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FEATURED Q&A

Will Continued Military Policing Work in Mexico?



Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador signed an order to continue the military's role in civilian policing. Members of Mexico's National Guard, which López Obrador created, are pictured above. // File Photo: Mexican Government.

Q Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador this month authorized the country's military to participate in civilian law enforcement for another four years, until March 2024. The move came after Mexico recorded 2,585 murders in March, the highest monthly total since López Obrador took office a year and a half ago. Has López Obrador made the right decision to continue the military's role in civilian policing? Why has the country's homicide rate been increasing? How effective has Mexico's National Guard, which López Obrador created shortly after taking office, been at keeping law and order?

A Andrés Rozental, member of the Advisor board, president of Rozental & Asociados in Mexico City and senior policy advisor at Chatham House: "López Obrador's decision to use Mexico's army and navy as a last-ditch strategy to try to reduce the country's appalling spread of violence and murder is a strange turnaround from his own past record of strongly opposing the same action taken by previous administrations, especially by President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012). Back then, AMLO was violently opposed to having the military on the streets as a replacement for a plethora of corrupt and ineffective civilian police forces at the municipal, state and federal levels, and he made a strong case for improving civilian law enforcement rather than using troops to quell violence, drug trafficking, homicides and other crimes. Now that he is president, AMLO has diametrically changed his view given the dramatic increase in criminality since he took

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Brazil Surpasses 20,000 Deaths From Coronavirus

Brazil's death toll from Covid-19 surpassed 20,000 on Thursday as the country saw its deadliest day during the pandemic. Brazil has the world's third-highest number of confirmed cases.

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BUSINESS

GM to Begin Reopening Plants in Mexico

General Motors said Mexico's government is allowing it to reopen some of its manufacturing facilities in the country that had been closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

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ECONOMIC

Argentine Gov't Extends Deadline in Debt Talks

Argentina's government has agreed to extend a deadline until June 2 as it seeks to renegotiate \$65 billion in debt. Economy Minister Martín Guzmán had said there was a "big chance" today's deadline would be extended.

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Guzmán // File Photo: Argentine Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Brazil Surpasses 20,000 Deaths From Coronavirus

Brazil's reported death toll from Covid-19 surpassed 20,000 on Thursday as the country becomes a world hot spot for the highly contagious disease. The South American nation also experienced 1,188 deaths in a 24-hour period, a new record, the health ministry said, Agence France-Presse reported. The country's number of deaths from coronavirus has also doubled in just 11 days, according to the health ministry. Brazil has the sixth-highest reported death toll in the world from the novel coronavirus and the third-highest number of confirmed cases in the world, at more than 310,000. Only Russia, which has more than 326,000 confirmed cases, and the United States, which has more than 1.5 million, have more, according to Johns Hopkins University. Experts say the actual number of

SUBSCRIBER NOTICE

The Latin America Advisor will not be published on Monday, May 25 in observance of the Memorial Day holiday in the United States. We will resume publishing on Tuesday, May 26.

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office and the relative lack of results from his much-touted National Guard—which in reality is composed of tens of thousands of soldiers and marines presumably under civilian leadership and control. The constitutional change that authorized the National Guard was approved contingent on it being a 'civilian-led body.' However, as of today it hasn't reached anywhere near the proposed levels of recruitment, training, mobility or efficacy in curbing growing criminal activity and violence, which, to a large extent, is a result of AMLO's own ambivalent attitude toward cartels and criminal organizations.

cases in Brazil is likely much higher due to a lack of testing. Despite the mounting number of confirmed cases and deaths, President Jair Bolsonaro has downplayed the threat of the virus and has pushed to end lockdown measures and allow businesses to reopen to revive the country's economy. However, nearly all of Brazil's states are under some type of lockdown order. Hospitals in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro are reaching capacity, and authorities have reportedly been racing to construct field hospitals with more beds for patients. [Editor's note: See the Advisor's [interview](#) on Brazil with Gabrielle Trebat of McLarty Associates.]

ECONOMIC NEWS

Argentine Gov't Extends Deadline in Debt Negotiations

Argentina has extended a critical deadline to reach a deal with international creditors to restructure \$65 billion in foreign debt in a bid to avoid default, CNBC News reported Thursday. The deadline for talks was set to expire today, but the government has agreed to continue negotiations with bondholders through June 2. However, a grace period for a \$500 million group of interest payments on three foreign

It's difficult to forget his motto of 'hugs instead of bullets' when referring to the state's relationship with these groups. Notwithstanding the polemics surrounding the decision, it's interesting to note that in spite of a perceived threat to human rights, current public opinion is overwhelmingly in favor (78 percent) of the decision to use the military for law enforcement as long as it leads to a reduction in threats to people's lives and well-being, and as a last resort to curbing the abominable state of public insecurity in Mexico."

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NEWS BRIEFS

Colombia's Attorney General Orders Arrests of 10 Mayors

Colombia's attorney general's office on Thursday issued arrest warrants for 10 mayors for alleged corruption during the country's coronavirus lockdown, and the country's inspector general is pushing ahead with 512 disciplinary processes involving 26 provincial governments and 271 mayor's offices, Reuters reported. Colombian authorities have found irregularities in the purchases of food and hospital equipment as well as tenders awarded to companies without relevant experience or with political connections, officials said in a virtual press conference.

El Salvador's Bukele Threatens Complaint Against Congress, Courts

Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele has threatened to file a complaint with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights against the country's two other branches of government in a conflict over Bukele's tough coronavirus lockdown policies, the Associated Press reported Thursday. Bukele alleges El Salvador's courts and Congress have "violated the right to health and life [of Salvadorans], by not allowing the government to take the necessary health measures." The Supreme Court and Legislative Assembly have accused the president of exceeding his power amid the pandemic.

Caixa Econômica Federal Reports 22.2% Drop in Net Income for First Quarter

Brazilian state-owned bank Caixa Econômica Federal reported 3.049 billion reais (\$535.62 million) in net income for the first quarter, a 22.2 percent drop as compared to the same period a year ago, Reuters reported. The lender's net interest income declined 13.9 percent year-on-year.

bonds remains due today. If Argentina fails to make the payment, as most analysts expect, it would mark the country's ninth default. Analysts say the impact of such a move will largely depend on the outcome of the restructuring negotiations that were just extended. "Argentina firmly believes that a successful debt restructuring will contribute to stabilizing the current economic condition, alleviating the medium and long-term constraints on Argentina's economy created by its current debt burden and returning the country's economic trajectory to long-term growth," the government said in a statement on Thursday. Creditors have presented the government with counteroffers, after having rejected the country's initial proposal earlier this month. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the May 13 issue of the Advisor.]

BUSINESS NEWS

General Motors to Begin Reopening Plants in Mexico

General Motors said Thursday that the Mexican government is allowing it to reopen some of its plants in the country after the U.S.-based automaker completed a government health and safety questionnaire, the Detroit Free Press reported. The company is opening three assembly plants as well as powertrain and stamping plants that support them, the newspaper reported. Among the facilities reopening is GM's Silao plant, which is one of the largest factories in Guanajuato state. "Having the plant in Silao come back online will help us meet demand for the new product there," GM spokesman Jim Cain told the Free Press. "But those vehicles are built with a lot of U.S. content." GM said that as of Thursday night, it would restart its engines and transmissions manufacturing facilities at Silao as well as at its Ramos Arizpe plant in Coahuila state on Thursday night. GM added that its assembly plants in the two complexes would tentatively restart operations today, depending on their suppliers.

CAPITOL HILL WATCH

A Look at U.S. Congressional Activity on Latin America

González-Colón Expresses Support for Plebiscite on Puerto Rico Statehood

Congresswoman Jenniffer González-Colón (R-P.R.) on May 16 expressed support for a nonbinding referendum to be held in November on whether Puerto Rico should become a U.S. state, *Primera Hora* reported. Governor Wanda Vázquez said her government would schedule the plebiscite, which is to ask one single yes-or-no question as to whether Puerto Rico should be immediately admitted as a state, for Nov. 3. "All the crises we have suffered during this four-year term, the two hurricanes, the earthquakes, Covid-19, the fiscal [issues] demonstrate the urgency for our people to achieve equality with the rest of the states," González-Colón said in a statement. Statehood would require approval from the U.S. Congress. The island has for years been engaged in polarized debates over its territorial status, including through the organization of previous referendums.

Menendez Asks DOJ to Investigate Former Rep. David Rivera as Venezuela Agent

Senator Bob Menendez (D-N.J.), a member of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, on Tuesday asked officials from the Department of Justice to open a probe into whether former Representative David Rivera (R-Fla.) should have registered as an agent of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's government, *The Hill* reported. The U.S. subsidiary of Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA last week sued Rivera, who left the House of Representatives in 2013, over a \$15 million payment allegedly made as part of a \$50 million contract. The lawsuit alleges that Rivera did not deliver on his end of the contract, including a promise to improve PDVSA's reputation within the United States. In a letter to Assistant Attorney General for National Security John Demers, Menendez said the legal action and reports showed Rivera was working on behalf of a foreign agent without the necessary registration under the Foreign Agents Registration Act, or FARA. "I therefore request that the Department of Justice review whether Mr. Rivera was in compliance with FARA, including whether he has an obligation to retroactively register as a foreign agent acting on behalf of the Maduro regime," wrote Menendez.

Representatives Call for Gov't Support to Latinos in the United States Amid Covid-19

U.S. Representatives Sylvia Garcia (D-Tex.), Debbie Mucarsel-Powell (D-Fla.) and Veronica Escobar (D-Tex.) called on the U.S. government to support Latino communities in their states and across the country in an op-ed published May 14 on *CNN en Español*. "This pandemic has exposed the life and death inequalities that Latinos face and that have worsened the impact of the virus for our people," they wrote, citing among such inequalities the disparity in income, a "flawed" immigration system and a lack of access to medical attention.

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A **Evan Ellis, Latin America research professor at the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute:** "The current violence reflects the fragmentation of Mexico's criminal landscape and the proliferation of armed gangs, which diversified from controlling narco-routes to other forms of criminality to sustain themselves. The proxy war waged by Jalisco Nueva Generación, the Sinaloa Cartel's expansion in Juárez, and the struggle between actors in states such as Guerrero and Michoacán have also contributed. The release of 'El Chapo' Guzmán's son, captured in Culiacán last October, further encouraged infighting between groups by demonstrating the government's reluctance to stand up to them. AMLO's new decree authorizes a continued army and navy role in a range of domestic functions, including crime prevention, law enforcement, border security and facility guarding, for the full five years authorized by the constitutional amendment, but it does not give the military additional authorities. How the military will do so, within and outside the new National Guard, is left open. AMLO had little choice, having dismantled the Federal Police and having to rely more than expected on army and navy personnel to man the new National Guard when fewer Federal Police officers than expected chose to transfer into the organization. Moreover, the scale of military capability demonstrated by the Sinaloa Cartel in the fight for Culiacán is appropriately met by military, not conventional, police forces. Covid-19 strengthens the need to use the military, not only for logistics, medical support, checkpoints and curfews, but also for law enforcement, as millions of unemployed increase criminality and gang recruitment, while border closures lead criminal groups to struggle over narco-routes and revenue streams."

A **Raúl Benítez Manaut, researcher at the Center for Research on North America at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM):** "The May 11 agreement does not have the force of law. It ratifies the Law of the National Guard, of May 27, 2019. The armed forces and the National Guard during 2019 and 2020—unlike what happened between 2007 and 2018—have not received any recommendation on human rights violations from the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) or from any international body or organization such as Amnesty International. The main reason for this is because they have withdrawn almost to the level of inaction. The National Guard, initially 'in parallel to the law' between January and May 2019, acted in collaboration with AMLO's first strategy against organized crime: fuel theft. Then, it worked to promote the containment of migrants in accordance with the Mexico-U.S. binational strategy that President Trump demanded. The May 11 agreement, in addition to supporting the remilitarization of the country, responds to a political struggle between the secretary of defense, Gen. Luis Cresencio Sandoval, and the secretary of public security and citizen protection, Alfonso Durazo. Durazo's public image has been highly devalued among the federal cabinet and public opinion, because approximately 90 percent of the National Guard are active members of the National Defense Secretariat (SEDENA), both commissioners and commanders. In the case of armed forces, the public has a negative perception of the Oct. 17 incident in Culiacán, when 'El Chapo' Guzmán's son was released. Now, facing the Covid-19 crisis, the armed forces' image will surely improve, because the army and the navy do a good job in supporting civil authorities when there are natural disasters or, in this case, in the wake of a serious health crisis."

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