

# latin american weekly report

23 March 2017, WR-17-11

ISSN 0143-5280

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This edition of *Latin American Weekly Report* has been produced for Canning House Corporate Members by LatinNews ([www.latinnews.com](http://www.latinnews.com)).  
*Latin American Newsletters since 1967*

## Backlash in Brazil over operation 'weak meat'

A new corruption probe launched by Brazil's federal police (Policia Federal – PF) into the meat packing industry, code-named *carne fraca* (weak meat), has raised health concerns and caused a number of trading partners, including China and the European Union (EU), to ban imports from Brazil. It may also have triggered a domestic political backlash, with claims that the PF overreached and unnecessarily placed exports and employment in the meat-processing industry at risk.

On 17 March the PF launched a new set of raids on business premises and homes across six states. This was not another wave of the long-running *Java Jato* or 'Car Wash' investigation into corruption involving construction contractors and Petrobras, the state-run oil company. Instead, this time the PF had arrest orders for 38 executives and public-sector health inspectors associated with the meat-processing industry. Apart from the arrests they also seized assets valued at approximately US\$35m.

The PF were investigating a core allegation: that executives in the industry had regularly been bribing officials to approve meat that was past its sell-by date, or had been adulterated in various ways that made it unfit for human consumption. A total of 21 companies were reported to have been implicated, including JBS and BRF, respectively the world's largest beef exporter and Brazil's largest poultry meat exporter.

The raids set off a chain reaction. JBS, BRF and other companies' share prices took a tumble. China and then Hong Kong stopped all imports of Brazilian meat pending further clarification. This is a major blow as they are the top two importers of Brazilian meat.

Four of the 21 named companies had permits to export to the EU, and these were suspended. Chile banned all meat imports from Brazil. South Korea briefly stopped poultry imports, but then lifted the ban following assurances that none of its Brazilian suppliers were under investigation. There were also reports of restrictions being applied in Japan, Canada, Mexico and Switzerland.

The repercussions could be costly. Brazilian meat exports last year amounted to just under US\$13bn, or around 7% of the country's total exports. According to one estimate, by the Associação de Comércio Exterior do Brasil (AEB), the food scare could cost Brazil anywhere between US\$1bn and US\$2bn in lost sales this year.

President Michel Temer and other officials swiftly went into damage control mode. Temer invited ambassadors to a *churrascaria* (a Brazilian-style rotisserie) in Brasília and had himself photographed eating Brazilian meat, which

## Export markets

Brazil is the largest global exporter of beef and chicken, and the fourth largest exporter of pork, selling these products to 150 countries worldwide. China is its largest market. China's biggest hypermarket chain, Sun Art Retail Group, and the Chinese arms of Wal-Mart Stores and Metro AG pulled Brazilian meat from their shelves on 22 March. Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, the second-largest importer of Brazilian meat, the supermarket chain ParknShop announced that it had done the same.

he proclaimed was healthy and of high quality. Officials said any irregularities were small and were not representative of an otherwise well-run and well-regulated industry.

Only three of 4,850 meatpacking plants in the country had been forced to close, Brazilian officials maintained. Last year, they added, Brazil made 853,000 shipments of animal products and only 184 of them had been rejected as non-compliant by the authorities in the importing countries. Most of those, they pointed out, were due to incorrect labelling or paperwork rather than health issues.

## Police action under scrutiny

The big political issue emerging in the wake of the *carne fraca* investigation was whether the PF overreached. An editorial in the daily newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* was highly critical of the PF's role. It argued that the allegations of wrongdoing were serious and deserved a full investigation, but that the PF had in effect put on a media show and been very sloppy in its communications management.

Police sources had initially claimed they had secretly intercepted and recorded conversations showing that cardboard had been mixed into processed meat. But further examination showed the alleged conspirators were only discussing cardboard packaging of meat products, not using it for the purpose of adulteration.

An angry minister of agriculture, Blairo Maggi, said, "This is idiotic. These companies have spent millions of dollars in marketing to gain access to international markets. After that, are they really going to mix cardboard into their products?" Addressing two senate commissions on 22 March Maggi said the government would endeavour to minimise the impact of the meat debacle but "Brazil's image has been tarnished [and] it will be a huge blow."

The PF is also accused of a lack of technical knowledge, criticising the use of certain ingredients in sausage meat, apparently unaware that their use is both a normal and legal industry practice. Most seriously perhaps, it emerged that the PF had first received information on illicit and unhealthy practices in the meat industry two years ago. This meant, *O Estado* deduced, that nothing had been done immediately to address an ongoing and serious threat to public health during all of that time. This, the paper concluded, "reinforces the impression that, rather than investigating crimes, the intention is to produce a spectacle of investigations".

## Economically damaging

The controversy over the *carne fraca* probe may reflect a wider, partly unspoken concern over the much larger *lava jato* investigation, which has now been underway for three years. However desirable in terms of enforcing the rule of law, both have had negative economic effects.

Opinions remain divided in Brazilian public life between those who believe corruption should be investigated rigorously and no matter what the consequences, and those who believe that the investigations themselves have become part of a never-ending 'show' that has played a role keeping the economy in recession and that continues to get in the way of a return to normal business.

The second group may, of course, itself contain many corrupt officials and politicians who are hoping *lava jato* will be wound up before anyone comes knocking on their door with an arrest warrant. Either way, how to handle corruption looks like remaining a live and controversial issue all the way up to Brazil's presidential elections in October 2018.

**Macri faces difficult fortnight****Teachers' protests**

The teachers' unions are demanding a 35% wage increase.

They say 10% relates to purchasing power lost in 2016, while 25% is needed to keep up with this year's expected inflation. They do not

accept the government's prediction that inflation will fall to

17% in 2017. As education is managed on a province-by-province

basis, the political cost of the dispute is most acute in the largest province,

Buenos Aires. The provincial

government is led by governor María

Eugenia Vidal, one of the most popular

members of Macri's centre-right

Cambiamos coalition.

President Mauricio Macri is preparing to confront a challenging two weeks, marked by a range of trade union strikes and protests, poor opinion poll ratings, and the build up to the first general strike against his government, a 24-hour stoppage called for 6 April.

The background to a tricky short term political situation for President Macri is that the economy is at last beginning to turn, but not fast enough to reverse his falling popularity. Figures released this week by the national statistics institute (Indec) showed that the quarter-on-quarter growth rate has at least turned positive, registering a gain of 0.5% in the final quarter of 2016 over the previous quarter. Indeed, third-quarter growth was revised to 0.1% from a 0.2% contraction. GDP fell by 2.3% during the course of 2016 as a whole, but the latest Indec figures suggest that the much-predicted recovery in 2017 is shaping up. The problem is that few people are feeling it.

According to a survey conducted by Management & Fit for the national daily *Clarín* in early March, for the first time Macri's disapproval rating (44.2%) has exceeded his approval rating (40.2%), giving him a net negative score of -4.0%. The electorate appears to be glum. Almost half the respondents (48.3%) believe the economy will get worse, against less than a third (27%) who expect an improvement.

Individually, corruption (17.9% of respondents) and insecurity (16.5%) are identified as the country's top problems. However, if economic issues are taken together as a package they easily top the list, as survey respondents identified unemployment (15.5%), inflation (15.4%), and poverty (14%), along with rising public utility tariffs (10.7%), as the main issues of concern.

**Teachers**

The political problem for Macri is that over the next two weeks he faces a major test from at least four loose and sometimes overlapping forces. One of these is a collection of teachers' unions that since the beginning of the school year in early March have been calling regular cycles of 48-hour stoppages in demand of significant salary increases (*see sidebar*).

The government suspects that the teachers' strike is an essentially politically motivated affair. Roberto Baradel, leader of the Sindicato Unificado de Trabajadores de la Educación de Buenos Aires (Suteba), is closely aligned with the opposition Frente para la Victoria (FPV, Kirchneristas) faction of the Partido Justicialista (PJ, Peronists). The danger for Macri is that the teachers' strike will drag on and potentially spread to other areas. There is already some evidence of this. Court workers launched a 36-hour stoppage on 21 March in protest at administrative changes.

**Trade union movements**

The second big force with which Macri must contend is the re-unified umbrella trade union movement, Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT). The triumvirate that currently leads the CGT has for the moment been outmanoeuvred by a combination of rank-and-file pressures and the actions of more radical groups.

The CGT is widely seen as being willing to negotiate with the government, and of having been reluctant to call a general strike. But after being jeered

## Destabilisation

Although the leader of the Kirchnerista movement, Macri's immediate predecessor Cristina Fernández (2007-2015), faces multiple corruption charges, and had a net negative rating of -9.8% in the same Management & Fit survey, a campaign of disruption is seen as the key to eroding government support and attracting dissatisfied voters ahead of October's mid-term congressional elections.

and attacked at a rally earlier this month for not naming a strike date, they have finally called for a 24-hour stoppage on 6 April. This seems to be at least in part an attempt to recover some street credibility. The leadership has however said there will be no demonstrations during the stoppage. This may reflect two things: a desire not to lose control once more to radical groups; and a signal to the government that there is still room to talk.

### **Kirchnerismo**

Ministers fear that the third force in play, the Kirchnerista movement, is seeking to extract maximum political capital by disrupting and destabilising the Macri administration (*see sidebar*). The Kirchneristas, along with various left wing groupings, have been building their influence in the CGT's rival union movement, the Confederación de Trabajadores de la Argentina (CTA). The CTA had called its own strike for 30 March, but quickly shifted the date to coincide with the 6 April stoppage called by the CGT. Unlike the CGT, it promises to hold demonstrations and rallies during the day, and may even see it as a golden opportunity to claim a centre-stage role.

### **Piqueteros**

The fourth force troubling the Macri administration is the *piqueteros*, who tend to be allied to Kirchnerismo. These are a wide range of radical social, shanty-town and community activists whose activities have ebbed and flowed in strength since the 1990s. As the name implies their modus operandi has been to establish flying pickets and road blocks in support of different causes, often interrupting traffic and demanding cash 'contributions' from members of the public.

Many *piqueteros* depend for a livelihood on cash payments from various government-backed social programmes, and there is evidence that cut backs and delays in those payments have led to greater militancy. Certainly, growing numbers of demonstrations and roadblocks have increasingly disrupted life in central Buenos Aires this month. They may be contributing to a generalised sense of social disorder which is also steadily eroding support for the government.

### **Macri's multifaceted challenge**

The challenge for Macri is to try and defuse some or all of the threats to his authority coming from these four different sources. Exactly how he will endeavour to do this is not yet clear, but a range of government sources have given some hints. One is that the government will keep negotiating with the CGT, with a focus on reaching sector agreements with individual unions. A recent deal with the oil workers, for instance, means that their union is now critical of the CGT leadership's strike call. More sector-by-sector agreements may be pursued.

On the *piqueteros*, there is divided counsel. Macri and his security minister Patricia Bullrich are said to believe the public is fed up with disruption and might welcome a hard line to break up the perpetual roadblocks. But others are advising caution. Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, the mayor of the city of Buenos Aires (and a member of Cambiemos) is reported to favour dialogue rather than a tough line. He argues that this is the best way to reduce levels of disruption gradually.

On the teachers' dispute, on the other hand, Macri appears disinclined to give way. He has recently argued that for the country to progress "schools must never stop". Specific new initiatives in the government's political battle with the *Kirchneristas* do not yet seem to be on the cards, but with the mid-term congressional elections now seven months away, the political temperature can be expected to continue rising.

## Combative Piñera confirms re-election bid

### Achievements

Piñera highlighted various achievements of his first term – the reconstruction after ‘27F’ (the earthquake that devastated Chile in February 2010 days before his investiture); the rescue of 33 miners trapped underground later that same year; economic growth; and Ingreso Ético Familiar, created in 2012, which replaced Chile Solidario aiming to reduce poverty and vulnerability through a wider range and larger amount of transfers and employment support.

“Given the difficult crossroads Chile has reached and the decisive importance of these presidential elections, I felt in the core of my being that my duty was to take on this challenge and embody the [requisite] leadership”. With these words, former president Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014) formally launched his candidacy on 21 March for the right-of-centre coalition Chile Vamos in this November’s presidential elections. Piñera fired a broadside at the incumbent left-of-centre Nueva Mayoría government led by President Michelle Bachelet which he described as “bad; Chileans know it, feel it and suffer it”.

Piñera has been the early frontrunner for a number of months, unofficially campaigning, and it was widely anticipated that he would have another tilt at the presidency, with the hope of forming just the second right-wing coalition government since Chile’s restoration of democracy in 1990. Piñera led the only other such government and if he returns to power next year he will have alternated with President Bachelet twice.

Some 1,000 people, including dozens of Chile Vamos mayors, members of congress and former cabinet ministers, gathered to hear Piñera’s address in a park in Santiago. He said his government had “handed over a better Chile in 2014 than the one we received in 2010” (*see sidebar*). He said his priorities this time around would be employment; crime, drug-trafficking and terrorism; education; improving health infrastructure and the running of hospitals; and pensions.

Piñera also devoted a lot of his speech to attacking the Bachelet administration. He described as “poorly conceived and even more poorly implemented” its tax, labour and education reforms. “The Nueva Mayoría promised to grant us the present but in practice it is snatching the future from us. It has created rights on paper but destroyed them in reality,” he said. Chile, Piñera added, had “two options: to pursue the mistaken path of the present government or to correct the mistakes and rediscover a path of unity and progress”.

Piñera argued that the biggest problem with the Bachelet administration was its refusal to adapt: “a good government should listen and change course but unfortunately [this one] doesn’t listen, doesn’t rectify and ploughs on obstinately on a path that Chileans don’t want, producing negative results”. Piñera was implying that listening and changing course is what his government did. His government set a series of targets from the outset, many of which it met, especially on the economic front, but it was seen as out of touch, reactive and politically inexperienced. Piñera responded by replacing some of the qualified technocrats but political ingénues in his cabinet with hardened politicians.

Piñera is currently set to face two rivals in primary elections on 2 July to secure the Chile Vamos presidential candidacy: Felipe Kast, the president of the small Evolución Política (Evópoli), a party forged by centre-right independents which advocates a more modern and progressive conservatism; and Senator Manuel José Ossandón, a dissident member of Piñera’s Renovación Nacional (RN), one of the two main parties within the coalition, along with the ultra-conservative Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI) which will hold a national convention at the end of the month to decide whether to present its own candidate or to back Piñera.

Ossandón has been directly critical of Piñera for conflict of interest, an issue which decimated Bachelet’s popularity early in her mandate and still stalks her. The attorney general’s office is investigating the purchase of shares by Bancard,

## Conflict of interest

Bancard bought Exalmar between November 2010 and February 2011 while Piñera was serving as president. In January 2014 the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague issued an arbitration ruling that favoured Peru in a longstanding dispute with Chile over offshore territorial limits; as a result, Peru gained title to a large area rich in fishing.

a holding company owned by Piñera and his family, in a Peruvian fishing company, Exalmar (*see sidebar*). Piñera said he would go beyond the requirements of the law to separate his role as president from all his private interests. He claimed that his family were the “permanent victims of an unscrupulous dirty campaign”, adding that he had not anticipated “such levels of hatefulness and falsehood” despite recognising that “politics can be tough”.

Bachelet too said that “politics is tough” this week after the national daily *La Tercera* published a report on 19 March claiming that her youngest daughter Sofía Henríquez had purchased land situated 12km from the Dominga mining project, located in the north-central region of Coquimbo, days after Bachelet took office for a second time in March 2014. Speaking during a press conference dominated by the matter on 20 March, Bachelet said that “politics should not pass ethical limits nor injure innocent people”. She added: “Something has happened in Chile that transforms normal things into crimes”.

Bachelet said she had bought the land in question for Ch\$6.5m (US\$9,000) as a present for her daughter, then a student, “to leave her something for the future”. The land was sold by Bachelet’s daughter-in-law, Natalia Compagnon, who is being investigated for the Caval influence-trafficking scandal which broke in February 2015 [WR-15-08]. Bachelet insisted she knew “nothing about Dominga” at the time. The commercial value of the land is set to increase after the regional environmental evaluation commission (CEA) suspended the mining project two weeks ago, prompting accusations that the government applied pressure to secure this result.

Piñera, meanwhile, took to *Twitter* to denounce all the criticism over Dominga as “absurd and groundless”. Pablo Wagner, a former deputy mining minister under Piñera, faces charges of having taken a bribe from a former director at the financial group Penta, Carlos Alberto Délano, for favouring the mining project, and could receive a 10-year prison sentence.

### Pacific Alliance prepares to go it alone

After the breakdown of the negotiations of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal, and the US withdrawal, the Pacific Alliance bloc encompassing Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru, is seeking to consolidate itself as an alternative to develop integration between Asian and Latin American countries. Chile, as the current pro tempore president of the bloc, organised a summit in Viña del Mar on 14 March. Foreign and trade ministers of member countries and some observers, including confirmed participants of the TPP, were represented, except the US which sent its ambassador.

The objective of the summit was to discuss alternatives to TPP, after the US withdrawal. Chile’s general director for international economic relations, Paulina Nazal, hailed the importance of the Pacific Alliance for regional integration and stressed its importance for deepening integration and trade opportunities with the Asia-Pacific. Nazal also reiterated China’s interest in further trade liberalisation and integration with the region expressed during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) summit in Lima in November 2016. The Mexican foreign minister, Luis Videgaray, stressed that the withdrawal of the US from the TPP did not preclude bilateral agreements with the participants of the TPP, both individually and via blocs, such as the Pacific Alliance.

The foreign ministers of the Pacific Alliance member countries held a separate meeting on 14 March. The main topics discussed were to establish a scheme of associated countries, among the 49 observer countries of the bloc, with whom to negotiate a free trade agreement.

Chile’s foreign minister, Hernando Muñoz, said the Pacific Alliance would seek to double internal trade by identifying and eliminating obstacles like tariff barriers, and advance capital integration to increase trade and investment in the four countries. Muñoz also mentioned ongoing talks over a convergence with the Southern Common Market (Mercosur). The Pacific Alliance and Mercosur will hold a summit on 7 April in Buenos Aires to further these discussions.

**MUD jockeying  
underway**

Julio Borges announced that Henrique Capriles would once again be the PJ's candidate for the next presidential election. But Capriles is no longer seen as the presumptive MUD candidate. Henry Ramos Allup, the veteran scion of Acción Democrática, who proved a combative and popular national assembly president in 2016, has also been proposed, while Leopoldo López, the imprisoned radical leader of Voluntad Popular, is also expected to bid. As such, MUD efforts to field a unity candidate could be complicated. By contrast, Vice President Tareck El-Aissami appears set to take the PSUV nomination.

**Political parties compelled to re-register**

The government-controlled national electoral council (CNE) has ordered political parties to renew their legal status. Parties that failed to win at least 1% of the vote in the last national elections (the December 2015 legislative elections) are required to take part in a mandatory registration process. To retain their status, parties must demonstrate that they have a membership equal to at least 0.5% of registered voters, across 12 of Venezuela's 23 states.

Some 59 parties in all were nominally required to take part, with blocs of parties assigned specific weekends, starting on 4-5 March and running until May, to register their members at centres across the country (using biometric machines provided by the CNE). Among the 59 are those parties grouped under the main opposition coalition, Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD), but also leftist parties nominally allied with the ruling Partido Unido Socialista de Venezuela (PSUV) under the Gran Polo Patriótico (GPP), the electoral coalition forged by the late president Hugo Chávez (1999-2013). These include the likes of the Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo-Partido Socialista de Venezuela, Podemos, Tupamaros, Movimiento Redes and Unidad Popular Venezuela (UPV), as well as some that have broken ranks with *Chavismo*, such as the Partido Comunista de Venezuela (PCV).

The problem is that many small local parties that opted to take part in national elections under the GPP or MUD umbrella instead of on their own individual party tickets, are being heavily penalised, as the CNE now says that it does not recognise these as having participated in recent elections. Moreover, they have to re-register under what they say are impossible-to-meet conditions. A string of small parties declared a boycott of the process, and in the end just 11 of the 59 agreed to take part. To date, 19 parties have lost accreditation, according to the CNE.

**Tensions in Gran Polo Patriótico**

The ruling PSUV was not obliged to re-register, as it took over the 1% threshold in the December 2015 elections. The party leadership rejected complaints that the CNE measure threatened the extinction of smaller parties, particularly at the regional level. "This is just about collecting 0.5% of voters in half of the states in the country. Obviously, if a party doesn't have the capacity to collect that amount then it cannot consider itself to be a national party," PSUV deputy Héctor Rodríguez argued.

Nonetheless, there has been tension on the Left over the CNE measure. Carmelo González, secretary general of UPV, complained that "the CNE wants to apply [the rule] that we haven't participated in the last two elections, when we did, as part of the Gran Polo Patriótico," the pro-*Chavista* website *Venezuela Analysis* reported on 1 March. The same article added that the PCV had argued against the use of old legislation on the statute books, the 1965 'Law of Political Parties', as a legal basis for the CNE's re-registration process. The PCV says that Article 25 of that law contradicts the 1999 *Chavista* constitution by obliging political parties to share details of their membership and leadership with the CNE. "We are talking about handing over the confidential information of members of a party...persecuted throughout history," the PCV secretary general Oscar Figuera was quoted as stating.

While the PCV is no longer persecuted by the Venezuelan State (as in the 1960s), no-one on either side of the political spectrum has forgotten the more recent

## Money supply data the latest to disappear

The central bank of Venezuela (BCV) appears to have ceased publication of the M2 measure of broad money supply in the country. In the extended absence of official inflation data, private economists had been using the (soaring) money supply data to estimate inflation. The last M2 data appeared on 24 February. It indicated that an increase in monetary aggregates of 180% year-on-year, up from a rate of about 160% year-on-year last December. The absence of M2 data may hinder the opposition-controlled national assembly's new inflation index (INPC), which in January and February suggested the highest monthly inflation since records began in 1945.

'Tascón List', when the names of thousands of people who signed a petition in 2003-2004 for a presidential recall referendum against Chávez were made public by a PSUV deputy (Luis Tascón). Public sector workers and others on that list affiliated to *Chavismo* were later subject to discriminatory measures.

## MUD reluctantly complies

The main MUD parties, led by the G-4 – comprising Primero Justicia (PJ), the traditional Acción Democrática (AD), the Zulia-based Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) and the right-wing Voluntad Popular (VP) – agreed to re-register “under protest”; in reality they had little choice but to comply. Smaller MUD parties including the likes of Copei, Proyecto Venezuela, Movimiento Progresista de Venezuela, Avanzada Progresista and Alianza Bravo Pueblo also reluctantly agreed, again under duress.

The CNE has made clear that it will not announce dates for the delayed December 2016 gubernatorial elections – which it had pledged to hold “in the first half of 2017” – until the registration process is complete, which, according to the timetable on its website, will be on 8 July. As such, the elections cannot happen until the second half of this year, when municipal elections are also due. Again, there is no indication as to when, but at this stage there is some expectation that the two ballots could be held together.

## MUD backs Almagro's call

The president of the national assembly, Julio Borges, said it was clear that the government led by President Nicolás Maduro is “absolutely defeated” after some 205,000 people registered support for the PJ, of which he is secretary general, over the weekend of 18-19 March. Borges said that not only had the PJ surpassed the threshold required, but that 80,000 people were left in the queues. “We validated [sufficient signatures] across the country,” he declared in an interview with *Globovisión*. Borges complained of some problems, saying that the PJ had been given fewer voting machines than VP previously. “They punished Miranda, Zulia and Lara. There was a commitment that there wouldn't be a break at midday, but they gave the order to stop,” he noted. He also complained of power cuts in the PSUV-run states of Carabobo and Vargas, blaming the respective governors (Francisco Ameliach and Jorge Carneiro).

Also celebrating the turnout for the PJ was Henrique Capriles Radonski, governor of Miranda and the MUD's twice-former presidential candidate. Capriles called on the Maduro government to measure itself in elections. “It doesn't have a way out. It might win a week, or a month, but there is no escape from elections,” he stated.

Borges announced that he would ask the MUD to create a commission to organise primaries to select candidates for the gubernatorial and municipal elections, and demanded that these be capable. “I want to be clear on this: the idea is not to elect candidates, the idea is to elect leaders, who will fight for Venezuela,” he said. Borges vowed that the Maduro government stood to lose either way. “If it goes to elections, it loses, and if it doesn't, it has lost. Whatever it does, it's defeated.” He called on Venezuelans to “get on their feet, so that the voice of the people is heard”.

According to the CNE, almost 418,000 people have so far signed for their preferred political parties in the latest registration drive. The PJ has been the best-supported MUD party by far to date. By contrast, Voluntad Popular got 46,081 signatures, the CNE reported. Copei is among those taking part in the 25-26 March round. Notably, the leftist party Avanzada Progresista, led by the former *Chavista* Henri Falcón, registered 73,226 members, a not-insignificant number suggestive of the appetite on the Left for an alternative to the PSUV. Falcón, the state governor of Lara, has long been touted as a potential consensus candidate in a transition from the PSUV to a successor administration.



**El Niño Costero**

Exceptionally warm waters just off Peru's northern Pacific coast have triggered unprecedented heavy rains in the Andes since December last year, in turn causing severe flooding and landslides. Parts of this usually-arid coastline have been dry for years. The last similar event was in 1998, but scientists say this is distinctive. Surface water temperatures in the area are about  $8^{\frac{238}{92}}\text{C}$  above their normal average of  $23^{\frac{238}{92}}\text{C}$ , and winds are very low, allowing precipitation that would normally stay offshore to sweep inland. Dimitri Gutiérrez, a scientist on Peru's El Niño committee, notes that coastal El Niños typically are preceded by a larger El Niño in the central Pacific, making them more predictable. But this year's developed suddenly and rapidly, from very local conditions.

**Troubled waters for Kuczynski government**

As we went to press, Peru's Defence Minister Jorge Nieto reported that 79 people have now lost their lives, among 665,313 estimated victims to date of torrential wet weather not seen in decades. Over 145,000 homes have also been affected, Nieto said, giving the latest update from the Centro de Operaciones de Emergencia Nacional (COEN).

Northern regions bordering Ecuador (which is also affected), remain the worst hit by the so-called El Niño Costero, including Piura and Trujillo. Peru's 10m-strong capital Lima, enduring a long hot summer, has also been affected, with fresh drinking water supplies cut last week after treatment plants operated by the local water authority, Sedapal, were overwhelmed by heavy inflows of water full of mud, sediment, debris and rubbish. With roads including the Pan-American highway, the country's main north-south artery, cut off in several places, food price inflation in Lima and elsewhere is becoming noticeable.

President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski has called a state of emergency in 11 regions in all (of the 25 in total, plus Lima province), but to some consternation has refused to declare a nationwide emergency. After several days of refusing to explain why, Kuczynski eventually said that he didn't want to "open the doors to corruption". Under a state of emergency, public works can be approved under special fast track conditions; local municipalities can avoid having to put projects out to tender, for example.

"The other landslide we have had in recent months is corruption," Kuczynski said in an interview with *CNN en Español*, in reference to the heavy weight of the Odebrecht affair, which has implicated three former administrations and all but paralysed private investor sentiment. "Unfortunately, the quality of our municipal governments leaves a lot to be desired. We would only open the doors to corruption," he commented.

Defending the central government's response to date, Kuczynski emphasised that of the country's 1,800 districts and 194 provinces, over half have already been declared in a state of emergency. Earlier in the week, Kuczynski reiterated that funding was "guaranteed" for affected areas, amid opposition calls for the 2019 Pan-American Games in Lima to be cancelled and the money used instead for reconstruction.

The mayor of Lima, Luis Castañeda, took umbrage at Kuczynski's comments, saying that he was offending and demoralising mayors trying to do their best to respond to the crisis without resources. "I don't think it's a good message for a president to say that mayors are crooked," Castañeda complained.

Castañeda himself has been under pressure over the collapse of a pedestrian bridge in Lima, after the Rimac River running underneath surged. The 'Puente Solidaridad' between the districts of San Juan de Lurigancho and El Agustino was erected in 2010 at a pricey US\$1.2m, when Castañeda was previously mayor (2003-2010). Castañeda said the bridge was not meant to withstand natural disasters, prompting derision. Another official made matters worse by insisting that the bridge hadn't "collapsed", but had merely "slipped".

Kuczynski, on tour in the north of the country, meanwhile questioned how new bridges could collapse, "when those built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century are still standing". His office later insisted he had not been referring to the Puente Solidaridad, but to a bridge over the River Virú (and part of the Pan-American highway) in the north-western region of La Libertad.

## Opposition decries judicial persecution

The opposition **Movimiento Demócrata Social (MDS)**, comprising the rump of the former regional opposition governors' bloc, **Consejo Nacional Democrático, Conalde** is launching a campaign against what it maintains is judicial persecution by the government led by President Evo Morales. The MDS's announcement was prompted by recent judicial orders against **Ernesto Suárez**, the former governor of Beni department (2006-2012) and other MDS members. The claims regarding the politicisation of justice come as elections are due in October for the supreme court (TSJ), the constitutional court (TCP), the council of magistrates, and the environmental court (TA) in a popular vote following the first of its kind in 2011 which the Morales government has since admitted was a failure.

On 16 March a local judge José Pedro Carvalho ordered that Suárez, who ran as the vice-presidential candidate in 2014 for the opposition centre-right **Unidad Demócrata (UD)**, be sent to Mocoví prison, in Beni's capital, Trinidad, for alleged money laundering. The local press reports the move is in line with investigations by the attorney general's office which began in May 2016 after the financial investigations unit (UIF) questioned the provenance of some US\$95,360 in his bank account. Suárez had been forced to quit as Beni's governor in May 2012 over corruption charges which he said were trumped up.

The move against Suárez led the MDS, which is headed up by long-time Morales opponent Santa Cruz governor Rubén Costas to release a statement on 19 March announcing plans to stage an international campaign against the persecution of its leaders (*see sidebar*). As well as Suárez, the MDS statement highlights as other members targeted Suárez's successor Carmelo Lens (2013-2015) and David Mollinedo, mayor of Concepción, Santa Cruz department. On 14 March, a judge announced that Lens was under house arrest in relation to alleged irregularities regarding the construction of Guayaramerín airport, having previously been sent to prison on a preventative basis in December 2016 in relation to the case. On 2 March the state prosecutor's office announced that Mollinedo had been imprisoned on a preventative basis for the alleged crimes of dereliction of duty and embezzlement in relation to an investigation into the misuse of some B\$720,000 (US\$104,200) in funds.

### Other members of Conalde

Suárez's imprisonment currently leaves Costas as the only active member of the former Conalde bloc which challenged President Morales in 2008 ahead of his efforts to pass the 2009 constitution. On 10 March the state prosecutor's office announced that Pando's former prefect Leopoldo Fernández (2006-2008) had been sentenced to 15 years in jail for the high-profile 'Pando massacre' in September 2008 (in which at least 19 people died). Fernández has been behind bars since 2008 under preventative detention ahead of the ruling.

In August 2016, the former prefect of Chuquisaca Sabina Cuéllar (2008-2010) was sentenced to a year in prison for dereliction of duty in relation to a contract she authorised with a local architect, Raúl Rivera, who was allegedly facing legal action. Another former Conalde member, Mario Cossio, ex-prefect and governor of Tarija (2006-2010), was ejected from office in December 2010 for alleged corruption, charges that he said were trumped up. He fled the country for Paraguay, where he has been ever since. On November 2016 the state prosecutor's office announced that Cossio had been sentenced to a further two-and-a-half years in prison for the crimes, including dereliction of duty and anti-economic conduct in relation to the construction of a road Tojo la Verdiguera. Finally, in September 2016, former prefect of Cochabamba Manfred Reyes Villa (2006-2008), who has been in the US since 2009, was sentenced to five years in jail in absentia for illicit enrichment while he was in office.

### OAS appeal

In its statement

Movimiento

Demócrata Social

(MDS) revealed that it

had formed a special

commission whose

chief objective was to

meet the Secretary

General of the

Organization of

American States

(OAS), Luis Almagro,

and outline the

situation of political

persecution facing

the opposition in the

country.

**Military control**

Although the national police force was created as a non-military security force in 1891, it was placed under control of the defence ministry in 1960 as part of the reorganisation of the country's security forces by the government of the time to better combat the country's guerrilla groups. The police force has remained under the control of the defence ministry (although not under direct control of the military high command) ever since. It is widely speculated that a crucial figure in the police demilitarisation process will be its former head (Ret.) General Oscar Naranjo (2007-2012), who has been named by Santos as his new vice-president. Naranjo's leadership of the police force has been internationally recognised and following his retirement he became an adviser in the peace negotiations with the Farc.

**Santos announces transformation of police**

President Juan Manuel Santos has announced that his government will embark on a new plan to transform and modernise the national police force. Santos said that the police force had played a key role in bringing an end to Colombia's long-running internal armed conflict but that it now needed to be focused on consolidating peace in a post-conflict scenario following the signing of a peace deal with the country's main guerrilla group, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc), and the start of formal peace negotiations with its second-largest, Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN). Santos said this should not only involve combating persistent threats to national security, such as organised crime, but also conducting more traditional policing duties.

President Santos announced the plan to overhaul the national police force during a televised address on 21 March. Santos said that the objective of the plan was to "have a more humane police...disciplined, innovative, and effective, and, above all, closer to citizens". He added that this was part of a wider reform of Colombia's security forces, already underway with the military which, after years of being dedicated to combating guerrillas, will now have the opportunity to take on other duties. In this context, Santos explained that the police force would likely undergo a demilitarisation process to concentrate on policing duties, with the armed forces focused on military duties.

Santos said that the transformation process would begin after the government fully evaluates a report on the matter that it tasked a commission of experts to draft, and which has now been submitted. He said that the report makes recommendations centred on five strategic points: the institutional framework of the police force; its relation with the defence ministry; its organisation; the management of human resources; and its transparency and accountability.

Santos noted that this process was not starting from scratch. He said that the police force had already launched a new strategic plan called 'Comunidades seguras y en paz' ('safe and peaceful communities'), which is focused on reinforcing public security in areas of the country previously under Farc control. As part of this strategic plan, 960 police officers will be permanently reassigned to rural areas around the country; while 500 young peasant farmers will be incorporated into the institution as auxiliary officers to help support policing efforts in rural areas. Santos said that as part of the transformation process, the rural policing unit (Dirección de Carabineros y Seguridad Rural) of the national police force would be strengthened, as would officer training in areas like citizen assistance.

Previously, the Santos administration had mooted the possibility of transferring control of the police force from the defence ministry to the interior ministry as part of its efforts to demilitarise it and turn it back into a civilian institution (*see sidebar*). However, Santos noted that the report recommends against this due to the fact that Colombia's immediate security challenges still require "close coordination between the police and the military".

Nonetheless, Santos said that the government's ultimate goal was to have a police force that "is capable of facing existing challenges and those that will come, such as promoting peace and coexistence" in a post-conflict Colombia. "This will be the police for the post-conflict: a police force up to the social transformations that the country is already starting to experience, a country that is reacquainting itself to normality," Santos said.

## US security cooperation

Mexico's attorney general Raúl Cervantes Andrade held a meeting with his US peer Jefferson Sessions in Washington DC on 20 March. According to a statement released by Mexico's attorney general's office (PGR) the two men promised to deepen bilateral security cooperation, while agreeing that "cooperation and collaboration would be based on mutual respect and reciprocity". Sessions and Cervantes apparently discussed disbanding the transnational criminal organisations which control the drug trade from Mexico to the US, but there is a prevailing fear that the level of security cooperation required to achieve this could fall prey to bilateral diplomatic tension surrounding the impending renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta).

## MEXICO & NAFTA

### MEXICO | SECURITY

#### Sinaloa security situation deteriorates

**Eight people appear to have been kidnapped in an outlying neighbourhood of Culiacán, the capital of the north-western state of Sinaloa, but the incident remains unclear. A video circulating on social media last week showed four municipal police officers arresting the eight near a tortilla stand, and then handing them over to heavily armed men who drove off with them in a number of vehicles.**

The initial interpretation was that, as in the notorious Iguala case in Guerrero in September 2014, complicit police officers were handing victims over to a drug trafficking organisation (DTO). The four police officers were indeed initially arrested on the orders of the state prosecutor. But they were then released days later, with deputy state prosecutor Julio César Romanillo saying investigations had shown the eight had not been kidnapped but "rescued" by the unidentified civilians. Although freed on parole the four officers would face charges related to "omission of duty", Romanillo said.

The case coincides with a surge of violence in Sinaloa in the ongoing war for control of the Sinaloa/Pacífico DTO, following the extradition of Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán Loera to the US in January. In an incident suspected to be related to this, on 16 March the son of Juan José 'El Azul' Esparragoza Moreno, one of the DTO's ruling triumvirate along with Guzmán and Ismael 'El Mayo' Zambada, escaped from Aguaruto prison in Culiacán.

The federal attorney general's office (PGR) is offering a M\$30m (US\$1.55m) reward for information that might lead to Esparragoza Moreno's capture; the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), US\$5m. Whether he is still alive is the object of some speculation. Rumours surfaced in January this year that he had died of a heart attack in 2014, but the authorities have never been able to confirm this, and leaders of DTOs have been known to fake their deaths before in an effort to reduce the pressure on them from security forces.

#### Prison break

Esparragoza Monzón walked out of the front gate of the prison, along with four fellow members of the Sinaloa/Pacífico DTO. Only captured in January this year, since when he had taken legal action to prevent his transfer to a maximum security prison, Esparragoza Monzón is suspected by the federal government of administering the DTO's finances and coordinating its drug distribution network.

The governor of Sinaloa, Quirino Ordaz Coppel, blamed the complicity of prison guards in the escape, and deep-rooted corruption. Ordaz Coppel said the Aguaruto prison director and 10 senior prison officers and guards had been suspended pending an investigation into the prison break.

Ordaz Coppel, a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), blamed the previous administration of Mario López Valdez, who represented the right-wing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), for the chaotic state of Sinaloa's prison system. Ordaz Coppel said he had appealed to the federal authorities to transfer 90 inmates classified as high risk (among 500 federal prisoners out of a total prison population in Aguaruto of 2,200) because the prison did not meet the required standard to hold them.

## Oil discovery

The Italian oil company Eni has announced the discovery of what it described as “meaningful” reserves of oil in the Bay of Campeche, the southern bight of the Gulf of Mexico. Eni won a contract for the Amoca, Mizron, and Tecoalli fields in the second phase of Mexico’s Round One oil and gas licensing auction in September 2015. The discovery, in the Amoca oil well, is the first made by an international oil company since the energy reform driven through by the federal government in 2013.

## Record homicide rate

After years of gradual reduction, Mexico’s homicide rate is again swinging upwards. In the first two months of this year the number of homicides reached a record high.

Figures from the Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SESNSP) show that in the first two months of the year police investigation files were opened into a total of 3,779 incidents involving one or more homicides, an increase of 30% on the same period a year earlier. This is the highest number of investigations registered since records began to be compiled in their present form in 1997.

Mexico is clearly experiencing a major surge in violence: there were more murder investigations during the first two months of this year than in the first two months of 2011 which has until now been considered the most violent year in Mexico’s militarised struggle against the country’s main drug trafficking organisations (DTOs).

A total of 4,254 people were killed in the first two months of 2017, up by 34.4% on last year (the number of deaths is higher than the number of investigations, because some incidents involve multiple killings). The news website *Aristegui Noticias* calculated that across Mexico on average one person was murdered every three hours in January and February.

Violence is not evenly distributed though the country. According to SESNSP data, the highest homicide rates were registered in the state of Colima (13.77 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants) Guerrero (9.46), Baja California Sur (9.26), Sinaloa (7.97) and Chihuahua (7.03). These rates are high compared to recent experience in Mexico, but still lower than in the Northern triangle countries of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) which have some of the world’s highest homicide rates.

## TRACKING TRENDS

**MEXICO | OECD recommendations.** On 17 March the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) released a report entitled ‘Going for Growth’, in which it made a number of recommendations on what some of the world’s leading economies could do to boost domestic economic growth. In reference to Mexico, the OECD report, which was released during the G-20 meeting of finance ministers held in Baden-Baden, Germany, recommends that the country should fully open up its domestic market to foreign investment.

The report praises the structural economic reforms that Mexico has implemented in recent years under the administration led by President Enrique Peña Nieto, such as the energy and telecommunications sector reforms, which have opened these previously semi-closed sectors up to increased competition and private sector investment. However, the report argues that cutting red tape for other sectors such as banking and transport, which remain largely closed to foreign investment, would help to boost Mexico’s foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows significantly.

Another obstacle to increased economic growth in Mexico identified by the OECD is low labour productivity. According to the report, this could be improved by tightening compliance procedures for Mexican businesses, offering more incentives and making it easier to set up new businesses, which could help foster a culture of innovation.

Besides these structural changes, the report also recommends that Mexico should invest more in education to see better returns in the labour market. Pointing to the fact that wage disparity in Mexico is one of the highest of all OECD member countries, the report recommends improving education as a way to reduce wage inequality and make the workplace more meritocratic. Giving Mexicans access to better education would in turn boost productivity and challenge inefficient informal procedures in the workplace. In this context, the OECD report urged Mexico to “professionalise” its national education system by investing more in teacher training and rewarding high-performing teachers.

**Protest march hits capital**

Some 1,500 people gathered on 19 March in the Parque Independencia in Santo Domingo, the terminus for a torch-led 'pilgrimage' to protest against corruption in the Dominican Republic. The social organisation Marcha Verde orchestrated the march which converged on the capital from each corner of the country, its numbers swelling over the course of the week. Marcha Verde accused "business, religious, political and social elites of complicity in the biggest corruption scandal in our history", promising more protest action until the government led by President Danilo Medina expels the Brazilian firm Odebrecht from the country and tackles official impunity.

Marcha Verde has won considerable media coverage in the last two months because of its meticulously planned and executed demonstrations against corruption. Such protests are highly unusual in the Dominican Republic despite the prevailing public perception of political corruption and impunity, especially under the ruling Partido de la Liberación Dominicana (PLD) administrations (2004-present). Organisers promised that street mobilisations would continue in Santiago de los Caballeros, the country's second-largest city, with the Marcha del Cibao (the populous northern coastal region) on 26 March, and a demonstration outside the legislative assembly in April.

Organisers read out a statement in the Parque Independencia on 19 March warning of "serious consequences facing society because of [President] Medina's silence" in response to its requests that Odebrecht be thrown out of the country and a commission of independent prosecutors be created to expunge corruption and impunity, which have caused "terrible social, institutional and economic consequences".

Foreign Minister Miguel Vargas Maldonado, the president of the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD), which forged an alliance with Medina's PLD after spending over a decade out of power, accused the main opposition Partido Revolucionario Moderno (PRM), a PRD splinter and now the main opposition, of "seditious attacks" and seeking to "delegitimise and unseat" Medina. "It [the PRM] is not interested so much in attacking corruption, which is a genuine problem in this country and worldwide, but rather achieving...what it could not achieve at the polls last May," Vargas said. He maintained that Medina had made numerous moves to contain public spending and avoid misuse of state funds, and had done more to prevent corruption ("more important than punishing it") than any of his predecessors.

A survey conducted by Alfonso, Cabrera y Asociados between 28 February and 4 March interviewing 2,400 people who voted in the last elections found that Medina's popularity is holding up well so far despite efforts by the opposition to capitalise on the Odebrecht scandal and Marcha Verde to expose corruption. Some 60% of respondents believed Medina was sincere when he said during his state-of-the-nation address to the legislative assembly on 27 February that there would be "no sacred cows", and all officials suspected of corruption would face justice. The survey also showed that 93% of those who voted for Medina in 2016 would do so again today if the candidates were the same. The wider public is yet to be persuaded that the alternatives to Medina are up to much: 54% favoured Medina's re-election in 2020 (although this would require yet another change to the constitution).

**Independence**

On the same day as Marcha Verde was calling for popular independence President Medina led a civil-military march in the south-western province of Azua to mark the 173<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the Batalla del 19 de Marzo when Dominican troops defeated a much larger Haitian force during the independence struggle.

**Sources of finance**

The key question that Prime Minister Lafontant reportedly faced in the legislature was how he planned to finance the various infrastructure projects he is proposing. Road infrastructure projects include plans to overhaul the national highway #1; part of the national highway #2 (from Vieux Bourg d'Aquin, a village in Aquin commune, Sud Department, to Cayes town, also in Sud Department); and the construction of a new highway #7 linking Cayes to Jérémie, the capital of Grand'Anse department. For education and health Lafontant is proposing to "significantly increase" the number of preschools and primary schools and create 10 new "model" public secondary schools, and to overhaul hospital infrastructure, particularly in Port-au-Prince. Lafontant omitted to give details about funding for these projects. Instead he mentioned plans to cut wasteful government spending, combating corruption and contraband, and boosting investment.

**Victory for Moïse as legislature ratifies PM**

Haiti's new president, Jovenel Moïse, received a major boost this week after the legislature approved the government plan of his pick for prime minister, Dr Jack Guy Lafontant, a gastroenterologist and reportedly close friend. Unlike his predecessor, Michel Martelly (2011-2016), Moïse, who took office last month, has a majority in the 119-member lower chamber and 30-member senate. However, the legislature's approval of the prime minister's government plan – traditionally a tortuous process in the country – was far from certain given Lafontant was a political unknown with no influence.

The challenges facing the new government are considerable. A 4 March update following hurricane 'Matthew' by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) notes that of the 2.1m people affected (out of a total population of 11m), nearly 1.4m need humanitarian assistance. On official figures cited by the OCHA report, 54,000 tonnes (t) of crops, agriculture land and fruit trees were destroyed, leaving "more than 70% of the population depending exclusively on agriculture in a disastrous situation". The OCHA update also notes an Emergency Food Security Assessment (EFSA) conducted in December 2016 in areas highly affected (mainly the south-western departments of Grand'Anse and Sud) which revealed that 33% of the population in these areas was food insecure (around 1.5m people) and 5% severely food insecure (around 280,000 people). It warns that due to widespread crop loss (up to 100% in some areas of Grand'Anse), seeds and livestock, the winter harvest season in February-March 2017 is expected to be low.

Like Moïse – an agricultural businessman from the north of the country – Lafontant has said that promoting agriculture will be a priority. This is in line with Moïse's manifesto, which cited as other key areas of focus, tourism, construction & infrastructure, and entrepreneurship. This is part of efforts to boost GDP growth, which a December 2016 report by the Economic Commission for Latin America & the Caribbean (Eclac) forecasted at 1% this year, down from 2% in 2016. In his government plan, which was approved by the 119-member lower chamber on 21 March and the 30-member senate five days earlier, Lafontant cited as a first step the installation of a panel of experts to conduct feasibility studies for various agricultural projects. He is also proposing to improve access to loans for agricultural businesses; to set up a national agricultural development bank (BNDA); and a system of insurance for the sector.

**New cabinet**

Lafontant's 18-member cabinet, which also required legislative approval, includes few familiar faces. One minister retains his previous post, Aviol Fleurant (planning & foreign cooperation), while Fritz Caillot, the director general of public works at the transport & communications ministry was promoted to head up the portfolio. Lafontant has named an agronomist, Carmel André Béliard, as agriculture minister, while Marie Greta Roy Clément, a doctor and former head of the Haitian medical association is the new health minister – an appointment which attracted attention given the recent strikes [\[WR-17-08\]](#) and cholera epidemic.

Other appointments include: Antonio Rodrigue, Haiti's current ambassador to Belgium (foreign affairs); Heidi Fortuné, a judge from Nord Department's capital Cap-Haïtien (justice & public security); Max Rudolph Saint-Albin, the director general of the government insurance office for occupational injury, sickness and maternity (Ofatma) as the interior minister; and Jude Alix Patrick Salomon, a former director general of the general finance inspectorate (IGF) as the economy & finance minister.

## Quotes of the week

“A small embarrassing situation.”

*Brazil's President Michel Temer on a scandal threatening to devastate the country's meat exports.*

“Chile has shown itself to be a resilient country in the face of natural disasters but very vulnerable to bad governments.”

*Chile's former president Sebastián Piñera.*

“I don't know whether to call him Guillermo Lasso or Señor Positano because this is the name he uses to hide his offshore companies.”

*Ecuador's President Rafael Correa.*

## El Salvador celebrates reduction in violence; shootout follows

A shootout in central San Salvador between private security guards and *mara* gang members claimed six lives on the most violent day of the year so far in El Salvador. In total 30 people were killed in the country on 15 March, including a further nine in San Martín, in the department of San Salvador. Just hours beforehand the justice and security minister, Mauricio Ramírez Landaverde, had boasted that the homicide figure for the year to 14 March was down by nearly two-thirds on the same period in 2016.

The head of the national police force (PNC), Howard Cotto, reported that 17 of the 30 people killed on 15 March were gang members. Of the six who lost their lives in the shootout in the historic heart of the capital, three were informal traders. Cotto announced the deployment of an additional 250 police officers, including members of the elite special reaction forces (FIRT and FES), in central San Salvador and more patrols over the next two weeks.

Just prior to the fatal shootout in the capital, Landaverde told the national security council (CNSCC), meeting to discuss security strategy, that homicides to 14 March stood at 651, a decline of 62.2% on the same period last year, while there had been 52 murders in San Salvador, down 64%. He later described the shootout in the capital as “an isolated case...regrettable but controlled”. He also maintained that 137 of the country's 262 municipalities, more than half, had reported no homicides, “confirming that the strategy of combating violence is effective and bringing results”.

Homicides, of course, do not tell the whole story of insecurity in El Salvador. Almost one year on from the government's introduction of ‘extraordinary measures’ to combat the *mara* gangs, which were recently extended until April 2018, there has been no noticeable reduction in extortion by *mara* gangs, and, according to testimony given by the attorney general, Douglas Meléndez, to the justice and human rights commission of the legislative assembly on 20 March, there have been almost as many disappearances so far this year as homicides: 588. Meléndez said that 3,330 Salvadoreans, mainly young men, ‘disappeared’ in 2016. He blamed the gangs for the majority of the disappearances but also pointed to the flow of migrants, with an estimated 300 Salvadoreans beginning a perilous journey northwards to the US every day.

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**LATIN AMERICAN WEEKLY REPORT** is published weekly (50 issues a year) by **Latin American Newsletters**, Hamilton House, Fourth Floor, Mabledon Place, London, WC1H 9BB, England. Telephone +44 (0)203 695 2790, Email: [subs@latinnews.com](mailto:subs@latinnews.com) or visit our website at: <http://www.latinnews.com>

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