a fortune built on Ecuador's main crop of bananas, Noboa pulled off an upset by advancing to the country's Oct. 15 presidential election runoff. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd)

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Nowhere has been hit harder than Guayaquil, Ecuador's biggest city and home to the country's most bustling port, from which drugs and other illegal goods pour out.

Gunshots regularly ring out, their sounds reverberating over multi-colored homes that wind up into the mountains overlooking the nearby Pacific. Tension grips the streets, where heavily armed police and soldiers patrol and sometimes roar by atop tanks.

As the government struggles to keep an emerging flock of narco groups at bay, things came to a head in August when an anti-corruption presidential hopeful, Fernando Villavicencio, was gunned down while leaving a campaign event less than two weeks before the first round of the presidential election.

Shortly before his death, the candidate had sent a message: "I'm not scared."

Few others in the Andean nation can say the same.



Grass grows over the tracks of a rail line in downtown Duran, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, Friday, Sept. 29, 2023. Before the 1990s, Duran was once an important part of the train network, for cargo and passengers, in southern Ecuador, and the railroad was an important employer in town. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd)

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A girl runs past soldiers patrolling Duran, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, Saturday, Sept

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German Mosquera's sons Jordana, left, Jordan, center, and Liam sit in his recycle cart, as they accompany him at work, searching for used cardboard and metal to sell in downtown Guayaquil, Ecuador, after midnight Friday, Sept. 29, 2023. Mosquera said he manages to make between three and five dollars a day. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd)

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Soldiers force men to do exercise as punishment for not having proper licenses for their motorcycles in Duran, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, early evening Saturday, Sept. 30, 2023. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd) [Read More](#)



After a gun attack, a TV video journalist focuses on a blood stain on the sidewalk near a campaign poster for presidential hopeful Luisa Gonzalez in Guayaquil, Ecuador, Sunday, Oct. 1, 2023. According to neighbors, two people riding a motorcycle shot two people, killing one and badly injuring the other. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd) [Read More](#)

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The body of taxi driver Juan Carlos Barrezueta lies at the entrance of a car parts shop where he stopped his vehicle to buy something in Duran, the sister city of Ecuador, Friday, Sept. 29, 2023. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd) [Read More](#)



Family members stand next to the open casket of Juan Carlos Barrezuela during his wake at the Peace Park Cemetery, before his burial in Durán, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, Friday, Sept. 29, 2023. Barrezuela was a taxi driver who was murdered when he stopped to buy something at a car parts store. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd)

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A bullet lays meters from the corpse of Juan Carlos Barreza, a taxi driver who was murdered when he stopped to buy something at a car parts store, in Duran, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, Friday, Sept. 29, 2023. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd) [Read More](#)



The relatives of Juan Carlos Barrezueta carry his coffin for burial at Peace Park cemetery in Duran, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, Friday, Sept. 29, 2023. Barrezueta's brother said the 40-year-old taxi driver was murdered while stopping his cab at a car parts store. (AP Photo/John Manchillo) [Read More](#)



A student band marches in a parade marking the independence of the city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, Sunday, Oc

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People watch a student marching band during a parade marking the independence of the city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, Sunday, Oct. 1, 2023. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd)

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The campus of the Fiscal Duran School sits empty in Duran, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, Friday, Sept. 29, 2023. The Ministry of Education temporarily closed the physical campuses of some schools in Duran starting in October and required the students and faculty to teach and learn

remotely, in response to high crime. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd)



A man is passed out drunk on the sidewalk where a taxi vendor waits for clients in Duran, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, late Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2023. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd)

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An internet worker fixes cables as soldiers patrol Duran, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, Saturday, Sept

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Lisheva Rose, wearing a bride costume to help attract customers to her husband's tamales stand, is surprised by the camera as she holds an energy drink in Duran, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, late Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2023. The English and art teacher from South Africa said she moved to Ecuador because her husband is Ecuadorean-Israeli, but hopes they move to her home country due to rising crime in Ec [Read More](#)





Soldiers pat down a motorcyclist and inspect his documents at a checkpoint in Duran, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, Thursday, Sept. 20, 2023. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd) [Read More](#)



Youths play soccer in Duran, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, just after midnight Saturday, Sept

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A soldier stands guard at the start of a security operation by the military and police in Duran, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, Saturday, Sept. 30, 2023. "Ecuador Ya" is the campaign slogan of presidential hopeful Naboa, ahead of Oct. 15 elections. (AP Photo/Rodrig

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Charred chairs and tables sit on the patio of the Italian restaurant, *Sapore Mio*, after Molotov cocktails were thrown at it in Guayaquil, Ecuador, late Thursday, Sept. 28, 2023. Three months prior, the owner, Benny Colonico, had been kidnapped for five days before being set free. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd)

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Restaurant owner Benny Colonico argues with a TV journalist covering the aftermath of the motorcyclist attack on the patio of his restaurant "Sabore Mio" in Guayaquil, Ecuador, Thursday, Sept. 28, 2023. Three months prior, Colonico, originally from Italy, had been kidnapped for five days before being set free. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd) [Read More](#)



homes in the Santa Ana neighborhood of Guayaquil, Ecuador, Sunday, Oct. 1, 2023. The bridge connects Guayaquil with Durán, top right. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd)

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Original reads in Spanish. Robbing is prohibited. You will be executed, in Duran, the sister city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, shortly after midnight Saturday, Sept. 30, 2023. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd) [Read More](#)

AP reporter Megan Janetsky contributed to this report from Mexico City.

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Ecuador police to investigate grisly deaths potentially tied to drugs bust

By **Yury Garcia**

February 14, 2022 4:23 PM EST · Updated 2 years ago



GUAYAQUIL, Ecuador Feb 14 (Reuters) - Ecuador's police on Monday said it will investigate the deaths of two people whose bodies were hung from a foot bridge in the small costal city of Duran, a crime officers say could be linked to a recent drugs seizure.

Violence and crime, including within the prison system, have exploded in Ecuador since the end of last year, with the government blaming drug-trafficking gangs which use the country to export narcotics to the United States and Europe.



them missing on Friday, Cortez said.

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One working theory held by the police is that the deaths could be linked to an operation which took place on Sunday in Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest city, during which seven tonnes of drugs destined for Belgium were seized.

President Guillermo Lasso is fighting the crime wave with legal reforms and increased presence of police and soldiers on the streets, but so far the measures have not succeeded.

Reporting by Yury Garcia in Guayaquil Writing by Oliver Griffin Editing by Alistair Bell

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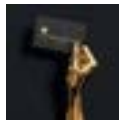


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Adolfo Macías Villamar: Curfew in Ecuador after infamous gang leader 'Fito' vanishes from cell

8 January 2024

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By Vanessa Buschschlüter & Robert Plummer
BBC News



Reuters

Adolfo Macías Villamar is the leader of the feared Los Choneros gang

A 60-day state of emergency has begun in Ecuador after a convicted gang leader vanished from his prison cell.

Adolfo Macías Villamar, better known as "Fito", is the leader of Los Choneros, a powerful gang which is thought to have been behind some of the deadly prison riots in

recent months.

He was being held in the maximum security wing of a jail in Guayaquil.

The emergency measures include the suspension of the right of assembly and a nightly curfew.

They were announced in a decree issued by President Daniel Noboa, who took office less than two months ago as the second-youngest holder of the post in Ecuadorean history.

He won the election after a campaign overshadowed by unprecedented levels of violence, including the assassination of another candidate, Fernando Villavicencio. President Noboa said the emergency would allow the military and police to take control of the country's prisons at a national level. Los Choneros control much of the compound at La Regional prison, where Fito was being held.

"These narco-terrorist groups intend to intimidate us and they think we will give in to their demands," the president said.

But he added: "We will not negotiate with terrorists and we will not rest until we have restored peace."

Fito is a notorious criminal suspected of having played a role **in last year's killing of Villavicencio**, whom he had sent death threats.

Police said they had noticed his absence early on Sunday and could not find him anywhere in the prison wing.

He often defies the authorities, most recently by releasing a "narcocorrido", a slick music video glorifying his criminal exploits, which was partly recorded inside the jail. The video shows the Mariachi Bravo duo singing along with Fito's daughter, known as Queen Michelle, and praising the "man of honour" they say the criminal is.

"I take my hat off to you, Fito, my dad," his daughter croons, claiming that "through his veins good blood flows".

The video shows Fito caressing a fighting cockerel and freely chatting to fellow inmates.

The fact that the video could be recorded behind bars suggests that the ban on electronic devices inside the jail had been breached.

It is still not clear if Fito managed to leave the prison compound in the port city or if he may be hiding somewhere inside.

A police commander said he could "neither confirm nor deny" an escape, nor could he say for how long the convict had been missing.

He said hundreds of officers were searching the prison.

La Regional jail is located in a large prison compound which houses a total of five penitentiaries and more than 12,000 inmates. Fito has spent much of his past 12 years behind bars there.

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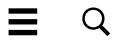


In August, he was briefly transferred to La Roca, a smaller jail in the same compound, which is considered safer because of the lower number of inmates. It took thousands of soldiers to move him.



Getty Images

When Fito was transferred, graffiti appeared in the football field of his old jail demanding he be returned



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compound.

The fugitive was captured along with his brother, a fellow member of Los Choneros, four months later at their mother's home in the city of Manta.

Fito has been in prison ever since. After the killing in December 2020 of Jorge Luis Zambrano, he took over the leadership of Los Choneros.

The gang, which is named after its power base in the town of Chone, mainly engages in drug trafficking and extortion and has forged links with Mexico's powerful Sinaloa cartel.

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World / Americas

Gangs, gunmen and cartels running amok. As terror grips the streets of Ecuador, even the armed forces live in fear

By [David Culver](#), [Abel Alvarado](#) and [Carlos Martinelli](#), CNN

🕒 7 minute read · Updated 12:38 PM EST, Thu January 25, 2024



Video Ad Feedback

CNN goes inside Ecuador's hunt for 'terrorists'

06:56 - Source: [CNN](#)

Guayaquil, Ecuador (CNN) — Camille Gamarra and Diego Gallardo sat in their living room and watched as armed gunmen stormed a local television news studio, taking anchors and staff hostage during the live broadcast.

People watching it play out were left stunned, and word quickly spread on social media and through WhatsApp messages of simultaneous attacks that were being carried out through Ecuador's largest and arguably most violent city, Guayaquil.

Suddenly, residents, including Camille and Diego, found themselves seeking a safe place for themselves and their loved ones.

The couple's 10-year-old son was in school across town, and Camille bolted towards her car keys to pick him up. But Diego stopped her.

"He told me, 'If something were to happen to you, our kids and I wouldn't know how to cope. They need you. Stay here. I'm going,'" Camille recounts, a lost stare in her eyes as tears stream down her face.

She messaged with Diego as he made his way to the school, all the while getting alerts of more violence playing out across their city: gangs were attacking hospitals, universities and malls.

Diego's last message to Camille said he was just two minutes from the school. But several minutes later, their son called Camille, scared and asking if anyone was coming to get him.

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Camille repeatedly tried calling Diego's cell to figure out where he was, and eventually a police colonel answered. Diego had been shot in an apparent random barrage of gunfire. By that point, police barricades were up and Guayaquil was on lockdown.

"I couldn't rescue either of them," Camille says, breaking down into tears. "I was powerless. I couldn't do a thing."

How Diego was caught up in the violence in Ecuador's Guayaquil

Musician Diego Gallardo was killed when going to pick up his son amid the violence of January 9 when armed gunmen took over a local TV studio. His death was one of multiple violent incidents taking place in the country that week, which saw a gang leader escape from Guayaquil prison complex, prompting the government to call for a state of emergency.





Days earlier, one of the country's most notorious gang leaders – José Adolfo Macías, or “Fito” – had escaped from his prison cell in Guayaquil, prompting the government to declare a state of emergency. That declaration provoked criminal groups to unleash fury in the city on January 9 – marking a turning point in Ecuador's fight against the gangs.



Members of the police and military escort Jose Adolfo Macias at Guayaquil prison, Ecuador, August 12, 2023, in a screengrab from a video provided by the Ecuadorean Police. Ecuadorean Police/Handout via Reuters

Hours after terror broke out in Guayaquil, President Daniel Noboa took an unprecedented step. Noboa, who had only been inaugurated two months earlier, declared an “internal armed conflict” in the country and ordered Ecuador's armed forces to “neutralize” the members of more than 20 gangs, which he labeled as terror groups.

executed the operation. They warn that leaks could cost lives.

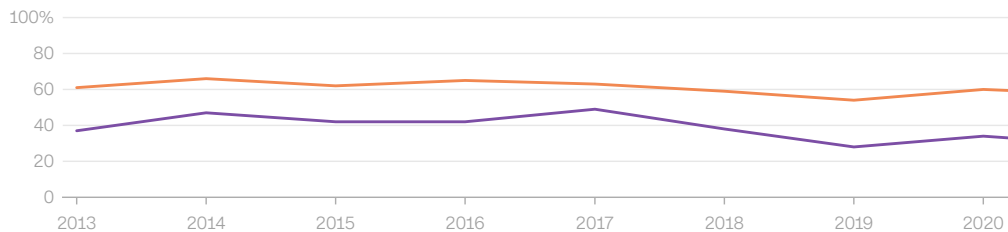
Fear has permeated the ranks; even in Guayaquil's 90-degree heat and humidity, under layers of tactical gear, they insist on putting on a ski mask before being filmed. Some asked CNN to also blur their faces.

"These have been long days and nights," one officer said. "But we do this for our fellow citizens and our own families."

Ecuador's faith in public order is declining

Ecuadorians' confidence in police and the judicial system has fallen over the past 10 years. In 2022, only two in five expressed trust in local police and only one in four in courts.

Share of Ecuadorians confident in local police and the judicial system



Note: The data is based on annual face-to-face and phone interviews with a sample of 1,000 Ecuadorians. The margin of sampling error varies between +/-3.6 and +/-4.1 percentage points.

Source: Gallup
Graphic: Krystina Shveda, CNN

'Island of Peace' no more

Ecuador, once known as the region's "Island of Peace," is nestled between two of the world's largest cocaine producers, Peru and Colombia, and its deep ports have made it a key transit point for cocaine making its way to consumers in the United States and Europe. Its dollarized economy has also made it a strategic location for traffickers seeking to launder money.

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Experts warn that Ecuador's terror groups are aligned with a wider criminal network, including the notorious Sinaloa Cartel out of Mexico, complicating Noboa's attempts to "neutralize" criminal groups operating within his borders. But Adm. Jaime Vela Erazo, head of the Joint Command of Ecuador's Armed Forces, has vowed not to "back down or negotiate" with armed groups, adding



The military guards the outer perimeter of Guayaquil's prison complex, the biggest in the country and the place where Fito was held before his suspected escape. Sean Walker/CNN

With a nationwide curfew in effect, during the day police and military set up roving checkpoints on the streets of Guayaquil. They stop drivers and pat them down to inspect them for weapons, meticulously searching every part of their car and even scrolling through their cell phones. Soldiers also stop commuter buses, asking passengers onboard if they have any information that might help law enforcement.

More than 3,000 people have been arrested since January 9, according to the Ecuadorian presidency. While those numbers may sound encouraging, fewer than two hundred of them were apprehended for what the government calls "terrorism," according to government figures.

The battle is far from over. Ecuador's government estimates that at least 30,000 people in the country are tied to gangs, according to Noboa.

But top military officials tell CNN that they worry about what happens next. They say they do not have the tactical equipment, ammo and intelligence needed to sustain this fight long term.

raids and preemptive strikes, some fear what will happen to them or their families if terrorists link them to the crackdown efforts.

Most Ecuadorians do not feel safe being outside alone at night

Question: Do you feel safe walking alone at night in the city or area where you live? Answering **no**:



Note: The data is based on a face-to-face survey with a sample of 1,000 Ecuadorians, conducted between July 11 and Aug. 22, 2022. The margin of sampling error is +/-3.8 percentage points.

Source: Gallup
Crosbie Kenton Shuda, CNN

“I know we’re now targets,” one soldier says. “But that won’t stop me from fighting.”

He and others have not been home in more than a week, working rotating shifts and patrols. He pulls out his phone to proudly show a letter sent by his 10-year-old daughter and written in English.

“I want you to know that everyone misses you at home and we want you to return safe and sound....And I ask you to help the country to be a better place,” it reads.

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“I’m at ease knowing I’m doing this for her,” he says.



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They met on a dating app in Bogota. He woke up dizzy and without his passport the next day

The crisis could drive more Ecuadorians to emigrate. Locals are tired of living in fear and being extorted for protection money, says Carlos Jimenez, an urban planner who studied in the US and is now living in his native Ecuador. “These people are in the middle of gunfights in their neighborhoods, what would you do? You’re not going to want to stay there.”



Armed gunmen stormed a local television news studio, taking anchors and staff hostage during the live broadcast. CNN

“I mean if (the US doesn’t) help us, probably you will see more people trying to cross the border,” Jimenez warns.

For now, Jimenez plans to stay, but he’s not sure for how long. “I’ve got a business down here; I’ve got family here,” he says. “I’m not seeing myself at 40-something moving somewhere else. I don’t want to move from my country, I love my country, man!”

Camille, who is still grappling with her husband’s death as she plans his funeral, says Diego too was proud to be from Ecuador. A musician, his stage name was *Aire del Golfo*, or *The Gulf Breeze*, an homage to his beloved coastal hometown.

Standing over the neighborhood memorial dedicated to Diego, she reads from a framed printout the lyrics from one of Diego’s songs: “I’m listening to voices that guide me to where I’m going and I don’t want to stop, because today I’ll find the place where I’m from. And I’ll stay there.”




Soldiers take part in drills before they head out on operations in Guayaquil. Sean Walker/CNN

Signs of normalcy are slowly returning to Guayaquil. Days after Noboa's decree of an "internal armed conflict," CNN saw businesses reopening in the bustling city center. Residents began venturing out for meals and shopping. Some restaurants even daring to place tables on sidewalks for outdoor dining.

But the terror is far from over.

On January 17, Cesar Suarez, the prosecutor tasked with investigating the TC Television studio takeover, was gunned down in his car on the way to court – a brazen strike against the government's anti-terror efforts, and a reminder of the gangs' unrelenting grip on the country.

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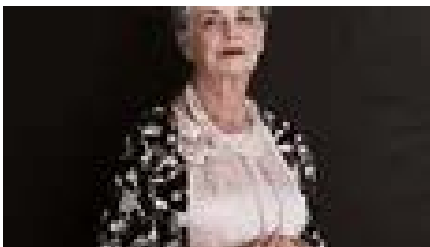
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Ecuadorian soldiers detain the men who stormed a TV station during a live broadcast on January 9.

News Security Policy

Ecuador Faces a Tangled Web in Its War on Gangs

by Anastasia Austin
19 Jan 2024

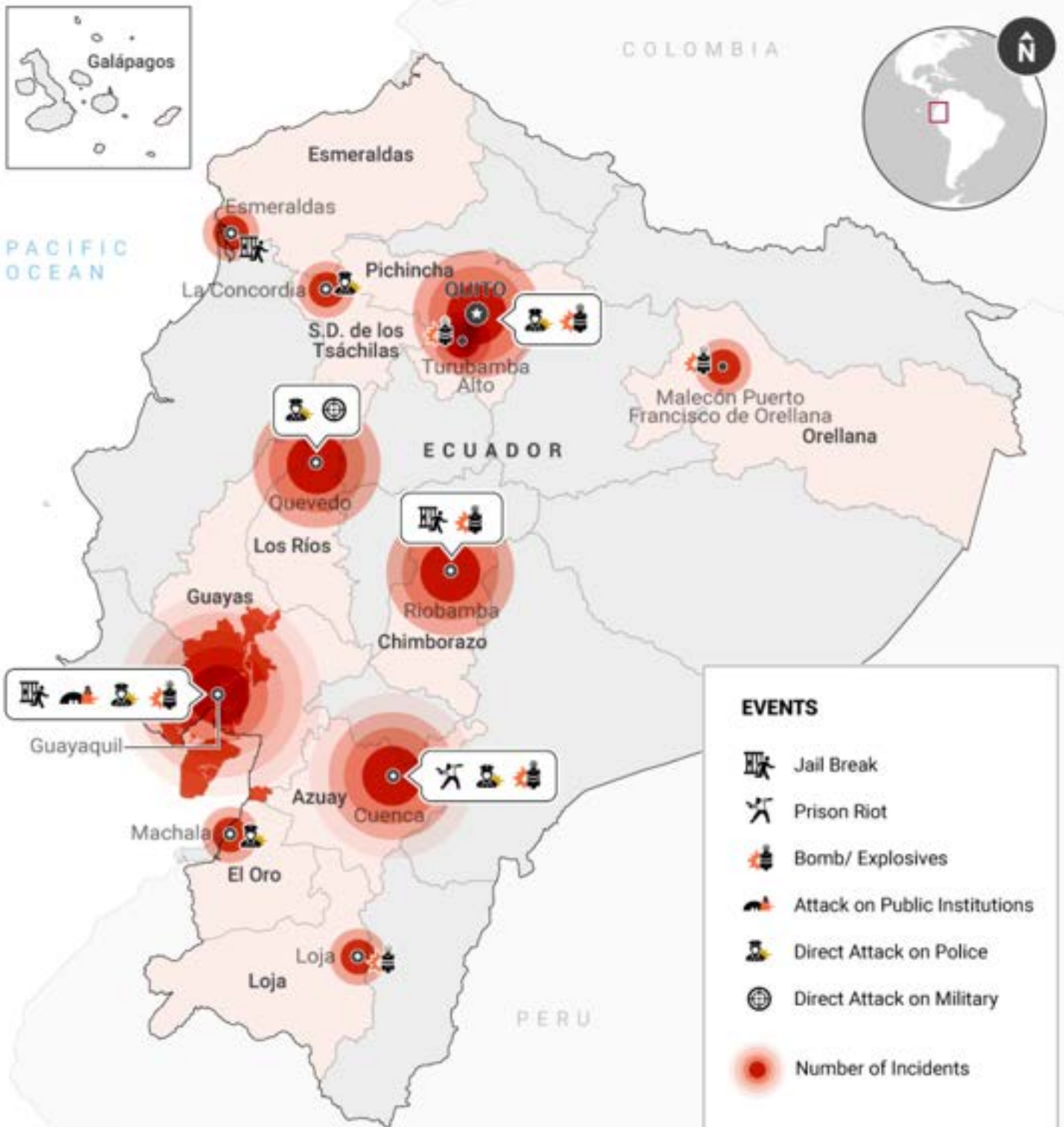
Ecuador's numerous gangs boast significant territorial presence and a diversity of funding streams that will pose a formidable challenge to the country's weak institutions in what will likely be a drawn-out conflict between organized crime and the state.

Approximately a week after Ecuador **declared war** on organized crime amid gang-led chaos, prison riots, and attacks on police and civilians, the country's security forces said they had re-taken prisons, and violence appeared to be down from its peak. But experts expect the lull to be temporary.

“It’s true that we’ve seen a decrease in violence, but that is normal in the first week of war,” Daniel Pontón, a professor of security at Ecuador’s National Institute of Higher Studies (Instituto de Altos Estudios Nacionales – IAEN Ecuador), told InSight Crime. “In time, it will come back with even more force.”

Key Events in Ecuador's War With Gangs

Between January 7-15, 2024, Ecuador's gangs unleashed chaos on the country.



January 2024

Sources: InSight Crime News Monitoring

insightcrime.org

Below InSight Crime maps out the challenges facing President Daniel Noboa.

A Complicated Criminal Landscape

Noboa faces fragmenting criminal structures with diverse income streams, and the gangs have made it clear that they maintain a presence beyond traditional criminal hotspots.

In his declaration of war, Noboa classified 22 groups as “terrorist organizations” — a much higher number than government officials have considered a serious threat in the past. Security experts have **questioned** whether the inclusion of such a large number reflects the reality on the ground.

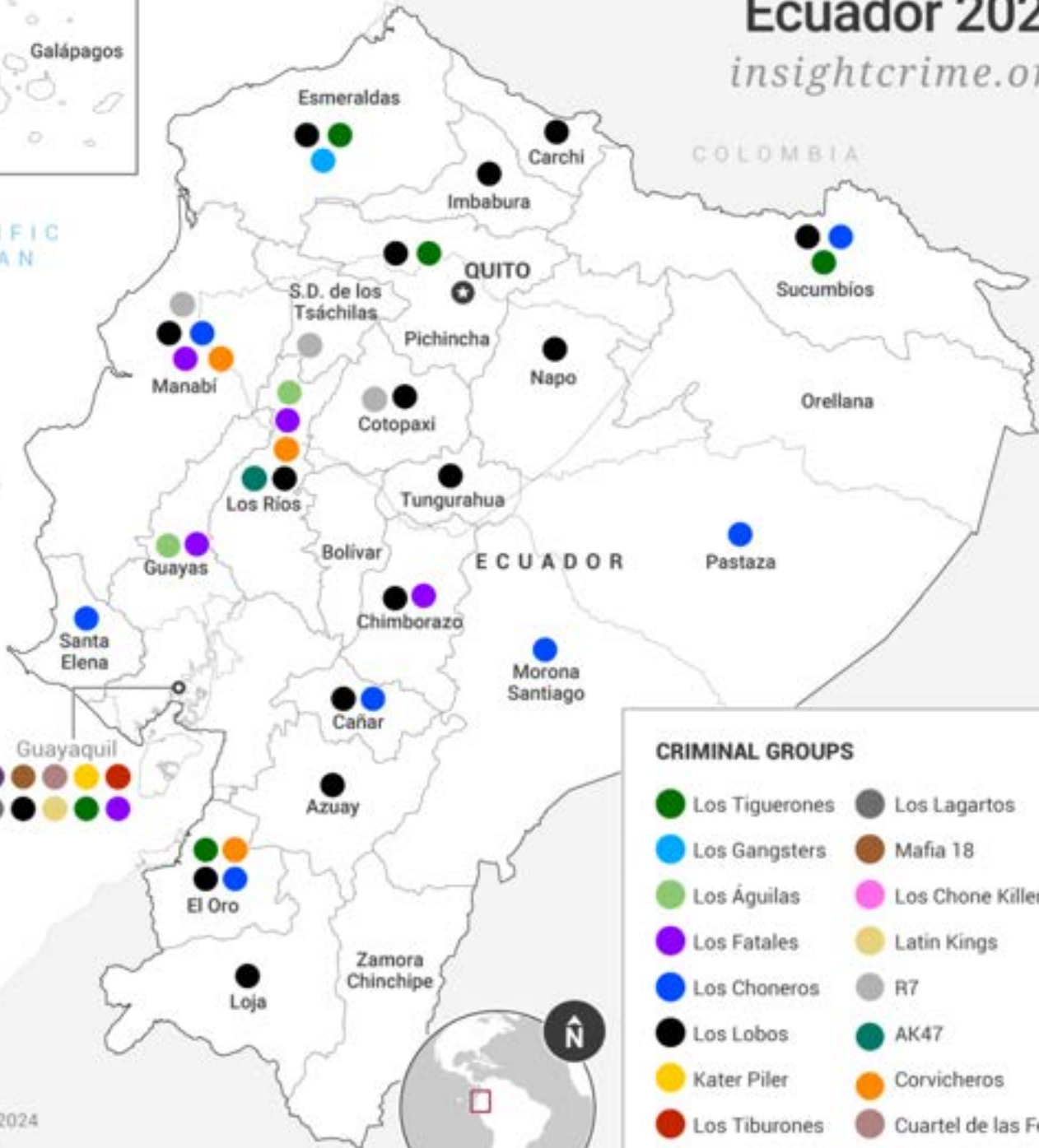
“Some of these, I have never heard of in my life, and I follow this subject closely,” Lorena Yael Piedra, former intelligence official and president of the Ecuadorian Association of International Studies, told InSight Crime.

Gang Presence in Ecuador 2024

insightcrime.org



PACIFIC OCEAN



January 2024

Sources: Data provided by Ecuador's Ministry of the Interior and a former intelligence official with links to active military intelligence

But the growing number of groups also reflects how quickly the criminal landscape in Ecuador has fragmented, with new groups splintering off from previously cohesive structures.

These groups are increasingly **fighting each other** for control of criminal profits, economies, and key territories. While they seem to have united against the government during the escalation of violence over the last week, these alliances may be temporary.

“You have long-term strategic alliances, and you have tactical short-term alliances with very specific objectives,” Renato Rivera-Rhon, coordinator of Ecuador’s Organized Crime Observatory (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado – OECO), **told** InSight Crime. “The current coordination falls within the category of tactical alliances, with the common objective of demonstrating the power that these criminal organizations have, mainly to the government, but also to citizens.”

*SEE ALSO: **Choneros Profile***

The underlying competition between gangs makes fighting a war against them difficult, since any military operation that significantly weakens one gang can give another — even a previously small and insignificant one — a strategic advantage.

The gangs also have an expansive geographical reach that could stretch government resources thin. Over the past week, bombings and other acts of intimidation have taken place in areas traditionally considered secure, including the capital, Quito, the major transport hub of Riobamba, and Cuenca, Ecuador’s third-largest city.

A Well-Resourced Enemy

Complicating the government’s response further is that these groups — which initially thrived off drug trafficking profits — have since diversified their income streams, making it difficult to cut off money funding the gangs’ side of the war.

The combination of transnational cocaine trafficking and retail drug sales within Ecuador is still the most important earner for the country’s organized crime groups, but other criminal economies are growing, according to an Ecuadorian government report obtained last year by InSight Crime.

Human smuggling and human trafficking, as well as a slew of environmental crimes, all saw a rise between 2021 and 2022, according to the report. **Extortion** is also on the rise.

The government, on the other hand, is strapped for resources. The country’s Finance and Economic Ministry has **estimated** that maintaining the armed forces’ operations will require over \$1 billion which Ecuador does not have.

“The country’s short-term fiscal situation is unsustainable,” the ministry **wrote** in an official statement released on January 15.

Noboa has asked Ecuador’s congress to raise taxes, but the opposition-controlled legislature signaled that it will reject the proposal in its current form.

International actors, including the United States, the European Union, Colombia, and even Venezuela have offered their support. But any aid may be too little, too late.

“It’s a situation with a lot of uncertainty,” Pontón said.

A Short-Term Approach to a Long-Term Conflict

In starting a war with Ecuador’s gangs, Noboa has given little indication of his exit strategy, and there is growing evidence that Ecuador will become bogged down in a long-term conflict.

In the short term, the government had few alternatives to a militarized response. But experts cautioned against excessive reliance on security forces to solve long-term crime problems.

“It should not become a habit — it should be a short-term intervention with specific goals,” a Ministry of Defense official speaking in a personal capacity told InSight Crime.

Yet, Noboa **has not specified** what comes next if the military response succeeds in restoring order.

“He’s making things up as he goes along,” Carla Alvarez, a professor at the Institute of Advanced National Studies (Instituto de Altos Estudios Nacionales) specializing in the development of public security policy, organized crime, and the prison system, told InSight Crime.

***SEE ALSO:** [GameChangers 2023: Ecuador Loses Its Grip on Crime](#)*

Additionally, corruption plagues some of the main institutions charged with containing crime over the long term, including the police, the **prisons**, and the **judicial system**.

“Corruption within the police is an open secret,” the Defense Ministry official told InSight Crime. “And that worries me because it could mean that the armed forces have to intervene for an extended amount of time if the police cannot do their job.”

Part of the problem is a shortage of resources — failure to invest in institutions and corruption go hand-in-hand, and underfunded institutions enable criminal groups, experts told InSight Crime.

In explaining why gangs have been able to convert prisons into recruiting grounds, for instance, Yael Piedra said, “when there is not enough money for the basics — when water, toilet paper, and soap become luxury items — organized crime steps in.”

**Marian Balceiro contributed to research for this article.*

*** The map “Gang Presence in Ecuador 2024” was updated on January 24*

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‘You cannot play with the mafia.’ Ecuador’s escalating gang violence is broadcast live as masked gunmen storm TV studio

World Updated on Jan 10, 2024 4:47 PM EST – Published on Jan 10, 2024 12:41 PM EST

GUAYAQUIL, Ecuador (AP) — Schools and stores sat shuttered, many people stayed home and soldiers roamed the streets of Ecuador’s biggest cities Wednesday, the day after armed gang members who invaded a television station during a live broadcast aroused new levels of fear in a nation experiencing a wave of criminal violence.

Much of Ecuador simmered with tension following Tuesday’s attack at public channel TC Television in Guayaquil, a coastal city that is considered the country’s most violent. Military personnel and tanks guarded hospitals, public transit and newsrooms there and in the capital city, Quito.

The hooded intruders who stormed TC Television’s offices and studio with guns and explosives unleashed at least 15 minutes of on-air threats while menacing journalists and other terrified employees. No one was killed, and police quickly moved in and arrested 13 people.

Even in a country where a presidential candidate was assassinated last year, however, the brazen daytime show of force broadcast into Ecuadorians’ homes and workplaces was unprecedented. The motive for targeting the station remained unclear, but the attack brought an immediate response from the government.

President Daniel Noboa, who came into power in November with a promise to bring peace to the South American country, issued a decree saying the nation had entered an “internal armed conflict” with 20 drug-trafficking gangs the government designated as terrorist groups.

READ MORE: Armed men break into public television studio in Ecuador as country rocked by series of attacks

The decree authorized Ecuador’s military to “neutralize” the gangs within the bounds of international humanitarian law. The president’s pronouncement prompted some analysts to describe the televised attack as a watershed moment for Ecuador.

“We are fighting for national peace. We are fighting against terrorist groups that are more than 20,000 people,” Noboa said in a interview with a local radio station Wednesday.

Police said they had arrested at least 70 people as of Wednesday morning for alleged terrorist acts, including the 13 who were apprehended at the TV station. TC Television’s mid-afternoon newscast was underway when the armed group burst in.

First, a man with a pistol appeared in the middle of the public TV station’s live transmission, followed by a second man with a shotgun, then a third and more. With the show’s “After the News” title behind them, station employees were brought onto the set and ordered to lie down.

“We are on air, so you know that you cannot play with the mafia,” one of the assailants is heard saying.

Masked men could be seen aiming guns at news staff. Someone said: “Don’t shoot!” Screams could be heard followed by the sound of gunshots. After about 15 minutes the transmission was cut.

Alina Manrique, the head of news for TC Television, was ordered to get on the floor. With a gun aimed at her head, “I thought about my entire life, about my two children,” she told The Associated Press after the ordeal had ended.

“I am still in shock,” Manrique said. “Everything has collapsed. ... All I know is that it’s time to leave this country and go very far away.”

The day before the events at TC Television, the president had imposed a national state of emergency, a move that allows authorities to suspend people’s rights and mobilize the military in places like prisons. Ecuador’s government reported Wednesday that 125 prison guards and 14 administrative workers have been held hostage since Monday inside prisons in five provinces.

Authorities were working to ensure the hostages “get out safe and sound without giving in to any single criminal,” Vice Minister of Government Fernando Torres said.

Noboa’s emergency declaration followed the apparent escape from prison of Llos Choneros gang leader Adolfo Macías on Sunday. Authorities say Los Choneros, one of the Ecuadorian gangs considered responsible for a spike in car bombings, kidnappings and slayings, has links with Mexico’s Sinaloa cartel.

READ MORE: Seven men accused of killing Ecuadorian presidential candidate slain inside prison

The whereabouts of Macías, who is known by the alias “Fito,” were unknown. The government has said at least 30 attacks have taken place since he was discovered missing from his cell in a low-security prison where he was serving a 36-year sentence for drug trafficking, murder and organized crime. He was scheduled to be transferred to a maximum security facility that day.

The head of the Armed Forces Joint Command told journalists Tuesday that the recent attacks were the gangs’ reactions to the government’s moves against them.

“They have unleashed a wave of violence to frighten the population,” Adm. Jaime Vela said.

The governments of the United States, Peru, Argentina, Israel, Canada, Colombia and Russia have offered to help Ecuador’s government crack down on the gangs, Noboa said. The president added he anticipated an aid package from the U.S. in the coming days.

Will Freeman, a political analyst at the Council on Foreign Relations, said that while gangs in Ecuador **previously assassinated presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio** and set off car bombs in front of government buildings, Tuesday’s events marked “a turning point.”

“Depending on how the government responds, it will set the precedent for these kinds of incidents to continue, or it will use this as a catalyst and make some very necessary structural reforms so that the state can start to win its war against crime,” Freeman said.

The National Police of Ecuador reported on X, formerly Twitter, Wednesday that it had secured the release of three officers who were abducted earlier in the week, recaptured 17 escaped prisoners, and seized explosives, cartridges, weapons and vehicles during raids throughout the country.

Ecuadorian officials said Tuesday that another gang leader, Fabricio Colón Pico of the Los Lobos group, had escaped from a prison in the town of Riobamba. Colón Pico was captured Friday as part of a kidnapping investigation and has also been accused of trying to kill one of the nation’s lead prosecutors.

Located on South America’s Pacific coast between Peru and Colombia, the world’s largest cocaine producers, Ecuador has become a key transit point for the drug in recent years. Much of the violence suffered by the country comes as drug gangs fight each other and the government for control of ports and smuggling routes.

Solano reported from Quito, Ecuador. Gabriela Molina, in Quito, Ecuador, and Manuel Rueda in Bogota, Colombia, contributed.

By – Allen Panchana, Associated Press

By – Gonzalo Solano, Associated Press

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WORLD ECUADOR

How Gang Violence Is Shaking Up Ecuador's Election

6 MINUTE READ



Military personnel in Quito, Ecuador, on Thursday, Aug. 10, 2023. Misha Vallejo—Bloomberg/Getty Images

BY ANNA GORDON X

AUGUST 19, 2023 11:02 AM EDT

Just five years ago, Ecuador was an anomaly in a region of chaos. Despite being sandwiched between the cocaine-producing heavyweights Colombia and Peru, Ecuador had somehow managed to avoid the large-scale drug violence that plagues much of the Andes region in Latin America, but that has since shifted.

only Venezuela, Honduras, and Colombia. The violence has been devastating for residents who are about to head into a presidential election on Sunday. And while Ecuador has historically had high voter turnout rates, with over 80% of the population voting in the 2021, the fear of violence could “reduce turnout,” **according to experts**. Soldiers have been deployed in the country for the Aug. 20 vote.

Watch more from TIME



Even before **the assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio** who was shot leaving a political rally earlier this month, at least half a dozen local politicians had been assassinated over the last year, according to **Will Freeman**, a fellow for Latin America Studies at the Council of Foreign Relations who visited Ecuador in May.

“In Ecuador, violence right now is very unpredictable. A crime can happen anywhere,” says Freeman. “In the Western Pacific Coast, which has it the worst, I think it's dangerous just to leave your house regardless of [whether] it's Election Day or not.”

the scene of a turf war between international gangs competing to control its ports for cocaine trafficking. And in Quito, the largest city and capital of the country, residents are afraid to go out at night.

In 2018, the country had a homicide rate of just 5.84 per 100,000 people, among the lowest in Latin America, according to the World Bank. But by 2022, the homicide rate had more than quadrupled in size to 26.1 per 100,000.

To understand how Ecuador has become so violent in such a short period of time, you need to first understand how Ecuador was able to maintain peace in such a turbulent region over the course of the 2010s.

The FARC deal

Ecuador had traditionally been shielded from the cocaine-related violence that is common in Latin America due to a combination of government policy and a status quo agreement with the armed group most active in drug trafficking in the Andes, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC.)

The FARC was a Marxist guerilla formed in 1961 with the aim of overthrowing the Colombian government. Beginning in the 1990s, it grew increasingly involved in the drug trade in Latin America, and by 2016, it controlled 60% of the world's most productive coca crops according to [The Atlantic](#). Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, the Ecuadorian government maintained a cautious but stable relationship with the FARC.

“They had kind of a hands off policy with the FARC, of [if] you don't make violence or trouble for us, we won't make trouble for you,” says Freeman.

The FARC, too, kept things relatively calm in Ecuador. Though it continued to maintain some drug trafficking operations in the northern part of the country, it spent most of its resources focusing on pre-existing drug trade hubs in Colombia.

Colombian government, formally demobilizing a 50-year insurgency and creating a gaping power gap in the cocaine trade.

“Once they were gone, there was just this vacuum,” says Freeman. “I think the reason that you’ve seen the violence explode is because that vacuum started to lure in different organized crime groups, both Ecuadorian and foreign, who wanted to control this very lucrative trade.”

Domestic policy

Over the course of the 2010s, at the same time as the FARC was winding down its operations, Ecuador’s then president, Rafael Correa, was instituting many policies that appeared, on the surface, to dramatically reduce poverty and crime in the country. He increased spending on social services, pouring money into schools, clinics, and public housing.

Under his administration, GDP increased while inequality decreased. A British think-tank, ODI, claimed that Ecuador had the world’s most “inclusive” growth between 2006 and 2011. The poorest 40% of Ecuadorians saw their incomes grow eight times more than the national average, according to **The Economist**.

But these reforms came with a price. **Correa borrowed billions of dollars**, putting the country in a vulnerable position where it could not pay its debts.

“His policies brought a lot of people out of poverty for that time, but not necessarily in a durable, long lasting way,” says Freeman.

Correa also increased budgets for police, built mega-prisons that **doubled the prison population** during his tenure, and **kicked out the U.S. military staff** that were assisting with anti-narcotic investigations.

“Building these mega prisons may have put a ton of people away and reduced the crime rate for a time, but that’s also on the inside of these mega prisons

The combination of high sovereign debt, a growing gang population, and a surging demand for cocaine across the world left Ecuador in a vulnerable state when the FARC disbanded in 2017 .

“All of that combined to get drug trafficking organizations to realize—oh, hey, there's this other country, which we haven't traditionally used, but which actually has sort of all the trappings of a perfect shipping post for our products,” says Freeman.

Gangs from Mexico, Venezuela, and Colombia are now all fiercely competing for territorial control over Ecuador's ports, which are well connected to markets in Europe and Asia.

Ecuador's democracy hangs in the balance

As Ecuadorians go to the polls this Sunday, the issue of crime will be front of mind. Across Latin America, residents have become increasingly frustrated with democratic institutions which many see as being too weak to solve the violence issue.

In El Salvador, strongman **Nayib Bukele** was able to dramatically reduce the country's once extraordinarily high homicide rate by imprisoning over 70,000 people using mass trials. While critics say that Bukele has eroded the country's rule of law and is destroying its democracy, many in Ecuador and other crime ridden Latin American countries say that they wish they had a Bukele style leader that could take care of the violence.

One major candidate on Ecuador's ballot is Jan Topić, a former soldier in the French foreign legion who claims to have fought in both Syria and Ukraine. Topić has referred to himself as the “**Ecuadorian Bukele**” styling himself with a similar haircut and promising to root out gang violence at any cost. According

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