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Which López Obrador will govern Mexico?

A combination of factors lay behind Andrés Manuel López Obrador's emphatic victory in Mexico's presidential elections in July, not the least among which were his promise to demilitarise Mexico and the perception that he would stand up to the nationalist rhetoric of US President Donald Trump, but even before assuming power he has taken steps in the opposite direction. Meanwhile, some of the old fears, principally that López Obrador would run an authoritarian government, are resurfacing. He stands accused of creating parallel governments to undercut the power of governors and mayors, and using his popularity to institutionalise a referendum process, ostensibly designed to increase participative democracy and empower people to determine policies, that has been abused in other countries, notably Venezuela. López Obrador has already confounded expectations but will he confound his critics?

López Obrador will need to hit the ground running when he takes office on 1 December. Two of the biggest challenges he will inherit are Mexico's domestic security crisis and the Central American migrant crisis. The first of these has seen López Obrador make a dramatic change of tack. A fierce critic of the progressive militarisation of public security in Mexico since 2006, López Obrador has presented a security plan which, however much he seeks to emphasise its social focus, would entrench this militarisation via a constitutional reform.

López Obrador participated in an unprecedented event for a president-elect on 25 November by addressing 32,000 army and navy personnel (including 102 generals and admirals) in the Campo Militar 1 military installation in Mexico City, along with the incoming and outgoing defence and navy ministers. Previously a firm proponent of sending troops back to barracks, López Obrador reached out to them as a crucial part of his government's fight against violence. "This is a nationalist army that has never been subordinated to any foreign government, I acknowledge its professionalism," López Obrador said, urging those attending, who he described as "the people in uniform", to embrace his idea of a national guard comprising members of the military and federal police (PF).

López Obrador promised to triple or even quadruple the security presence on the streets. It will not become apparent how he intends to fund the significant additional cost of this undertaking until his government tables its 2019 draft budget. But Mexico's Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) was not the only human rights group to express serious reservations about the creation of the proposed national guard, arguing that it went beyond the principles, recommendations, and criteria of international organisations which advocate strengthening civilian public security institutions.

Moral constitution

On 26 November President-elect López Obrador presented the four-person 'organising committee' to draft a 'moral constitution' for Mexico. López Obrador described the moral constitution as crucial to "rescue our identity and our roots", and serving as "a guide to values" to adopt new practices and improved behaviour, promote honesty, peace, and justice, and respect for human rights. It will include sections on respect for individuals, family, society, country, and nature. Members of the public will be entitled to submit proposals to be included in the constitution, which will have no formal legal status, between 3 December and 30 April next year. It will be finalised in a giant convention held on 31 July.

Migrant crisis

López Obrador's second immediate challenge will be confronting the Central American migrant crisis, a source of simmering diplomatic tension with the US, which erupted this week. Central American migrants, principally from Honduras, have been gathering in ever greater numbers, mainly in Tijuana, the largest city in the north-western state of Baja California, in an effort to make it to the US. On 25 November US border authorities closed the border and used tear gas to disperse some 200 migrants who broke through a security cordon erected by the PF and tried to climb over the border wall.

Around 9,000 Central American migrants have arrived in Mexico since 19 October, according to the authorities, more than half of whom have descended on Tijuana, and are being housed in an overcrowded local sports complex. The mayor of Tijuana, Juan Manuel Gastélum Buenrostro, has stoked tensions by saying that the city cannot cope with the "avalanche" of migrants. Some 300 Tijuana residents participated in a demonstration against the migrants on 18 November, clashing with riot police who blocked them from approaching the sports complex.

Gastélum, who has proposed staging a public consultation on whether Tijuana residents want to keep receiving "marijuana-smoking and violent" migrants, said on 28 November that the resources to fund the makeshift hostel would dry up within two days. He claimed that the migrants were costing municipal authorities M\$500,000 (US\$24,600) per day, and accused the federal government of abandoning them. Trump, meanwhile, tweeted that Mexico should "stop the Caravans long before they get to our Southern Border", adding that "All [the migrants] will stay in Mexico," unless their asylum requests were approved.

It was against this backdrop that The *Washington Post* ran an article on 24 November claiming that López Obrador's incoming government had struck a deal with the US to shelter all migrants until their asylum requests are processed. "For now, we have agreed to this policy of Remain in Mexico," the incoming interior minister, Olga Sánchez Cordero, was quoted as saying in an interview. Facing a storm of criticism at home, Sánchez Cordero appeared to backtrack, saying that no firm agreement was in place with the US yet and talks were ongoing.

López Obrador was critical of the Mexican government during his electoral campaign, accusing it of "doing the dirty work of the US", and saying it should stop blocking Central American migrants at the border [WR-18-20]. And yet now he appears to be performing another volte face.

Turning Mexico into an antechamber for migrants intent on gaining asylum in the US would be costly and could provide another internal security problem. The incoming government appears to be hoping that the expense would be defrayed by US financial assistance for major development projects being planned for southern Mexico (evoking parallels with the aborted Plan Puebla Panamá initiative of former president Vicente Fox [2000-2006]), which could provide jobs for the estimated 200,000 Central American migrants a year that pass through the country hoping to gain entry to the US.

Referendum victory

One of the big development initiatives envisioned by López Obrador for southern Mexico is the M\$150bn (US\$7.3bn) 'Tren Maya' railway line, which would link the Caribbean resort of Cancún (Quintana Roo) to the city of Palenque (Chiapas), passing through the states of Campeche, Tabasco, and Yucatán. López Obrador called a public consultation on 24 and 25 November on the Tren Maya, as well as an oil refinery, and 10 social welfare programmes. In contrast to the US\$13.3bn Mexico City international airport (NAIM) project, which was rejected in an earlier public consultation, all of these pet projects of López Obrador won strong backing ranging from 89.9% to 95.1%.

Super delegates

The governor-elect of Jalisco, Enrique Alfaro, also criticised the incoming government's security plan, which would see Mexico divided into 266 territorial areas, with around 500 members of the national guard assigned to each area [\[WR-18-45\]](#). "Don't play politics with security," Alfaro said. "We are responsible for security in our state by constitutional mandate," he added, arguing that the states stood to lose control under the government's security plan.

The public consultation was organised by the Fundación Rosenblueth for López Obrador's leftist Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena), and financed by the party's federal senators, rather than the national electoral institute (INE). This prompted criticism of a lack of independent oversight. There has also been some controversy over the selection of the 538 municipalities (out of a total of 2,448 in Mexico) where this and the NAIM referendum were held.

Although Morena won only 332 municipal elections in July, compared with 464 for the right-wing opposition Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and 456 for the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the referendum was held in nearly half (163) of Morena's municipalities but only 95 of those won by the PAN and 60 of those taken by the PRI.

Regional revolt over parallel powers

The recourse to referendums has fuelled criticism that López Obrador is intent on strengthening his legitimacy through public consultations of dubious legitimacy (another one is planned for 21 March on the national guard). All of this – the debate over the militarisation of public security, the migrant crisis, and the referendums – has overshadowed what looks set to be a major clash of federal, state, and municipal powers.

On 22 November the Morena-controlled federal senate approved modifications to the federal public administration law to create the position of 'state coordinators'. One of these coordinators will be assigned to each of Mexico's 32 states, replacing more than 900 federal delegations which presently administer federal resources and coordinate federal programmes in the states.

The incoming government argues that this will cut bureaucratic costs, and the scope for corruption, while improving accountability. But detractors contend that López Obrador is intent on undercutting the authority of democratically elected governors: he has handpicked the coordinators, many of whom were defeated in July's gubernatorial elections in the states to which they have been assigned.

"We cannot allow the creation, under the new federal government model, of parallel figures to the constitutional authorities of the [western] state of Jalisco, legitimately elected authorities," the governor-elect of Jalisco, Enrique Alfaro, of the leftist Movimiento Ciudadano (MC), said in response to the senate revisions to the law. "We will not allow any trampling on our sovereignty," he added. López Obrador has designated as coordinator for Jalisco none other than Carlos Lomelí, the gubernatorial candidate for his Juntos Haremos Historia (JHH) coalition who Alfaro defeated in July's elections after an ill-tempered campaign.

The 12 PAN governors (of Aguascalientes, Baja California, Baja California Sur, Chihuahua, Durango, Guanajuato, Nayarit, Puebla, Querétaro, Quintana Roo, Tamaulipas, and Yucatán) also opposed the imposition of the state coordinators, dubbed 'super delegates'. "This disdain for the federal pact is unacceptable for us," the PAN said in a statement. "The country is built from the bottom up...not imposition from the centre," it went on, maintaining that while the party's governors stood ready to cooperate with the López Obrador administration they would vigorously oppose "the subjection of the local order".

Alfaro and the 12 PAN governors, backed by other opposition parties in congress, are mounting a legal challenge on the grounds that the revisions to the law violate state autonomy enshrined in the federal pact and the constitution. Unless an amicable agreement can be reached, the dispute looks set to go to the supreme court (SCJN), which could hold the revised law in abeyance while it deliberates on the legal complaints.

ELN talks founder, Farc peace under threat**Social leader homicides**

In a report released days before the second anniversary of the signing of the peace accord with the Farc, the local NGO Somos Defensores reported 77 social leaders murdered in the first half of 2018, up 34% on the same period last year. It also said that 91.4% of murders of social and community leaders between 2009 and 2017 had gone unpunished. It demanded “effective justice”, and action by the attorney general’s office to improve prevention, something which the PAO commission established by President Duque will seek to deliver.

The vision of a consolidated ‘complete peace’ in Colombia envisioned by former president Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) always looked chimeric if his government could not conclude a peace accord with the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) guerrilla group before he left office in August. And so it has proven. President Iván Duque, critical of what he views as the Santos administration’s excessive concessions to the country’s guerrillas, and having already suspended talks with the ELN, was unswayed by the group’s decision last week to draft its maximum leader ‘Gabino’ (Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista) on to its negotiating team. His government has not unpicked the peace accord with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc) as some feared. The slow pace of implementation two years on from its signing has raised concerns that the accord could unravel, although two recent developments could help to entrench it.

The Colombian foreign ministry appealed to the Cuban government on 20 November to comply with an Interpol Red Notice to capture ‘Gabino’, two days after President Duque revealed that the ELN leader was in Cuba. The foreign ministry statement served as tacit confirmation that the Duque administration had rejected the ELN’s decision to designate Gabino as a member of the guerrilla group’s negotiating team in Havana. The ELN posted a tweet directly afterwards, attaching a letter, dated 10 November, in which it had confirmed Gabino’s presence in Cuba and his incorporation to its negotiating team.

Colombia’s high commissioner for peace, Miguel Ceballos, said that only Duque had the authority to approve Gabino’s participation in the peace negotiations and that he would not ask the attorney general’s office and judiciary to lift the arrest warrant against the ELN leader unless the talks were back on, which would require its acceptance of conditions it deems to be tantamount to surrender: releasing all of its hostages, ending kidnapping, and ceasing all criminal activity, such as attacks on mining and energy infrastructure. Duque reiterated these conditions on 27 November in a reply to a letter from senators sitting on the peace and post-conflict commission.

Those in favour of renewing the suspended peace negotiations, such as former president Ernesto Samper (1994-1998), argue that the decision by the ELN to include Gabino in its negotiating team is a positive development and a signal of its intent, as the strength of his authority could unify some of the guerrilla group’s disparate factions behind peace. But the government appears to view it as a ruse to shield Gabino from capture given that arrest warrants against peace negotiators are suspended.

Farc difficulties

The impasse with the ELN coincided with the second anniversary of the signing of the peace accord with the Farc on 24 November. The leader of the Farc political party, Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri (‘Timochenko’), was critical of the “limited” advances in its implementation, particularly as regards “access to land”. The Fundación Paz y Reconciliación, directed by León Valencia, a political commentator and former ELN commander, broadly concurred in its sixth report on how the implementation of the peace accord is progressing, released to mark the second anniversary of its signing. It highlighted “an increase in criminal anarchy in post-Farc territory”, saying that violence had increased in 146 of the 242 municipalities (60%) previously under Farc influence, with the ELN having expanded into 19 of these.

Truth commission

The truth commission is composed of 11 members, presided over by the Jesuit priest Francisco de Roux, including academics, journalists, human rights defenders, and victims of the conflict, chosen from 196 candidates. They will be based in different departments across Colombia and will have three years in which to produce a report that will attempt to represent what really happened during the armed conflict, with the overriding aim of promoting national reconciliation as an antidote against more cycles of violence.

The report said it was encouraging that the Duque administration had accepted the peace accord in essence. But it stressed that there was “a very big risk” that the Farc could remobilise under senior former guerrillas like its chief peace negotiator, Luciano Marín Arango (‘Iván Márquez’), who has gone into hiding alleging a lack of guarantees in the peace process, if former Farc secretariat member Seuxis Paucis Hernández (‘Jesús Santrich’) is extradited to the US to face drug trafficking charges. The report said there were already 22 groups of Farc dissidents, comprising some 1,600 former guerrillas.

The report also said that on average one social leader is being killed every four days in Colombia. According to the ombudsman’s office 343 social leaders have been killed between January 2016 and August this year when Duque took office. In a joint statement on 24 November, Eamon Gilmore, the special peace envoy for Colombia for the European Union (EU), and Jean Arnault, the head of the United Nations (UN) mission in Colombia, also highlighted the “persistent murder of social leaders” as “one of the most negative expressions of [the country’s] violence”.

The Duque administration is taking steps, however, to try to tackle this vexed situation, which damages the credibility of the peace process. Duque signed a decree on 19 November delineating an ‘opportune plan of action’ (PAO) to prevent and protect, individually and collectively, the human rights, lives, freedom, and security of social leaders, and representatives and activists of social and community human rights organisations.

Duque created a PAO commission, over which he will preside, composed of the ministers of justice, defence, and interior; the commander of the armed forces; the directors of the police and the Unidad Nacional de Protección (UNP), an agency in the interior ministry responsible for providing protection to individuals and groups of persons whose position or activities subject them to extreme risk; the high commissioner for peace; presidential advisers on human rights and security; the attorney general’s office; and the human rights ombudsman. It aims to improve coordination between all state institutions; formulate public policy for prevention and protection (it will visit priority municipalities in December); take strategic action (release early alerts, and investigate effectively the material and intellectual authors behind attacks); and carry out “institutional reengineering”.

If the PAO is successful it will help restore some of the Farc’s faith in the peace process. As will the establishment of a truth commission on 29 November. Giving an independent body the institutional support to draw up a report outlining the fundamental causes of the country’s internal armed conflict, and helping to heal the wounds left behind by it, was a key demand of the Farc during the peace negotiations (*see sidebar*).

PERU | POLITICS & SECURITY

Devida launches anti-drug offensive in Vraem

The Peruvian government plans to invest PEN18.5bn (US\$5.5bn) over the next three years to develop the Apurímac, Ene, and Mantaro rivers valley (Vraem), the last redoubt of the Sendero Luminoso (SL) guerrilla group from where around 80% of the country’s annual cocaine production comes. This is far from the the first plan to develop and pacify the Vraem but the executive president of the national drug agency (Devida), Rubén Vargas, who is responsible for delivering it, argues that it is the most comprehensive.

The Plan Vraem 2021 investment initiative consists of 2,974 projects,

Cocaine

Peru's drug czar Rubén Vargas claimed that "Brazil is moving the coca and drug-trafficking map in Peru", with soaring coca production in the province of Mariscal Ramón Castilla in the north-eastern region of Loreto on the triple border with Colombia and Brazil; the province of Sandia in the south-eastern province of Puno bordering Bolivia; and the neighbouring region of Madre de Dios bordering Brazil and Bolivia. Vargas said that most of the drugs produced in Peru were destined for Brazil and Argentina (some going onwards to Europe) or Chile (and onwards to Asia and Australasia).

including the construction of 135 new schools, 32 medical centres, and 803km of asphalt roads, along with other basic infrastructure development in the Vraem, an area comprising some 35,000km² spread across 69 municipalities taking in parts of five regions (Apurímac, Ayacucho, Cusco, Huancavelica, and Junín).

Speaking during a foreign press conference on 27 November, Vargas said that the objective of the Plan Vraem was to reduce poverty, and improve education, healthcare, and road infrastructure to provide better opportunities for local farmers to access national and international markets. He said it aimed to apply some of the strategies applied in the Alto Huallaga valley (where SL was vanquished in 2012), incentivising coca growers to produce alternative crops, such as coffee and cacao to satisfy increasing foreign demand for single origin, premium quality beans.

This will be a major undertaking. The Vraem is a remote area with little state presence. It is the largest coca-producing area in Peru, with an estimated 20,500 hectares given over to the crop's cultivation. Vargas ruled out forced eradication of coca in the Vraem because of the security threat posed by the 250-strong SL remnant under the Quispe Palomino brothers.

The density of plantations and higher yield of the bushes in the Vraem means potential cocaine production is significantly higher here than elsewhere in the country. In spite of this, Vargas took issue with a report released earlier this month by the US Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), which asserted that cocaine production in Peru increased to "the highest level in 25 years" in 2017, rising 20% on the previous year to 491 tonnes (t), with coca cultivation up by 13% "driven by increased production in the...Vraem".

Vargas said that estimates of potential cocaine production differed markedly but, in his view, Peru was producing around 400 tonnes of cocaine a year. He said that the ONDCP report had not taken into account the legal market administered by Peru's Empresa Nacional de la Coca (Enaco) for the traditional use of coca, which consumes 11,000 tonnes of coca per year.

TRACKING TRENDS

PERU | Budget proposal. On 28 November Peru's finance & economy minister, Carlos Oliva, presented the government's proposed 2019 draft budget to the national legislature. The draft budget is for PEN168bn (US\$49.8bn) up 6.9% on the 2018 budget.

According to Oliva, the budget has as its main objectives maintaining a responsible fiscal policy, stimulating domestic economic growth, assuring efficient use of resources, and strengthening the national decentralisation process.

Of the total, around 29% will go on education and health spending. According to a press release from the economy & finance ministry (MEF), education will be assigned PEN30.6bn, prioritising the increase in pay to teachers (which will account for PEN820m) followed by the budget for public universities (PEN452m) and maintenance of schools (PEN366m). The MEF points out that the amount of the budget assigned to education will increase to 3.8% from 3.7% of GDP.

As for health spending, the budget assigns PEN18.2bn. Other priorities include reconstruction for areas affected by the 'El Niño Costero' weather phenomenon last year – which will be assigned PEN7bn. As regards decentralisation, 30% of the budget will go to regional and local governments, with a further PEN6bn to be transferred from the national government over the course of the year. The MEF highlights that in 2019 regional and local government will have the biggest budget in history (PEN50bn), which is 19% more than this year.

Deforestation

Amid fears that President-elect Jair Bolsonaro will dismantle environmental protection laws, Brazil's environment ministry announced that the country has suffered its worst levels of deforestation in 10 years. A total area of 7,900km² was deforested between August 2017 and July 2018, a 13.7% increase on the area of deforestation in the previous year. Despite this, a recent UN report notes that Brazil is one of only three countries in the world on track to meet its nationally determined contributions (NDCs, efforts to reduce national emissions established as part of the Paris Agreement), if current policies are not rolled back.

Araújo's anti-Marxist agenda

Gazeta do Povo, a Brazilian weekly, published an op-ed on 26 November by the future foreign minister, Ernesto Araújo. In it, Araújo does not outline what he sees as key areas of Brazilian foreign policy. Rather, he defends the mandate given to him by President-elect Jair Bolsonaro to "free" Itamaraty (the foreign ministry) of the ideology of "cultural Marxism" supposedly imposed by years of leftist Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) governments.

Bolsonaro's choice of foreign minister reflects his own open admiration of US President Donald Trump and virulent criticism of the PT. Araújo, whose appointment was confirmed on 14 November, is the author of a blog in which he has fiercely criticised the PT, cultural Marxism, and globalism. He occupies a mid-level diplomatic position within Itamaraty, where his writings have cemented his position as a pro-Trump anti-globalist.

Throughout his campaign and since being elected, Bolsonaro has made a number of controversial foreign policy-related announcements [WR-18-44], such as saying he plans to move Brazil's embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. If any more signs were needed of the president-elect's intention to rupture with Brazil's traditional foreign policy stance, Araújo provides them.

In his article, Araújo defends a foreign policy turned towards the Brazilian people and representative of the elected head of state. He criticises the hermetic diplomatic status quo, in which representatives abroad ignore their own people and "ask themselves, scared: 'What are the UN officials going to think of me, what is the *New York Times* going to say of me, what are *The Guardian* and *Le Monde* going to say?'" This dismissive tone echoes Bolsonaro's past attacks on the foreign media and international institutions – he has been known to call the United Nations (UN) "useless" and a hotbed of communists, although his tone has been more moderate since being elected.

To free Itamaraty from the PT's ideology means ridding it of cultural Marxism, an insidious ideology which has penetrated and controls public discourse and social life, writes Araújo. Paradoxically, he defends the poor Brazilians who feel neglected by the powers that be, arguing for their inclusion in foreign policy considerations, while also criticising his imaginary Brazilian reader for supposed questioning and ignorance of the ideological issues he is discussing.

Araújo's piece reads overall as a tirade against those who doubt his credentials as foreign minister. However, some points give cause for concern. He lists "climate alarmism", "anti-Christian and pro-abortion agendas", and "the destruction of the identity of peoples through unlimited immigration" as some of the Marxist elements that he must combat within Itamaraty. In policy terms, this would mean reneging on Brazil's international commitments to human rights, to sustainable development, and to combating climate change.

The latter appears to be happening already. On 27 November, the Brazilian government retracted its offer to host the 25th Conference of the Parties (COP25) UN climate talks in 2019, citing budget restrictions and the government transition process. Bolsonaro has in the past said that he would take Brazil out of the Paris Agreement – he has since backtracked, but he still supports opening up protected areas of the Amazon forest to mining and infrastructure projects, and makes no secret of his dislike of climate activists. Brazilian NGO Observatório do Clima described the announcement as "regrettable but unsurprising".

The battle for the national education system

Enem

Jair Bolsonaro has said that as president he will ask to see the questions of Brazil's national high school exam (Enem) before they are set, following his criticism of this year's paper which referred to the "secret dialect of gays and trans people" in a question on linguistics. Bolsonaro said that discussions on "gender ideology" had no place in schools, and is backed on this by his designated education minister, who sees the Enem as a vehicle for indoctrination. Bolsonaro's suggestion that he might see and vet the Enem's questions has been criticised by much of the education sector.

The appointment of Brazil's future education minister on 22 November came amid rumours that the evangelical caucus in congress was exercising its influence to dictate President-elect Jair Bolsonaro's choice. Bolsonaro denies this, but there is no doubt that Ricardo Vélez Rodríguez, his chosen appointee, aligns with the views and values of the most socially conservative members of the president-elect's support base.

Vélez, a Colombian naturalised Brazilian, is a philosopher, university professor, and author. In many of his texts, including in a personal blog, he has criticised the political Left, particularly the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), and the infiltration of Marxist ideology within Brazil's education system. The striking similarities with designated foreign minister Ernesto Araújo's discourse (*see previous article*) are unsurprising considering both names were reportedly suggested to Bolsonaro by Olavo de Carvalho, a conservative and controversial philosopher and essayist who considers that Brazil's education system and media are dominated by communist ideology.

The choice of Vélez over a more moderate candidate shows that education is an area in which Bolsonaro will stand by his more extreme and controversial views, and continue exploiting the culture wars that divide Brazil's population down moral and ideological lines.

'Escola sem Partido'

Vélez is a proponent of the 'Escola sem Partido', a movement which promotes "education without indoctrination" amid its concern over what it calls the politico-ideological contamination of Brazilian schools. The movement supported Bolsonaro's presidential campaign – a campaign which relied, in part, on moralistic discourses about values and scare-mongering reports (often fake or exaggerated) about left-wing indoctrination in schools, such as the teaching of so-called gender ideology.

The movement is behind a draft bill, also known as 'Escola sem Partido', which has been debated in the federal chamber of deputies since 2014. It outlines teachers' duties, under which they cannot dispense ideological, political, or partisan teachings. It also proposes the suppression of lessons about gender or sexual orientation, and would ensure that the content of lessons does not go against parents' moral and religious convictions. If passed into law, it would affect all levels of Brazil's education system, from primary schools to universities. The vote in the chamber of deputies has been repeatedly obstructed and postponed due to disagreements between legislators, but the topical discussion is back on the table and a special commission could now vote on it within the next few weeks.

Although the bill finds support amongst many social conservatives, including the evangelical caucus in congress, it also faces strong opposition both in and out of congress, particularly in light of Vélez's appointment.

This week, a group of 60 Brazilian NGOs and education associations launched a 'Defence handbook against censorship in schools', in response to increased attacks on teachers. Last week, 150 education organisations from 87 countries adopted an emergency motion condemning the 'Escola sem Partido' project. More significantly for Bolsonaro, Antônio Carlos Magalhães Neto, the leader of the Democratas (Dem) party, which is expected to be his ally in congress, opposes the project, saying that to monitor and censor all teachers because of the occasional militant one is "unreasonable".

Searching for a superfinal venue

In a statement Conmebol said that it had decided that the Libertadores final cannot be held in Argentina and that it was looking for a city in another country to host the game on either 8 or 9 December. Numerous cities including Doha, Abu Dhabi, Santiago de Chile, and Medellín have expressed an interest in hosting the event. However, as Conmebol has said that it will assume the travelling and accommodation costs for both teams, Asunción is being considered as a viable option (Conmebol headquarters are located in Paraguay's capital). Yet this has sparked questions about the Paraguayan authorities' capacity to provide full security guarantees, with observers noting that Paraguay's record of combating violence in football is not much better than Argentina's.

Inequality in Brazil

"We see important achievements being dismantled and the harbinger of a period of growing poverty and inequalities in the country," reads the opening paragraph of a report published by NGO Oxfam Brasil on 26 November. Entitled 'A stagnant country: a portrait of Brazilian inequalities', the report reveals that Brazil, infamous for its high levels of inequality, saw its ranking slip from 10th to 9th most unequal country in the world in 2017 (in terms of income distribution).

According to the data collected by Oxfam Brasil, 2017 was the first time in the last 15 years that Brazil's Gini coefficient (a measure of inequality) stopped decreasing from one year to the next. Income inequality for women and blacks has increased. In 2016, on average women earned 72% of a male salary. This dropped to 70% in 2017. The racial pay gap is much greater. Black people earned on average 57% of what white people did in 2016, and only 53% in 2017.

Other indicators are also worsening. The number of Brazilians living in poverty has increased for three years in a row. In 2017, 15m Brazilians lived on US\$1.9 or less a day (7.2% of the population), up from 13.3m (6.5% of the population) in 2016.

While poverty is increasing, the rich are getting richer. In 2017, the labour income of the poorest 50% of the population fell by 3.5%, and their overall income declined by 1.6%. At the same time, the richest 10% saw their labour income increase by 6%, and their overall income grow by 2%.

Tackling these levels of inequality will be a major challenge for the incoming government led by President-elect Jair Bolsonaro, although there is concern that it is not high on his agenda. Oxfam Brasil recommends a number of measures including raising the minimum wage, putting in place policies against racial and gender discrimination, implementing a tax reform which raises income tax and inheritance tax, and increasing social spending. While Bolsonaro is committed to stimulating economic growth and lowering unemployment, he has also said that he wants to cut state spending and dismisses policies aimed at reducing gender and racial inequality.

ARGENTINA | SECURITY

Football violence mars G-20 summit

It was supposed to be the final to end all finals. For the first time in the tournament's 58-year history Club Atlético River Plate and Club Atlético Boca Juniors, Argentina's most popular football teams, were due to play each other in a decisive second leg of the Copa Libertadores de América regional club football competition. The match, due to be played in Buenos Aires on 24 November, was meant to showcase the best of Argentine and South American football. However, the game had to be suspended following a violent incident involving local hooligans ('barras bravas'). The episode, which made headlines around the world, has raised serious questions about the Argentine authorities' ability to maintain peace and order in general and to guarantee public security during the upcoming G-20 heads of state summit due to be held in Buenos Aires from 30 November to 1 December in particular.

Violence among football fans has become such a big problem in Argentina that away fans have been banned from attending games since 2013. These rules applied to the first leg of the Libertadores final played at Boca's 'La Bombonera' stadium on 11 November (in which the teams drew 2-2). They were also in place ahead of the second leg (dubbed 'superfinal') due to be played at River's 'Monumental' stadium, with the Argentine authorities adamant that this was necessary to prevent violence between the fans from the fierce rivals. However, not even these precautions were enough to stop the River barra bravas.

Terrorist threat?

Concerns about a potential terrorist attack during the G-20 summit in Buenos Aires were heightened on 15 November when Argentine police announced the arrest of two individuals suspected of having links with the Lebanese Islamist militant group Hezbollah. The police said that Argentine nationals, brothers Axel Ezequiel Abraham Salomon and Kevin Gamal Abraham Salomon, were arrested during a raid on their home in the Buenos Aires suburb of Floresta, where firearms, ammunitions, and knives were found. Lawyers for the the Salomons have denied that their clients have any links to Hezbollah and said that the weapons found belonged to their grandfather, a former member of the military. They have accused the Argentine government of persecuting the brothers for being Muslim.

As the Boca team bus approached the Monumental stadium it was met by heckling from River barra bravas. The scene quickly descended into violence as the barra bravas began throwing stones, bottles, and even bricks at the Boca bus, breaking some of its windows. It was then that the anti-riot police stationed outside the stadium acted and used tear gas and pepper spray to disperse the barra bravas and allow the Boca bus to leave the area (some 30 people were arrested during the unrest). The authorities then decided to postpone the game to prevent any more violence. Later Boca reported that some of its players had been injured in the incident sustaining cuts when the windows of the bus were shattered, while some suffered the effects of being exposed to tear gas.

Fallout

Following the incident, the South American football confederation (Conmebol) sought to reschedule the game for 25 November. But Boca refused on the grounds that the Argentine authorities were unable to offer full security guarantees. Eventually Conmebol agreed with Boca and on 27 November it issued a statement saying that the game could not be played in Argentina as there were no full security guarantees and that it was in discussions with both Boca and River to try to find a new venue for the final outside of Argentina (*see sidebar*).

At the domestic political level, the episode sparked recriminations between the federal and Buenos Aires City authorities. The federal security minister, Patricia Bullrich, heavily criticised the security operation put in place by the municipal authorities ahead of the superfinal. Federal security forces were deployed in support of the Buenos Aires municipal police during, but the operation was led by the municipal authorities. Yet the municipal security minister, Martín Ocampo, complained of a lack of support for the municipal police force from the federal security forces and a lack of coordination.

Offering assurances

In the end, Ocampo assumed the political responsibility for the security failures and he tendered his resignation on 26 November defusing the tensions that had emerged between the government led by President Mauricio Macri and the municipal administration led by his political ally Horacio Rodríguez Larreta. But Ocampo's departure did not dispel the concerns about the security forces' ability to carry out a successful public security operation and contain violence. Instead, the episode led to serious questions being asked about Argentina's readiness to hold a major international event due to be attended by world leaders.

The upcoming G-20 summit is the first to be hosted in South America and the Macri government had hoped that the event would help to enhance its international image. So, government officials have been at pains to ease concerns about a major potential security breach during the summit. Bullrich has been adamant that the security operation for the G-20 will be led by the federal not the municipal security forces and that this should ensure that it is better organised. Bullrich said the deployment of 13,400 federal security officers, and 9,000 provincial and municipal security officers, as well as fighter jets, anti-aircraft guns, and even a navy destroyer positioned in the mouth of the River Plate would be "adequate". Bullrich added that "Argentina will show the world that it is ready [to host the G-20]".

Meanwhile, Hernán Lombardi, the man in charge of organising the G-20 summit, told the Argentine media that the security preparations ahead of the event had been going well and that the authorities from the various countries were all cooperating to provide security. In particular, Lombardi said that Argentina's federal security forces were already coordinating their

Aerolíneas

Argentina's transport minister, Guillermo Dietrich, said that the current government's objective is to reduce subsidies gradually and force Aerolíneas to become a competitive firm, noting that in 2016 Aerolíneas received US\$380m in subsidies from the state but that this was reduced to US\$180m in 2017 and the plan was for this not to exceed US\$100m this year. However, Dietrich said that the government had to inject an additional US\$32m into Aerolíneas this month to help ease financial pressures, which has taken the total subsidies received by the firm this year to US\$197m.

actions with armed forces from the likes of the US, China, Russia, and France, which are all deploying sizable contingents to the event. However, the fact that the Argentine government failed to reach an agreement with civil-society groups (local and foreign) planning to stage demonstrations during the G-20 summit over security protocols, will have fuelled concerns that it could be marred by scenes of violent street protests, that could prove to be worse than those at last year's summit held in Hamburg, Germany.

CHILE | POLITICS & SECURITY

Security forces pose problems for Piñera

Still wrestling with the fallout from the killing of a Mapuche youth by the Carabineros militarised police, Chile's President Sebastián Piñera is now being forced to confront a serious corruption scandal within the army.

On 25 November Mapuche leaders announced a month of protest actions over the killing of Camilo Catrillanca in a botched operation in the southern region of La Araucanía [WR-18-46]. They also conditioned an eventual dialogue process with President Piñera on the withdrawal of the 80-strong Comando Jungla unit from the region, and the resignations of the interior minister, Andrés Chadwick, and the Carabineros director, General Hermes Soto.

Piñera will not cede to this pressure but he was dealt a blow by congress on 28 November when the senate gave final approval to his government's US\$73.47bn budget for 2019 (up 3.2% on 2018) but withheld the Cl\$500m (US\$740,000) and US\$90,000 in special expenses for the Carabineros, granting them a symbolic one peso and one dollar instead. The senate president, Carlos Montes of the opposition Partido Socialista (PS), said this was designed to send "a very clear message" that the Carabineros required profound reform.

On the same day the commander-in-chief of the army, Ricardo Martínez, was hauled before the defence commission of the lower chamber to clarify his comments on 20 November to some 900 members of the army at the military academy in Santiago (leaked to the online publication The Clinic) that rogue officials within the institution have been registering legally procured weapons as lost while selling them illegally to drug-trafficking organisations and other criminal groups. Martínez seemed most concerned about the leaked audio recording, saying "tomorrow it could be a secret document, plan, or action that could seriously damage the state".

TRACKING TRENDS

ARGENTINA | Aerolíneas Argentinas. Argentina's transport minister, Guillermo Dietrich, said on 22 November that the state-owned national carrier airline Aerolíneas Argentinas was on the verge of bankruptcy. Dietrich's revelation came after the Aerolíneas workers' unions called for an indefinite strike starting on 26 November over pay. Speaking at a press conference, Dietrich urged the unions to call off the strike, which follows three 24-hour strikes already held this month, arguing that the firm simply does not have the resources to meet their demands.

"Aerolíneas, a firm that systematically loses money, is technically bankrupt... if it were not partly subsidised by the state... salaries would not get paid," Dietrich said (see sidebar). He urged the unions to reflect on this and on the fact that a strike would "only cost the firm more money", while complaining that "it is almost impossible to advance any dialogue with the unions over how to improve productivity at Aerolíneas". Dietrich's calls fell on deaf ears. The strike went ahead as planned, with Aerolíneas forced to cancel 371 flights on 26 November, affecting 40,000 passengers.

Boosting ties with Spain**Investment and trade**

According to the Spanish government, some 200 Spanish companies are currently active in Cuba – the highest number of foreign companies.

Meanwhile, Spain's foreign trade institute (Icex) reports that Cuba was Spain's second-biggest market in Latin America & the Caribbean for exports in 2017 (worth €899m) after Mexico (€4.6bn) although this was down from the record €964m in 2015. Meanwhile, Cuba's exports to Spain totalled some €170m situating Cuba as Spain's 12th-largest source of imports from Latin America.

Pedro Sánchez last week became the Spanish first prime minister to visit Cuba since 1986. While the focus of Sánchez's visit was to boost bilateral trade and investment, it also serves as the latest sign of stronger ties between Cuba and the European Union (EU) which have gathered pace since their official relaunch in 2016.

A press release by the Spanish government issued on 22 November, the first day of the two-day visit, noted that Sánchez and Cuba's President Miguel Díaz-Canel signed two Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) – one establishing a mechanism of political consultations and another regarding cultural cooperation. However, the focus of his trip seemed to be trade and investment. According to the government press release, Sánchez inaugurated a new Hispanic-Cuban business forum, tasked with analysing possibilities for business cooperation in sectors such as infrastructure, renewable energy, tourism, and investment.

As regards concrete agreements, the Spanish government has since announced plans to offer better access to finance for Spanish companies looking to invest in Cuba, through the relaunch of a €40m (US\$45m) loan from Spain's development finance institution (Cofides). Also announced was an agreement inked by the Cuban government and Spanish company Kodysa for the production of fresh chicken in Cuba: Kodysa will supply at least 25% of Cuba's total needs, with an investment of some US\$50m as well as the potential participation of Spanish companies in infrastructure projects in strategic sectors. These include the participation of Spain's state-owned airport operator AENA in the modernisation and management of four airports on the island; the rollout of telecommunications and internet networks by Spanish multinational telecoms company Telefónica; and the participation of the shipping company Elcano in a project to supply Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) in Cuba's Mariel special development area.

As well as signalling closer bilateral relations between Cuba and Spain, Sánchez's visit – the first by an EU leader since Díaz-Canel took over the presidency in April – follows other signs of closer Cuba-EU ties since their official relaunch in 2016. Back in May 2018 the first-ever meeting of the EU-Cuba Joint Council took place where those present agreed to implement the political dialogue and cooperation agreement in place provisionally since November 2017. This cooperation is being underpinned by five sectoral dialogues: countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; controlling conventional arms and combating the illicit traffic of small arms; dealing with unilateral coercive measures; implementing the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; and human rights.

Counterpart fund

The Cuban and Spanish leaders also discussed the functioning of the Counterpart Fund, set up three years ago under the December 2015 framework deal between Cuba and the Paris Club of creditors, under which Cuba and 14 Paris Club countries agreed to restructure US\$11.1bn in debt outstanding since Cuba's cessation of payments to the Club in 1986. The Club agreed to condone US\$8.5bn of the total, with the remaining US\$2.6bn to be repaid at revised terms over 18 years. Spain, one of the largest investors in Cuba, was the key architect of the Paris Club deal. According to the Spanish government, during Sánchez's visit, the Cuban government "undertook to give a firm boost to the fund" so that it can be an effective instrument in financing large investment projects in strategic sectors carried out by Spanish companies.

Partido Liberal decimated

It is not just President Hernández who has endured a challenging week.

The disciplinary tribunal of the opposition Partido Liberal (PL) expelled 17 congressional deputies from the party. At a stroke this reduced the PL presence in the 128-seat legislative assembly by nearly two-thirds. The party now has just nine deputies. The 17 deputies expelled from the PL's ranks were accused of acting in "an illegal and arbitrary way", ignoring a party resolution for them to oppose the election of an auditing council for the national registry of persons in a congressional vote in September, and, as such, serving the PN government.

Hernández has little cause for celebration on anniversary

It has been a tumultuous week for Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández. While protests detracted from the first anniversary of his controversial electoral victory on 26 November, on the eve of this milestone, his brother Juan Antonio was arrested in the US accused of drug trafficking, which he described as "a heavy blow for the family". To top it off, corruption allegations were levelled against Hernández.

Police fired tear gas to disperse protesters led by former president Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009), the general coordinator of the main opposition Partido Libertad y Refundación (Libre), who attempted to approach the presidential palace in Tegucigalpa to accuse Hernández of "electoral fraud" this time last year. Protesters then turned to burning tyres in the streets.

This has been fairly standard fare for Hernández over the course of the last year since his dubious re-election. More alarming was the arrest of his brother, a congressional deputy for the ruling Partido Nacional (PN) until last year. Juan Antonio Hernández was charged on 26 November with conspiring to bring tonnes of cocaine to the US, based on plea-bargain testimony provided by a former leader of the Honduran drug trafficking organisation Los Cachiros, Devis Leonel Rodríguez Maradiaga.

President Hernández reacted to the arrest of his brother by insisting that he had always maintained that nobody is above the law and he had told all his friends and family never to approach him with illicit proposals as he would not support them. It was with these remarks echoing in the public's ears that the Honduran head of state was accused of directing "a criminal organisation" through his late sister Hilda, who served as agriculture minister until January 2017 when she resigned to work on his re-election campaign.

The accusation was made by the lawyer of Fernando Suárez, who has been charged along with 37 others, including another former agriculture minister Jacobo Regalado and several deputies, in the so-called 'Pandora case' [[WR-18-45](#)]. This involves the alleged embezzlement of L\$282m (US\$11.7m) from the agriculture ministry, and several state institutions, including the legislative assembly, to finance the electoral campaigns of the PN and the opposition Partido Liberal (PL) in 2013.

Hernández challenged "anyone who has proof" of his involvement in corruption to go to "the competent authorities". Hernández told a PN convention on 24 November that he would not seek an elected post after his term ends in 2022 but would rather provide an unpaid advisory role for mayors, deputies, or presidential aspirants.

NICARAGUA | POLITICS

Preparing for another controversial vote

Nicaragua's opposition parties have all announced their intention of running in the March 2019 regional elections scheduled for the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (Raan) and South Atlantic Autonomous Region (Raas) on the remote, largely indigenous, Caribbean coast. This ends speculation as to whether they would boycott the vote given widespread concerns about the independence of the electoral authorities (CSE) and the political crisis afflicting the country.

US sanctions

On 27 November the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) imposed sanctions on two of Ortega's closest associates – Vice President and First Lady Rosario Murillo and Néstor Moncada, his national security adviser. According to an OFAC statement, while Moncada is being designated for acting for or on behalf of Murillo, the First Lady is described as a leader with access and influence over the FSLN's youth organisation, known as the Sandinista Youth, and the national police (NNP), both of which have been flagged up by international human rights organisations for engaging in "serious human rights abuses".

The elections are being held to select 45 councillors in each region which, combined, account for 48% of Nicaragua's national territory. In the last such election, which took place in 2014, the ruling Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) maintained control over the Raan, securing 52% of the vote ahead of the local indigenous party Yatama (a former FSLN ally), which ended up with 21%. The FSLN also claimed victory in the Raas, traditionally a stronghold of the opposition Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), taking 48% of the vote to 19% for the PLC. This provided the ruling party with a 23-seat majority for the first time in both regions.

As well as the FSLN, the PLC and other opposition parties like Ciudadanos por la Libertad (CXL) and Alianza por la República (Apré) have registered candidates ahead of the 20 November deadline, while Yatama has said it will participate but "under protest".

Preparations for the elections are taking place against the backdrop of the country's political crisis which continues to attract international concern. Most recently, on 23 November, the spokesperson for the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Liz Throssell, expressed "deep concern" at reports that Nicaraguan authorities are continuing to criminalise the "legitimate actions of social leaders" and others associated with the protests.

Throssell noted that over the "past 10 days, two prominent leaders of the country's peasant movement are reported to have been detained". The OHCHR statement also notes government figures which show some 273 individuals were being held in connection with the protests as of 5 November, although it flags up civil-society figures which suggest at least 586 people are currently being detained.

Throssell added that the number of demonstrations has "declined dramatically in recent months" but far from being a sign of returning normality, "we fear that the authorities' actions have deterred people from engaging in demonstrations, severely restricting the exercise of the right to peaceful protest". According to the latest figures released by the local human rights NGO ANPDH, on 23 November, 545 people have been killed and 4,533 injured in the long-running protests.

EL SALVADOR | POLITICS & JUSTICE

Key judicial posts filled

After nearly four months of delay, El Salvador's 84-member legislature has elected four new magistrates for the five-member constitutional chamber (SC) of the supreme court (CSJ), along with one new magistrate to the civil chamber, for nine-year terms. Widely viewed as having defended due process and the rule of law, as well as issuing various emblematic rulings, the outgoing four SC justices (nicknamed the 'Fantastic Four') had been uncharacteristically independent, proving a thorn in the side of both the ruling left-wing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) and the main right-wing opposition Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Arena). Given this, the appointments of their replacements came under considerable scrutiny.

The 'Fantastic Four' (Belarmino Jaime, Florentín Meléndez, Sidney Blanco, and Rodolfo González), whose mandates concluded at the end of July 2018, had delivered some ground-breaking rulings which at times resulted in

Complaints concerning Meléndez

In its statement released on 5 November Asgoju also complains that the attorney general's office has failed to do enough to go after other Arena officials such as the country's former vice president Ana Vilma de Escobar (2004-2009). De Escobar has been implicated in a corruption case known as Fecepe (a special fund set up under former president Saca for the creation of jobs in strategic productive sectors) related to the alleged mismanagement of over US\$30m.

clashes with other branches of government. These included the July 2016 decision to overturn the 1993 Amnesty Law, which had prevented prosecutions of grave human rights abuses or war crimes committed during the country's 1980-1992 civil war. They also challenged the excessive power traditionally exercised by the main political parties' leadership committees over the country's political system through rulings such as that issued in 2010 which paved the way for independent candidates to stand in municipal and legislative elections and ended the much-criticised practice of closed-list ballots.

Electing their replacements was bound to be contentious in the legislature where the FMLN has just 23 seats to 37 for Arena. The choices were made from a list of 30 candidates, half of whom were proposed by the law association (Fedaes) and the other half from the national judicial council (CNJ), an autonomous state institution charged with judicial training and review.

After a long impasse the FMLN and Arena, along with the smaller parties, Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (Gana), Partido de Concertación Nacional (PCN), Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC), and Cambio Democrático (CD), finally approved the choices of Aldo Cader, Carlos Avilés, Marina Marenco de Torrento, and Carlos Sánchez for the SC, along with Roberto Calderón for the civil chamber. The breakthrough occurred when the FMLN and Gana stopped insisting on the appointment to the SC of current procurator general Sonia Cortez (who reportedly scored poorly on rankings done by civil-society groups monitoring the election). Instead she was chosen as an alternate.

Speculation persists as to how far the new justices will continue in the pioneering footsteps of their predecessors. Yet Leonardo Bonilla, the only independent deputy in the legislative assembly, condemned the election for "lacking transparency", complaining that the decisions took place behind closed doors and through agreements which were hidden from the public.

Another post pending

As well as the need to fill the vacant posts on the SC, another appointment which has attracted considerable attention is that to replace the attorney general, Douglas Meléndez, whose three-year term concludes in January 2019. Under the watch of Meléndez, a career lawyer with no overt party-political affiliation, significant progress has been made in anti-impunity efforts – not least the unprecedented conviction for corruption earlier this year of former president Tony Saca (Arena, 2004-2009).

Yet on 5 November the Alianza Social por la Gobernabilidad y la Justicia (Asgoju), a group of local NGOs, urged the unicameral legislature not to re-elect Meléndez, complaining that he has not done enough with regard to investigating corruption involving past and present Arena members. Saca, who received a 10-year prison sentence, parted ways with Arena after the 2009 general election and founded Gana.

In its statement, Asgoju complained that the attorney general failed to provide sufficient proof with regard to a case involving relatives of the late president Francisco Flores (Arena, 1999-2004), accused of embezzling US\$15m of donations provided by Taiwan for victims of the 2001 earthquake in El Salvador. Flores died of a brain haemorrhage in January 2016 shortly before he could stand trial. Earlier this year, the supreme court (CSJ) ruled that his relatives did not have to pay back the funds.

The FMLN has already made it clear that it will back Meléndez, who has also been key to efforts to bring former president Mauricio Funes (FMLN, 2009-2014), accused of embezzlement and money laundering, to justice. Meanwhile, prominent members of Arena such as the president of the legislative assembly, Norman Quijano, have indicated that they will support Meléndez's re-election. A total of 33 candidates have registered to participate in the election. They will then be considered by a congressional committee before being voted upon by the full plenary.

Quotes of the week

“If we are not able to raise our voice now there is an enormous risk that the voice of the regions, states, and municipalities in this country will be erased forever.”

Enrique Alfaro, the governor-elect of the Mexican state of Jalisco, accuses the incoming president Andrés Manuel López Obrador of seeking to create parallel structures to control all levels of government.

“Are you against ideology [in Brazilian foreign policy]? ...To cure the illness it is not enough that we hate it; it is necessary to understand its causes and manifestations, its strategies and disguises.”

Brazil's incoming foreign minister Ernesto Araújo.

“The fire of war is being extinguished in Colombia. But we still have some burning logs. [President Iván] Duque has to decide whether to throw water or fuel on them.”

Léon Valencia, director of Colombia's Fundación Paz y Reconciliación.

Developing an action plan to deal with Venezuelan exodus

Representatives from eight Latin American countries this week signed a declaration under which they agreed to develop a joint action plan to deal with the mass movement of Venezuelans escaping the social, economic, and political crisis in their home country and seeking refuge in neighbouring nations. The move highlights just how much of a problem this exodus has become for the region and the growing need to find a concerted solution to the humanitarian crisis it has created.

The declaration was issued following the second international technical meeting on the Venezuelan migration phenomenon staged in Quito, Ecuador, on 22 and 23 November. Thirteen countries attended the meeting in which they all once again discussed the problems that the mass arrival of Venezuelan migrants seeking asylum has been producing in their national territories. While all the attendees agreed that they required assistance from international organisations, such as the United Nations (UN) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), to help deal with the emergency, eight of them – Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay – signed a declaration under which they agreed to work more closely together to offer assistance and facilitate the movement of Venezuelan migrants in their national territories.

Santiago Chávez, Ecuador's deputy human mobility minister, said that the eight signatory countries had agreed to reinforce the initiatives that each of them have implemented to allow Venezuelan migrants to become socially and economically integrated.

Chávez explained that this involves a commitment by each signatory country to implement a 'migratory status regularisation programme' for Venezuelan refugees, with the assistance of the UN, to ensure that refugees (which the UN estimates now number 3m) are properly recorded and tended to. Chávez explained that this would then allow host countries to request funding from international donors more appropriately to help the refugees and ease the financial pressures under which their governments have fallen. The declaration calls for any initiatives adopted under the joint action plan to be evaluated in a third international technical meeting, and for all other meeting attendees that did not sign up to the joint action plan – Brazil, Mexico, Panama, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic – to do so as soon as possible.

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