

I. Key general developments in the region

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Eight countries in the Americas experienced active armed conflicts in 2021 (the same as in 2020): one in North America—Mexico (high-intensity subnational armed conflict, including three armed conflicts meeting the thresholds of non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) as defined under international law), and one in the Caribbean—Haiti (low-intensity subnational armed conflict), as discussed in section II; three in Central America—El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras (all low-intensity subnational armed conflicts), as discussed in section III; and three in South America—Brazil (high-intensity subnational armed conflict), Colombia (three NIACs as well as other high-intensity subnational armed conflicts) and Venezuela (low-intensity subnational armed conflict), as discussed in section IV. Across the region as a whole, conflict-related fatalities have remained relatively constant over the past four years, though with a slight overall decline compared to 2018 (see table 3.1).

The region was host to three multilateral peace operations in 2021, the same as in 2020: two in Colombia (see section IV) and one in Haiti (see section II). The number of personnel in multilateral peace operations in the Americas remained very low compared to the numbers of personnel deployed in other regions, decreasing from 303 on 31 December 2020 to 301 on 31 December 2021.¹

This section briefly covers the three main cross-cutting armed conflict-related trends and political developments in the region in 2021: (a) the instability caused by armed gang violence and other armed violence; (b) rising levels of authoritarianism; and (c) the impact of Covid-19, food insecurity and natural disasters.

Gang violence and other political violence as armed conflict

The assessment that there are eight armed conflicts in the Americas is based on battle-related fatality figures provided by new Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) data on the region (backdated to 2018). In previous years the Americas section in this yearbook adhered to the definition of armed conflict in international humanitarian law (IHL). However, to ensure consistency with the approach adopted in other regions covered by the yearbook (as defined in chapter 2), the definition of armed conflict in the Americas has been broadened beyond this strict legal definition

¹ SIPRI, Multilateral Peace Operations Database, accessed 1 Apr. 2022. See also chapter 2, sections II and III, in this volume.

Table 3.1. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Americas, 2018–21

| Country | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Brazil | 6 471 | 4 905 | 5 020 | 5 489 |
| Colombia | 861 | 726 | 847 | 1 238 |
| El Salvador | 935 | 848 | 297 | 363 |
| Guatemala | 787 | 1 098 | 558 | 653 |
| Haiti | 229 | 373 | 520 | 579 |
| Honduras | 672 | 928 | 656 | 594 |
| Mexico | 9 801 | 9 361 | 8 407 | 8 280 |
| Venezuela | 741 | 1 106 | 453 | 229 |
| Total | 20 497 | 19 345 | 16 758 | 17 425 |

Notes: Fatality figures are collated from four event types: battles; explosions/remote violence; protests, riots and strategic developments; and violence against civilians—see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019. A country is treated as being in an armed conflict if there were 25 or more battle-related deaths in a given year—see chapter 2, section I, in this volume. The first available year for data on conflicts in the region in the ACLED database is 2018.

Source: ACLED, ‘Dashboard’, accessed 15 Feb. 2022.

and now includes other situations of violence, principally battle-related violence between state security forces and criminal gangs, and inter-gang violence.² While this violence is usually characterized as criminal rather than as conflict, and may not necessarily meet the stringent thresholds for armed conflict under IHL, it is often as lethal as traditional armed conflict. Moreover, it involves other major impacts normally associated with armed conflict, such as significant levels of territorial control by non-state actors, forced displacement and migration flows, and movement restrictions. Given these impacts and the lethality of gang–state violence—a prominent feature of all the countries listed in table 3.1—there is growing debate about whether IHL definitions of armed conflict require adjustment.³

Organized crime and gang violence vary widely across the region, and discussion of their political, sociological and legal dimensions is beyond the scope of this chapter. Nonetheless, insecurity and confrontations between state forces and armed gangs, or between the gangs themselves, are briefly highlighted in relation to the ACLED conflict data. The boundaries between localized acts of violence, violence linked to cartels and other organized crime actors, and an internal armed conflict in the region are likely to remain blurred (see especially the discussion on Brazil in section IV). According to InSight Crime, a non-governmental investigative organization, most of the region’s countries experienced a marked increase in homicides over the

² For conflict definitions and typologies see chapter 2, section I, in this volume.

³ See e.g. Applebaum, A. and Mawby, B., ‘Gang violence as armed conflict: A new perspective on El Salvador’, Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, Nov. 2018; Ryan, K. O., ‘“Urban killing fields”: International humanitarian law, gang violence, and armed conflict on the streets of El Salvador’, *International and Comparative Law Review*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2020), pp. 97–126; and Chaparro, L. and Deslandes, A., ‘Where’s the aid for Mexicans displaced by gang violence?’, *New Humanitarian*, 1 July 2021.

course of 2021 as pandemic lockdown measures were lifted, law enforcement was strained due to illness, and a sharp deterioration in economic conditions made youth more susceptible to recruitment by criminal gangs.⁴

The region also stands out in terms of other forms of political violence. In 2021 Mexico remained one of the most dangerous places for journalists in the western hemisphere, while elsewhere across the Americas a number of journalists survived shooting attacks.⁵ Over the past decade, nearly 80 per cent (140) of murders of journalists in the Americas have taken place in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Honduras.⁶ Moreover, Latin America has also been the site of the greatest number of lethal attacks on land and environmental defenders, including a disproportionate number of attacks against indigenous people. In 2020 (the latest regional figures available) three out of four killings of environmental defenders took place in Latin America, with the region containing 7 of the 10 countries with the highest number of such deaths.⁷ Colombia had the highest number of attacks, with 65 defenders killed, followed by Mexico (30) and Brazil (20), while Nicaragua saw the highest per capita number of killings with 12 deaths.⁸

Rising authoritarianism in Latin America and political instability in the United States

Alongside these armed conflicts, authoritarian rule persisted in Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela, which were categorized as ‘not free’ in the 2021 Freedom House ratings of people’s access to political rights and civil liberties, while eight other countries in the region were categorized as ‘partly free’: Bolivia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Paraguay.⁹ In El Salvador and Guatemala authorities cracked down on the political opposition and weakened or dismantled institutional checks and balances, including the independent judiciary, media and civil society. In Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti and Peru popular dissatisfaction was expressed in public demonstrations over issues relating to autocratic rule, poor governance, corruption, Covid-19 responses, economic hardship, violence against women, police brutality and

⁴ InSight Crime, ‘InSight Crime’s 2021 homicide round-up’, 1 Feb. 2022.

⁵ Southwick, N. and de la Serna, C. M., ‘A press freedom crisis unfolds in Latin America’, Committee to Protect Journalists, 8 Dec. 2021.

⁶ Reporters Without Borders, ‘2011–2020: A study of journalist murders in Latin America confirms the importance of strengthening protection policies’, 13 May 2021.

⁷ Global Witness, *Last Line of Defence: The Industries Causing the Climate Crisis and Attacks Against Land and Environmental Defenders* (Global Witness, Sep. 2021), p. 12.

⁸ Global Witness (note 7), p. 11.

⁹ Freedom House, ‘Countries and territories: Global freedom scores’, accessed 21 Mar. 2022.

other human rights abuses, and environmental and indigenous land concerns.¹⁰

The year opened with an attack on the United States Capitol by supporters of President Donald Trump seeking to overturn the election of Joe Biden. This directly resulted in five deaths, while four police personnel guarding the Capitol on the day of the riot subsequently committed suicide (of which one has been officially acknowledged as a direct line-of-duty death).¹¹ Impeachment charges against Trump ended in his being acquitted of ‘incitement of insurrection’ by the Republican-controlled Senate in February 2021.¹²

A comprehensive review of the domestic terrorism threat ordered by President Biden identified two main threat sources: violent racially or ethnically motivated white supremacists; and anti-government or anti-authority violent extremists, including those belonging to militias.¹³ In June 2021, Biden launched the country’s first-ever strategy to counter domestic terrorism, declaring it the most urgent terrorism threat to the country.¹⁴ The strategy aims to enhance information-sharing across government; prevent recruitment and mobilization; disrupt and deter domestic terrorism; and address long-term contributing factors.¹⁵

The impact of Covid-19, food insecurity and natural disasters

The Covid-19 pandemic contributed to deepening poverty and food insecurity, in some cases exacerbating instability, displacement and violence across the Americas. Although some countries responded effectively, the region was disproportionately affected due to leaders—Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and outgoing US President Trump in particular—denying the seriousness of Covid-19 and implementing weak pandemic response, which in turn interacted with deep societal inequalities and governance challenges.¹⁶ Despite constituting less than 8.4 per cent of the world’s population, Latin America accounted for over 30 per cent of all global deaths due to Covid by October

¹⁰ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, ‘Global Protest Tracker’, accessed 22 Mar. 2022.

¹¹ Inskeep, S., ‘Timeline: What Trump told supporters for months before they attacked’, NPR, 8 Feb. 2021; Healy, J., ‘These are the 5 people who died in the Capitol riot’, *New York Times*, 11 Jan. 2021 (updated 22 Feb. 2021); and Reilly, R. J. and Caldwell, L. A., ‘DC police officer’s suicide after Jan. 6 riot declared line-of-duty death’, NBC News, 10 Mar. 2022.

¹² Fandos, N. and Shear, M. D., ‘Trump impeached for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress’, *New York Times*, 18 Dec. 2019 (updated 10 Feb. 2021); and Levine, S. and Gambino, L., ‘Donald Trump acquitted in second impeachment trial’, *The Guardian*, 14 Feb. 2021.

¹³ White House, ‘Fact sheet: National strategy for countering domestic terrorism’, 15 June 2021.

¹⁴ National Security Council, *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism* (White House: Washington, DC, June 2021). See also Byman, D. L., ‘Assessing the right-wing terror threat in the United States a year after the January 6 insurrection’, Brookings Institute, 5 Jan. 2022.

¹⁵ White House (note 13).

¹⁶ Lewis, T., ‘How the US pandemic response went wrong—and what went right—during a year of COVID’, *Scientific American*, 11 Mar. 2021.

2021.¹⁷ Similarly, by the end of 2021 the Covid-19 death rate in the USA reached almost 825 000 and exceeded that of all other large, high-income countries.¹⁸

Despite the estimated 6.2 per cent GDP growth in 2021 evidencing economic recovery in the Latin America and Caribbean subregion, the pandemic resulted in a prolonged health and social crisis linked to underlying problems of inequality, poverty and vulnerability, particularly affecting the lower income strata.¹⁹ This situation was exacerbated by unequal access to or acceptance of vaccines in the subregion.²⁰

During 2020 food insecurity in Latin America and the Caribbean had increased to its highest point since 2000, with a 30 per cent jump from 2019 to 2020 alone (Haiti and Venezuela experienced the most pronounced rise).²¹ With 40.9 per cent of the population experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity in 2020, up from 31.9 per cent in 2019, this represented the most pronounced increase in food insecurity of all regions in the world.²² Further, the continued impact of hurricanes and a higher number of natural disasters in 2020 caused El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to experience a 60 per cent growth in populations requiring humanitarian assistance in 2021.²³ According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), internal displacement flows in 2021 reached unprecedented levels, with Brazil, Cuba, Guatemala and Honduras listed among the top 25 countries in the world in terms of new displacements due to disaster or conflict.²⁴ By November 2021 more than 1.6 million migrants had arrived at the US–Mexico border during the 2021 fiscal year, more than four times the figure for the previous fiscal year, and the highest number on record.²⁵

¹⁷ United Nations, ‘COVID-19 cases and deaths in the Americas triple in 2021’, UN News, 15 Dec. 2021.

¹⁸ Mueller, B. and Lutz, E., ‘US has far higher Covid death rate than other wealthy countries’, *New York Times*, 1 Feb. 2022; and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, ‘Trends in number of COVID-19 cases and deaths in the US reported to CDC, by state/territory’, accessed 30 Mar. 2022.

¹⁹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), ‘Global humanitarian overview 2022: Latin America and the Caribbean’.

²⁰ Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), ‘The region of the Americas surpasses 100 million COVID-19 cases’, 22 Dec. 2021.

²¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and World Food Programme (WFP), *Latin America and the Caribbean: Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2021: Statistics and Trends* (FAO: Santiago, 2021), pp. 5, 8.

²² FAO, IFAD, PAHO, UNICEF and WFP (note 21), p. 8.

²³ UN OCHA (note 19).

²⁴ UN OCHA (note 19).

²⁵ Gramlich, J. and Scheller, A., ‘What’s happening at the US–Mexico border in 7 charts’, Pew Research Center, 9 Nov. 2021.