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FEATURED Q&A

Is Duque Setting the Best Course for Colombia's Security?



Colombian President Iván Duque visited the Tolemaida military base earlier this month. // Photo: @IvanDuque via Twitter.

Q On Feb. 6, Colombian President Iván Duque announced a new hardline security policy that bans bilateral ceasefires, pledging to preserve the country's military options so as "not to allow violence and terror to be methods to gain any rights and privileges." Bilateral ceasefires had been used by the previous administration to foster peace talks with the National Liberation Army, or ELN, rebel group and the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, guerrillas. The new strategy also calls for a million Colombians to join a "citizens' network" that would inform on illegal activity and support the military and police. A day later, the ELN released a Colombian soldier, the fourth hostage it let go in less than a week. How well is Duque's government responding to guerrilla violence in Colombia? What are the most important parts of the new security policy, and what consequences will it have? Are the ELN and Colombian officials headed to the negotiating table any time soon?

A Humberto de la Calle, former vice president, interior minister and chief negotiator in the peace process with the FARC in Colombia: "After a significant improvement in security figures, particularly in the areas of homicides and kidnappings, concerns and threats that were believed to have been overcome have emerged. This has led the Colombian president to prepare a security policy that focuses on several points: first, citizen participation, by creating a civilian network made up of one million informants. Second is allowing for the carrying of weapons—the Ministry of Defense has been authorized to apply exceptions to the ban on private individuals' weapons. Third is

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Venezuela Closes Border With Brazil

The move came less than 48 hours before an opposition-set deadline for the armed forces to allow in international aid from collection points in at least three neighboring countries.

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Mexico Fuel Theft Falls by 72 Percent

Over the past two months of a major crackdown on organized criminals tapping state-run fuel pipelines, approximately \$40 million have been saved, the government said.

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POLITICAL

Ortega Calls for New Talks With Opposition

More than six months after breaking off talks with opposition groups following weeks of deadly street riots, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said he will restart talks with his opponents. The new round could begin Wednesday, although Ortega did not say who would be invited.

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Ortega // File Photo: Turkish Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Venezuela Closes Border With Brazil as Aid Deadline Nears

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro said Thursday he had closed his country's border with Brazil indefinitely and was considering an imminent shutdown of the border with Colombia, CNBC reported. The move came less than 48 hours before an opposition-set deadline for Maduro and the armed forces to allow in international aid from collection points in at least three neighboring countries. "It is better to prevent than regret," Maduro said in a televised address from a military base in Caracas. Juan Guaidó, the head of the National Assembly who has claimed the mantle of interim president under the constitution, is en route to the Colombian border with a caravan of volunteers to help bring in the supplies. According to a National Assembly tweet, one of the caravans in San Cristóbal in Táchira State was attacked with blunt objects that put a hole through a bus window and seriously injured the driver. Later today, a concert organized by British billionaire Richard Branson will be held on the Colombian side of the border in a bid

to raise millions of dollars for Venezuelan aid. Concurrently, Maduro's government says it will hold its own event, reportedly within earshot, on the other side of the border. Meanwhile, a former intelligence chief in Venezuela on Thursday turned against Maduro, calling him a dictator with a corrupt inner circle, *The New York Times* reported. Hugo Carvajal, 58, who is a congressman in the governing Socialist Party, urged the military to break with Maduro. He was the head of Venezuelan military intelligence during President Hugo Chávez's government, from 2004 to 2011. In related news, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence will travel to Colombia on Monday to join a meeting of the Lima Group of countries, which is made up of Western Hemisphere nations focused on Venezuela's crisis. "The Vice President will state plainly that the time has come for Nicolas Maduro to step aside," the White House said in a statement. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in yesterday's issue of the Advisor.]

Mexico Fuel Theft Falls by 72 Percent

Mexico's president said on Thursday that the theft of state-owned fuel by organized gangs and petty criminals has been reduced by 72

NEWS BRIEFS

Nicaragua's Ortega Calls for Talks With Opposition

More than six months after breaking off talks with opposition groups following weeks of deadly street riots, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said Thursday he will restart talks with his opponents, the Associated Press reported. A new round of talks could begin as soon as next Wednesday, although Ortega did not say who would be invited. Last year's riots, which left at least 320 people dead and many more imprisoned, sent thousands of Nicaraguans fleeing abroad and severely damaged the Central American country's economy.

Haitian Opposition Calls for New Street Protests

Opposition political parties say they will hold fresh demonstrations across Haiti today to press their demands for the resignation of President Jovenel Moïse, *The Jamaica Observer* reported. At least eight people have been killed in riots and looting since protests broke out Feb. 13 over alleged corruption in Moïse's administration. The U.S. and Canadian embassies were temporarily closed amid the chaos. Last weekend, about 200 demonstrators burned the U.S. flag in Port-au-Prince, calling on Russia to assist Haiti to resolve the crisis.

Ecuador Lays Out Plans for International Loans

Ecuador's finance minister, Richard Martínez, said Thursday he plans to use \$4.2 billion in new International Monetary Fund loans to boost foreign reserves, make changes to the tax regime and optimize government spending, Reuters reported. The Andean nation, which has an annual GDP of about \$100 billion, is also set to receive an additional \$6 billion from other multilateral organizations, which Martínez said will help to build new infrastructure as well as pay for social programs such as pensions for the elderly.

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controlling the consumption of narcotics. The permissiveness of so-called minimum doses has disappeared, and the police is now authorized to confiscate such amounts of drugs. Fourth is harder conditions against the surviving guerrilla—talks with the ELN would only resume if hostilities cease. And fifth, the revision of the agreement ending the conflict with the FARC. It is too early to evaluate the results of this security policy, and there is a division of opinions. There are fears over the possibility of the resurgence of self-defense organizations, as has happened in the past. The difficulty of restarting a dialogue with the ELN is clear, given the government's hardline position. And as for

the FARC, there is a certain degree of uncertainty about the path that the government will take regarding the peace agreement, beyond statements of commitment."

A **María Victoria Lorente, executive director of Fundación Ideas para la Paz in Bogotá:** "President Iván Duque was elected for his tougher rhetoric regarding peace, the drugs problem and the Maduro regime. His defense and security policies respond to such a mandate, although it's clear that the ELN's absurd attack at the police school, which left more than 197 victims, gave a boost to his position's radicalization. The

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percent since he launched a strategy to combat the crime at the end of last year, Agence France-Presse reported. “We’ve achieved a substantial reduction in oil theft. If we continue like this we could save around 50 billion pesos (\$2.6 billion),” President Andrés Manuel López Obrador told reporters. Part of the strategy involved closing major pipelines, from which most of the country’s fuel is transported, leading to shortages and lines at gas stations. Despite the disruptions, a strong majority of the public has backed the president’s strategy, according to a poll by *El Financiero*. Over the past two months of the operation, approximately \$40 million have been saved, according to Octavio Romero, the head of state oil company Pemex. More than 100 people were killed in January when an illegally tapped pipeline exploded. [Editor’s note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Jan. 18 issue of the weekly Energy Advisor.]

BUSINESS NEWS

Two Heckler & Koch Employees Convicted on Mexico Charges

Two former employees of German weapons manufacturer Heckler & Koch were convicted in connection with the delivery of machine guns that ended up in Mexico, *Deutsche Welle* reported Thursday. The employees were found guilty following a 10-month trial, which also ended with the arms manufacturer being fined 3.7 million euros (\$4.2 million), the approximate value of the weapons, which were sent to Mexico between 2006 and 2009 in violation of Germany’s War Weapons Control Act. The employees, who were convicted and given suspended prison sentences in a Stuttgart state court, held largely administrative duties. Three other defendants, two former managers and a deputy sales manager were acquitted, the *Associated Press* reported. Heckler & Koch delivered 4,219 assault rifles, two submachine guns and 1,759 ammunition magazines to Mexico. In a statement responding to the verdict, the company said it would carefully

TECH BRIEFS

IBM to Open AI Research Center in São Paulo

IBM is set to open a research center focused on artificial intelligence, or AI, in the Brazilian city of São Paulo, the U.S.-based company said Monday. The center, which would be the first Latin American hub of IBM’s AI Horizons Network, would be jointly run with the São Paulo Research Foundation, or FAPESP. Over the next 10 years, the Brazilian facility will receive \$20 million in investment from IBM and FAPESP, as well as from academic organizations, the company said. IBM seeks to “create deeper knowledge around the [AI] technology and to develop applications that can be of benefit to the industry,” the statement said, adding that the agribusiness, financial services and health care sectors could benefit most from the research center. The research hub’s areas of interest also include natural language processing, industrial applications of AI and the acceleration of AI-based systems that can process reading, processing and interacting in Portuguese. FAPESP has launched a tender to attract more partners. The chosen projects will be announced in April.

López Obrador to Launch Mobile Banking System

The government of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has announced new measures that seek to make banking more affordable and use financial technologies to lift people out of poverty, *Reuters* reported Tuesday. The government is planning a digital payments system that will allow Mexicans to make and receive payments through their mobile phones without charging a fee. A pilot roll-out of the platform, which would be built and run by the central bank, is expected by March. More than half of Mexico’s population is unbanked. “In the future, it will no longer be necessary to have a bank in the sense of a traditional, established bank,” said Arturo Herrera, Mexico’s deputy finance minister. “Mobile phones will become banks,” he added. The system faces several challenges, including spotty mobile phone and Internet coverage and the lack of basic telecom infrastructure in remote areas.

Argentina Seeks Vietnamese Investment to Digitize

Argentina is seeking Vietnamese investment in its telecommunications sector to improve infrastructure and connectivity, Vietnamese state-run newspaper *Nhân Dân* reported Thursday. At a meeting in Hanoi with Vietnamese minister of information and communication Nguyen Manh Hung, Argentina’s secretary of modernization, Andrés Ibarra, said the South American country is looking to digitize its ministries and businesses. The move would include bringing new technologies across a range of activities, including robots, blockchain and the Internet of things. Ibarra, who visited the Asian country with Argentine President Mauricio Macri, said only nine million Argentines have access to fixed broadband services, while 60 percent of the population uses 4G connectivity on their mobile phones, according to the report.

review the decision, but added that it did “not understand the Court’s decision that we should not only forfeit the profit generated on the Mexico business [deal] but instead forfeit the entire sales price, despite the fact that none of

the directors committed an offence,” *Deutsche Welle* reported. It added that the company has undergone a “rigorous change process” over the past years and has “established new ethical standards.”

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incident precipitated his decision to shutter the dialogue with this group and to take on a questionable position by ignoring protocols agreed to with the ELN in the case of ending negotiations. The perspective that emphasizes terrorist threats and drug trafficking was put forth, one similar to former President Álvaro Uribe's national security focus. Under these conditions, it is unlikely that negotiations with the ELN will resume in what remains of this administration. This is compounded by the decline of the Bolivarian project in the region. A decade ago, when the left was ascending democratically in several Latin American countries, it was strategic for 'chavismo' to demobilize Colombian insurgent groups—that's why Chávez played a key role in getting the peace process with the FARC off the ground. Now, by contrast, it is convenient for the Maduro regime to have the ELN as a destabilizing factor for Colombia. Historically, the ELN has had a rearguard in the neighboring country, which in recent years has strengthened beyond the border zone. In such a context, confrontation with the ELN should be understood as a 'war of proximity,' that exists beyond the border and which will be hard to contain without the cooperation of Venezuela. And let's not forget the FARC dissidents, who operate near the border, and the risk that the former head of the negotiating delegation, Iván Márquez, will abandon the process given the uncertainty caused by the harsh implementation of the peace accords. Peace and stability in Colombia are strongly linked with the development of the Venezuelan crisis, where the alliance between Colombia and the United States will be decisive."

A **Maria Velez de Berliner,** managing director of RTG-Red Team Group, Inc.: "His hard line against the National Liberation Army and his deft handling of Venezuela's implosion so far favor Duque's standing. However, extortion, murders and robberies at knife-point, assaults, recruitment of minors into criminal organizations and other crimes

committed by guerrillas, FARC dissidents and sundry gangs plague urban and rural areas. Insecurity gave Duque the rationale for privatizing sources and methods of police and military functions to nationwide citizens' networks. These networks seem to be feasible in a country known for its weak, corruptible and corrupt police and military, and an overburdened, ineffective and compromised judiciary. However, this outsourcing of security does not bode well for Colombia, with its history of intra-personal and intra-country murderous violence, and a sense of entitlement to personal redress of grievances, threats or wrongs. These unsupervised, unaccountable, self-appointed networks increase the threat and risk of becoming Duque's revived 'Convivir' network

“ This outsourcing of security does not bode well for Colombia.”

— Maria Velez de Berliner

of informants and militias that former President and current Senator Álvaro Uribe formed. 'Convivir' operatives tortured, assassinated and murdered opponents of competing gangs, but also jilted lovers, jealous partners and friends, done-wrong business associates, noisy neighbors and despised groups, just because someone pointed a finger at the victim as an enemy of 'Convivir' or an enemy of or opponent to the government. Duque must decrease criminality and violence nationwide. But Colombia's history of violence and personal betrayal mitigates against citizens' networks being the solution to widespread insecurity. Based on history, an explosion of violence will likely result from this revived version of 'Convivir,' which morphed into the lawless 'Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia,' or AUC—ultimately a powerful cocaine cartel that operated under the protection of some police and military officers."

LATIN AMERICA ADVISOR

is published every business day by the Inter-American Dialogue, Copyright © 2019

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Latin America Advisor is published every business day, except for major U.S. holidays, by the Inter-American Dialogue at 1155 15th Street NW, Suite 800 Washington, DC 20005

www.thedialogue.org

ISSN 2163-7962

Subscription inquiries are welcomed at ebrand@thedialogue.org

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