

## I. Key general developments in the region

MARINA CAPARINI

In 2020 the Americas region experienced varying levels of peace and conflict. According to the global peace index, in 2019 South America experienced the largest decline in peacefulness due to militarization and deterioration of safety and security, while Central America and the Caribbean recorded the second-largest deterioration in peacefulness based on ongoing conflict.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the trend in violence in 2020 was not as clear—a likely result of the disruptive effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Non-international armed conflicts continued in two states in the Americas, worsening in Colombia and Mexico. The 2016 peace accord between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia–Ejército del Pueblo, FARC–EP), which had brought an end to over 50 years of conflict, experienced continuing implementation problems and delays, while killings of former combatants, activists and community and indigenous leaders persisted (see section II). Criminal gang violence intensified in Mexico, leading international humanitarian law experts to identify a third non-international armed conflict to add to the two already existing (see section III).

The region was host to three multilateral peace operations in 2020, one fewer than in 2019. The United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia verifies the reintegration of former FARC–EP members into political, economic and social life and the security guarantees for former FARC–EP members, their families and communities, and comprehensive security and protection programmes for communities in the territories.<sup>2</sup> The Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz en Colombia) of the Organization of American States is a political and technical mission that assists peace efforts in the areas most affected by internal armed conflict, crime and inequality.<sup>3</sup> In Haiti the UN Integrated Office in Haiti (Bureau Intégré des Nations Unies en Haïti) advises the Government of Haiti on promoting political stability and good governance, preserving and advancing a peaceful and stable environment, and protecting and promoting

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), *Global Peace Index 2020* (IEP: Sydney, 2020), p. 2. Note most indicators in the global peace index use the measurement period from 16 Mar. 2019 until 15 Mar. 2020; see Appendix B.

<sup>2</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2366, 10 July 2017; and UN Security Council Resolution 2377, 14 Sep. 2017.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Convenio entre el Gobierno de la Republica de Colombia y la Secretaria General de la Organización de los Estados Americanos para el Acompañamiento al proceso de proceso de paz en Colombia’ [Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Colombia and the Secretary General of the Organization of American States for accompaniment to the peace process in Colombia], 4 Feb. 2004.

human rights. It is also mandated to advise the Government of Haiti on dialogue and reforms, elections, police professionalism, community violence reduction and gang violence, justice reform, and human rights protection and accountability.<sup>4</sup> The number of personnel in multilateral peace operations in the Americas remained very low compared to the numbers of personnel deployed in other regions. It increased from 275 on 31 December 2019 to 304 on 31 December 2020.

Over the past three decades homicide rates in the Americas have consistently exceeded those in other regions of the world.<sup>5</sup> However, homicide rates across the region have also varied significantly. In 2020 these variations reflected different levels of restrictive measures imposed by governments due to the Covid-19 pandemic, socio-economic conditions, and the varying presence of organized crime, gang violence and illegal armed groups. In contrast, homicides in other global regions were more linked to interpersonal violence.<sup>6</sup> With the highest level of homicides in the region, Jamaica recorded 1301 killings, or a rate of 46.5 per 100 000, a slight decline from the 2019 toll of 1339 killings.<sup>7</sup> High levels of homicides were also seen in Venezuela (45.6), Honduras (37.6), Trinidad and Tobago (28.2), Mexico (27.0), Belize (24.3) and Colombia (24.3) per 100 000.<sup>8</sup> In Colombia and Guatemala homicides dropped significantly by 32 per cent and 26 per cent, respectively, due to the Covid-19 lockdown between March and June, but rebounded afterwards.<sup>9</sup>

Several countries in the Americas experienced targeted political violence towards human rights activists and social movement representatives, including assassinations of indigenous leaders and activists. In Colombia 177 human rights defenders were killed in 2020, far outstripping all other countries globally. Also ranked in the top tier of countries where human rights defenders were killed were Honduras with 20 killed, Mexico with 19, Brazil with 16 and Guatemala with 15.<sup>10</sup>

By early June 2020 the region was heavily affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Although Argentina and Peru moved quickly to close borders and impose lockdowns, the governments of Brazil and Mexico—the two largest countries in the region—initially downplayed concerns and did not act quickly or effectively to attempt to suppress the rate of contagion. By the

<sup>4</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2476, 25 June 2019.

<sup>5</sup> UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Homicide: Homicide Trends, Patterns and Criminal Justice Response* (UN: Vienna, 2019), p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> UNODC, 'Effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and related restrictions on homicide and property crime', Research Brief, 2020, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Asmann, P. and Jones, K., 'InSight Crime's 2020 Homicide Round-Up', InSight Crime, 29 Jan. 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Asmann and Jones (note 7).

<sup>9</sup> UNODC (note 6), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Front Line Defenders, *Front Line Defenders: Global Analysis 2020* (Front Line Defenders: 2020).

end of 2020 the Latin American countries of the region, accounting for only 8 per cent of the global population, had recorded nearly 20 per cent of global cases and almost 30 per cent of global deaths from Covid-19.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the region suffered the greatest economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic globally, resulting in an 8.2 per cent contraction in gross domestic product in 2020. The UN predicted more than 15 million more people would fall into extreme poverty in 2020, bringing the total to over 82 million.<sup>12</sup>

## Developments in specific countries

### *Bolivia*

After 14 years as president of Bolivia, Evo Morales resigned and fled the country in November 2019. Mass protests had erupted over allegations of a fraudulent presidential election on 20 October that year in his bid for an unprecedented and unconstitutional fourth term. Police refused to suppress the post-electoral violence in which at least 30 people were killed and over 800 injured.<sup>13</sup> The armed forces withdrew their support and suggested he resign, resulting in Morales' allegations that he was being ousted by a military coup.<sup>14</sup> Bolivia experienced 11 turbulent months under a caretaker government led by Conservative senator and interim president Jeanine Áñez. After the 2019 election was nullified, the planned rerun of the presidential and congressional elections was rescheduled three times due to the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in nationwide demonstrations, roadblocks and marches by the main workers' union and indigenous and *campesinos* (farmers and farm workers) movements allied to the Movement Toward Socialism.<sup>15</sup> Former members of the Morales administration became the focus of criminal investigations, and Morales was charged with terrorism and terrorist financing by Bolivian prosecutors. This led international human rights groups to allege political interference in judicial investigations and exertion of pressure on judges for political ends.<sup>16</sup> On 18 October 2020 with an 87 per cent electoral turnout, Luis Arce—former finance minister under Morales and his chosen successor in the Movement

<sup>11</sup> 'Where the pandemic clobbered economies hardest', *The Economist*, 1 Jan. 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 'Latin America and the Caribbean and the Covid-19 pandemic: Economic and social effects', Special Report Covid-19 no. 1, Santiago, 3 Apr. 2020, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 'The human rights situation in the aftermath of the 20 October 2019 general elections in Bolivia', [n.d.], p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> 'Was there a coup in Bolivia?', *The Economist*, 14 Nov. 2019.

<sup>15</sup> 'Bolivia delays presidential election due to pandemic', AP News, 23 July 2020; and Blair, L. and Jiménez Bercerra, C., 'Bolivia protesters bring country to standstill over election delays', *The Guardian*, 9 Aug. 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Stott, M., 'Bolivian government accused of hounding ex-president Evo Morales', *Financial Times*, 11 Sep. 2020; and Human Rights Watch, 'Justice as a weapon: Political persecution in Bolivia', 11 Sep. 2020.

Toward Socialism party—won in a landslide victory with 54 per cent of the vote, and the socialists secured a clear mandate with a majority in the senate and congress.<sup>17</sup> One day after Arce was sworn in as president on 10 November Morales ended his exile and returned to Bolivia, although Arce stated Morales would have no role in the new government.<sup>18</sup>

### *El Salvador*

In his first year in office President Nayib Bukele oversaw a dramatic drop in killings in what has been one of the world's most violent countries. He also adopted a confrontational stance to state institutions and political opponents. In February Bukele brought armed police and soldiers into the opposition-controlled Legislative Assembly to pressure it to vote in support of a loan of \$109 million to finance his security plan of equipping police and soldiers to combat crime in the country ridden by gang violence.<sup>19</sup> A precipitous decline in homicide rates was seen in El Salvador, with 1332 killings in 2020, a 45 per cent reduction from 2019, constituting a homicide rate of 19.7 per 100 000.<sup>20</sup> The reduction was attributed by the Bukele administration to its new security strategy pairing *mano dura* ('iron fist') law enforcement with violence prevention in low-income communities.<sup>21</sup> However, it appears more likely due to the decision of gangs not to battle with soldiers or among themselves, and to an informal understanding between Bukele and leaders of the Mara Salvatrucha (commonly known as MS-13) gang to reduce violence and gain political support for Bukele's party.<sup>22</sup>

### *Honduras*

Honduras continued to stand out as one of the most violent, corrupt and poverty-afflicted countries of the Americas. It had the highest homicide rate in the subregion of Central America, with 3496 killings for a 2020 homicide rate of 37.6 per 100 000, representing a slight decline compared to 2019.<sup>23</sup> According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Honduras experienced 655 fatalities linked to political violence in 2020, a decline from 925 fatalities in 2019.<sup>24</sup> President Juan Orlando Hernández, a key United States ally in the region, was alleged by US federal

<sup>17</sup> Segura, R., 'Bolivia's landslide lays to rest the fears of fraud', International Crisis Group, Commentary, 21 Oct. 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Abdalla, J., 'Evo Morales completes triumphant Bolivia return. Now what?', Al Jazeera, 11 Nov. 2020.

<sup>19</sup> 'El Salvador parliament denounces president's "attempted coup"', BBC News, 11 Feb. 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Asmann and Jones (note 7).

<sup>21</sup> Briscoe, I. and Breda, T., 'A bargain worth making? Bukele and the gangs of El Salvador', War on the Rocks, 16 Dec. 2020.

<sup>22</sup> International Crisis Group, 'Miracle or mirage? Gangs and plunging violence in El Salvador', Report no. 81, 8 July 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Asmann and Jones (note 7).

<sup>24</sup> ACLED, Dashboard, accessed 1 Mar. 2021.

prosecutors to have taken bribes from drug traffickers to protect them from law enforcement, and tasked the armed forces with protecting illicit drug production and shipments to the USA.<sup>25</sup> In November two category 4 hurricanes killed at least 94 and displaced hundreds of thousands of people.<sup>26</sup> These disasters exacerbated a longer-running food insecurity crisis driven by droughts induced by climate change and poor environmental practices, setting off new waves of US-bound migrant caravans.<sup>27</sup>

### *Nicaragua*

Nicaragua has been subject to increasingly authoritarian rule since the onset of a political and social crisis that began in March 2018 with mass anti-government uprisings spurred by President Daniel Ortega's social security reforms, and which were suppressed by police and pro-government groups, resulting in over 300 dead. Suppression of dissent continued through 2020, with police abuses against demonstrators and critics of the regime.<sup>28</sup> Persons perceived as opponents of the regime were detained, usually on charges of common crimes.<sup>29</sup> In a move seen as aimed at hindering political opposition in the run-up to the elections in November 2021, legislation was passed in October 2020 banning foreign financing for political purposes, and identifying anyone who receives funding from abroad as a 'foreign agent'.<sup>30</sup> A subsequent cybercrime bill suppressed dissent by regulating what could be published by news outlets and social media, with potential prison sentences for anyone found guilty of publishing information not authorized by the government.<sup>31</sup> The continuing political and social crisis has driven forced displacement. Since the beginning of the crisis in 2018 over 100 000 Nicaraguans have fled the country due to political persecution or human rights abuses, with two thirds seeking asylum in Costa Rica.<sup>32</sup> However, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, many of those who had earlier sought refuge in

<sup>25</sup> Torrens, C., 'US motions expand drug claims against Honduras president', AP News, 10 Jan. 2021; and AP News, 'US prosecutors accuse Honduran president of taking drug money', *The Guardian*, 3 Mar. 2020.

<sup>26</sup> 'Hondureños en EEUU envían ayuda humanitaria para damnificados por huracanes' [Hondurans in the US send humanitarian aid for hurricane victims], *El Heraldo*, 29 Nov. 2020; and Kitroeff, N., '2 hurricanes devastated Central America. Will the ruin spur a migration wave?', *New York Times*, 4 Dec. 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Olson, J., 'Honduran storm survivors form US-bound migrant caravan', *New Humanitarian*, 11 Dec. 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Nicaragua: Events of 2020', *World Report 2021*.

<sup>29</sup> Bachelet, M., UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, OHCHR, 'Update on the human rights situation in Nicaragua, pursuant to resolution 43/2', 45th session of the Human Rights Council, 14 Sep. 2020.

<sup>30</sup> 'Nicaragua passes controversial "foreign agent" law', *Deutsche Welle*, 16 Oct. 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Lopez, I., 'Nicaragua passes bill criminalizing what government considers fake news', *Reuters*, 27 Oct. 2020.

<sup>32</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 'Two years of political and social crisis in Nicaragua force more than 100,000 to flee', 10 Mar. 2020.

Costa Rica attempted to return to Nicaragua due to lack of employment opportunities in Costa Rica, poverty and increased xenophobia.<sup>33</sup>

### *Venezuela*

Nicolás Maduro's regime in Venezuela withstood a challenge by Juan Guaidó. In 2019 Guaidó was recognized by numerous states including the European Union (EU) and USA as Venezuela's rightful and interim president on account of his role as head of parliament and the allegedly fraudulent election of Maduro in 2018.<sup>34</sup> However Maduro consolidated power in the December 2020 legislative election, when his party won over two thirds of the vote. The election was boycotted by most of the opposition and had a turnout of only 31 per cent. The EU, the USA and over 12 Latin American countries said they would not recognize its results.<sup>35</sup> Maduro entered 2021 with full control of all branches of government. After losing his seat and position as head of the National Assembly, the EU withdrew its support for Guaidó as interim president, although the United Kingdom and the USA continued to declare him the real leader of Venezuela.<sup>36</sup> The humanitarian crisis continued, with over 5.4 million refugees and migrants of an estimated population of around 30 million having left the country between 2014 and the end of 2020 due to violence, political and economic crises, and lack of food and medicine.<sup>37</sup> Due to Covid-19-related lockdowns in neighbouring countries and severe hardship, some 130 000 migrants returned to Venezuela.<sup>38</sup> Ranked the world's second-least peaceful country in 2019 in terms of safety and security, in 2020 there were improvements in some areas and deterioration in others.<sup>39</sup> Homicides dropped by 30 per cent from the extremely high rate in 2019 to 11 891 in 2020, constituting a homicide rate of 45.6 per 100 000.<sup>40</sup> However, there were more than 2000 young people killed between January and August of 2020 in disadvantaged neighbourhoods as a result of state security operations.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, a fact-finding mission of the UN Human Rights Council in September found state authorities were responsible for atrocities constituting crimes against

<sup>33</sup> Dupraz-Dobias, P., 'Nicaraguan asylum seekers face hunger in Costa Rica or dangerous returns', *New Humanitarian*, 28 Sep. 2020.

<sup>34</sup> 'Venezuela crisis: European states recognise Guaidó as president', *BBC News*, 4 Feb. 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Sequera, V. and Buitrago, D., 'US, EU say they do not recognize Venezuela parliamentary vote', *Reuters*, 7 Dec. 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Emmott, R., 'EU states no longer recognise Guaido as Venezuela's interim president', *Reuters*, 25 Jan. 2021.

<sup>37</sup> UNHCR, 'Venezuela situation', [n.d.].

<sup>38</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Venezuela', *World Report 2021* (Human Rights Watch: 2021).

<sup>39</sup> IEP (note 1), p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> Asmann and Jones (note 7).

<sup>41</sup> Bachelet, M., UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, OHCHR, 'Oral update on the situation of human rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela', 45th session of the Human Rights Council, 25 Sep. 2020.

humanity.<sup>42</sup> The desperate humanitarian situation in Venezuela exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in calls for the USA to lift economic and financial sanctions, which went unheeded and also spurred further measures by the Trump administration against individuals, companies and shipping companies transporting Venezuelan oil in violation of sanctions.<sup>43</sup> Sanctions imposed on Venezuela have also contributed to strengthening criminal groups and the informal economy, thus undermining economic recovery and democracy.<sup>44</sup> There was also a continuation of border tensions between Colombia and Venezuela, as well as the low-intensity conflict along the Colombia–Venezuela border (see section II).

<sup>42</sup> Human Rights Council, ‘Detailed findings of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela’, A/HRC/45/CRP.11, 15 Sep. 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Morello, C., ‘Pandemic fuels call to lift sanctions as Trump administration imposes more’, *Washington Post*, 27 Mar. 2020; and Congressional Research Service, ‘Venezuela: Overview of US sanctions’, updated 22 Jan. 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Bull, B. and Rosales, A., ‘Into the shadows: sanctions, rentierism, and economic informalization in Venezuela’, *European Review of Latin America and Caribbean Studies*, no. 109 (2020), pp. 107–33.