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## FEATURED Q&A

# Can the Northern Triangle Contain a Prison Pandemic?



Honduran officials recently released 1,600 prisoners who were not convicted of crimes or considered at high-risk for Covid-19 in an effort to stay ahead of the pandemic, Tiziano Breda writes below. A prison in Honduras is pictured above. // File Photo: Honduran Government.

**Q**undreds of inmates in prisons across Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras have tested positive for the novel coronavirus, sparking concerns of a humanitarian crisis in the making, along with increased risks of violence and human rights abuses. What implications do the Covid-19 outbreaks in the three Central American nations' prisons have for both health and security? To what extent are structures in place to effectively manage the outbreaks, and what is the best way for the countries' governments to deal with the crisis? What effects will the pandemic have on the region's prison systems in the future, especially in terms of funding and possible reforms?

**A**Barry McCaffrey, retired U.S. army four-star general and former director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy: "The Covid-19 pandemic is a disaster in the United States, with a fearsome impact on our 2.3 million prisoners. The pandemic will clearly inflame the prisons of the migratory nations of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. There are very grim consequences to come and few real solutions. Covid-19 has no effective therapies. There is no vaccine. Palliative care is resource intensive. The three nations have a confirmed infection rate of 25,000+ cases in the general population. Their massively overcrowded prison systems had in excess of a thousand cases at the end of May. (Occupancy is 200-400 percent of capacity.) There is zero chance of social distancing for this respiratory illness or quarantine in these fearsome facilities. Resources for hygiene, personal protective equipment and treatment in the prisons are minimal. Outside the prison walls, organized crime is aggressively exploiting the

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## TODAY'S NEWS

### POLITICAL

#### Venezuela Expels E.U. Envoy Over New Sanctions

Isabel Brilhante Pedrosa's expulsion follows sanctions imposed Monday by the European Union against 11 Venezuelans, including Luis Parra, a politician who is in a dispute with Juan Guaidó over who heads the National Assembly.

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### ECONOMIC

#### Brazil Sheds 332,000 Formal Jobs in May

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### ECONOMIC

#### Jamaica Considers New Virus Testing for Tourists

Jamaica is reconsidering its decision to require Covid-19 testing of arriving tourists because the island's coronavirus response systems have been strained by airport passenger traffic, Minister of Health and Wellness Christopher Tufton said Monday.

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Tufton // File Photo: Jamaican Government.

**POLITICAL NEWS**

## Venezuela Expels E.U. Envoy Over New Sanctions

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro on Monday ordered the European Union's ambassador to leave the country, the Associated Press reported. Isabel Brilhante Pedrosa's expulsion follows sanctions imposed Monday by the European Union against 11 Venezuelans, including Luis Parra, 41, a politician who is in a dispute with Juan Guaidó over who is the president of the country's National Assembly based on a vote in January. The sanctions include travel bans and freezes on assets. European leaders said they will "continue working to foster a peaceful democratic solution in Venezuela, through inclusive and credible legislative elections." Venezuela's Supreme Court, which



**Brilhante Pedrosa (L) and Maduro** // File Photo: Venezuelan Government.

is dominated by Maduro's supporters, earlier this month seated a new electoral commission after ruling that the opposition-controlled National Assembly did not appoint rectors to the country's electoral authority in time. "[Maduro's] strategy appears based on manipulating the electoral process, deepening rifts in the faction-prone opposition and exploiting those divisions to 'win' the election and thereby separate Juan Guaidó from his base of legitimacy," Peter DeShazo, a former U.S. State Department official now teaching at Dartmouth College, told the Advisor recently. Since early last year, Guaidó has been recognized as the legitimate interim president of Venezuela by more than 50 countries, including the European Union, but his popularity has suffered after a series of

missteps, and the path to political transition in the country remains uncertain. [Editor's note: See related **Q&A** in the June 23 issue of the Advisor.]

**ECONOMIC NEWS**

## Brazil Sheds 332,000 Formal Jobs in May

Brazil's Economy Ministry said Monday that the nation lost 331,901 formal jobs in May, Reuters reported. The figure, which was less than half the previous month's record loss due to the Covid-19 crisis, brings the total number of formal jobs Brazil's economy lost between January and May to more than 1.14 million. Average salaries fell 4.35 percent last month. "We expect the decline in formal sector jobs to continue in coming months given the still complex Covid viral outbreak," Goldman Sachs analyst Alberto Ramos told clients in a research note Monday. Brazil has confirmed 1.36 million cases of the new coronavirus, the second-highest number of confirmed cases in the world after the United States, according to data from the Johns Hopkins University's Coronavirus Resource Center.

## Jamaica Reconsiders Testing Arrivals for New Coronavirus

Jamaica's government is reconsidering its decision to require Covid-19 testing of arriving tourists because the island's coronavirus response systems have been strained by airport passenger traffic, the Jamaica Gleaner reported Monday. Minister of Health and Wellness Christopher Tufton said the numbers of arrivals are growing and "we just don't have the physical capacity to deal with the increase," according to the report. Some visitors complained of waiting for up to 11 days before receiving their test results. About 5,000 tourists have arrived in the island since June 15. Tufton said that a more targeted approach was

**NEWS BRIEFS**

## Brazilian Support for Democracy Hits Record Amid Institutional Clashes

Support for democracy among Brazilians rose to a record 75 percent this month, according to a Datafolha poll released Sunday, Folha de S.Paulo reported. In December, when Datafolha previously asked the same question, 62 percent supported democracy. The survey of 2,016 people taken last week found only 10 percent would say that a dictatorship is acceptable on some occasions. The shift in sentiment follows high-profile confrontations between President Jair Bolsonaro and other branches of government. [Editor's note: See related **Q&A** in the June 19 issue of the Advisor.]

## Peru Health Officials Sign Contract With Private Clinics for Covid-19 Care

Public health officials in Peru said that as of today, the government will sign contracts with private clinics to treat patients with coronavirus who require intensive care, El Comercio reported. A flat rate of 55,000 soles (\$15,700) includes "all costs and all services," regardless of the length of the internment, but only patients seriously ill with Covid-19 who require a mechanical ventilator and a bed in the intensive care unit will be referred.

## South American Farmers Monitor Locust Swarm

Farmers in the Southern Cone are monitoring large swarms of locusts that have damaged crops in Paraguay and Argentina, BBC News reported Monday. The insects could be headed for Brazil and Uruguay next. So far, crops of corn, sugar cane, wheat and oats have suffered limited damage. Brazilian Agriculture Minister Tereza Cristina Dias last week declared a "phytosanitary emergency" in the states of Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina to prepare for the swarm, Reuters reported.

needed and that the government might reopen the door to the pretesting of visitors, a recommendation made by the Medical Association of Jamaica. The island had closed its ports to incoming passengers on March 24. Five of Jamaica's six new cases of Covid-19 arrived on flights from the United States, pushing the island's confirmed cases to 696 as of Monday, according to the Jamaica Information Service. The recovery rate has been 79 percent. Later on Monday, Prime Minister Andrew Holness said that visitors from the high-risk U.S. states of Florida, New York, Arizona and Texas are now required to pretest for Covid-19 before traveling to Jamaica.

## BUSINESS NEWS

# Pemex Misses Goal for Refining in May

Mexican state oil company Pemex failed to reach the refining goal President Andrés Manuel López Obrador had set out for it in May, Forbes México reported today. The firm processed 640,073 barrels per day (bpd) of crude in its six refineries, according to data from the Energy Ministry, well below the one million barrels bpd that López Obrador wanted. The leftist leader had said the increase in refining would help boost prices for Mexican crude sold abroad. "It will help us weather the crisis brought on by the plunge in crude oil prices," he said. López Obrador has made strengthening Pemex, the world's most indebted state oil company, a cornerstone of his administration's agenda. Among his flagship projects, he has vowed to build a new refinery in Tabasco state, despite analysts' criticism of the project's high costs. Energy Minister Rocío Nahle in September last year had promised refining would reach one million bpd by the end of the year. However, in December, Pemex processed just 570,000 bpd. In related news, Pemex this month has registered 1,419 employees infected with Covid-19, for a total of more than 3,100 cases at the company, Oil and Gas Magazine reported Monday.

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crisis with murder, drug trafficking, extortion and sexual violence. More than 720,000 people have fled their homes to seek safety. There will be little political will to stop pretrial confinement or significantly increase early release to gain space. The economy is in freefall throughout Central America. Remittances are drying up from the United States and elsewhere. The lockdown has hammered the economy. Corruption from authorities and police continue to weaken business. We are watching an ongoing tragedy inside and out of the prison walls."

**A** **Adam Blackwell, vice president for international at Development Services Group and former Canadian ambassador to the Dominican Republic:** "I would argue that there are at best weak 'prison systems' in these three countries. We were all appalled to see the photos of the gangs lined up in the prisons of El Salvador during the peak of a pandemic. This is not new but unfortunately standard practice—overcrowding is the norm. When I was at the Organization of American States, we developed a methodology (based on international best practices) to test public security systems, including corrections services. In the case of Honduras, we pointed out many of the safety and security issues well before the Comayagua fire, which killed more than 350 inmates in February of 2012. Human Rights Watch and other human rights organizations have lamented the deplorable conditions in these prisons for years. Covid-19 will exacerbate an already volatile situation. There are no easy answers, but a good start would be to implement effective medical testing and screening processes so that those who have the virus can be given the proper treatment and be isolated from the rest of the population and visitors. Effective classification systems would allow those who have completed their sentence or are aged and/or ill to be released, would separate violent repeat offenders from youthful first-time offenders

and help in the development of rehabilitation programs to reduce recidivism and gradually reduce the incarceration rate, which is still too high. I can only hope that governments realize that the upfront investment of creating effective corrections approaches is cheaper in the long run than the approaches currently in place."

**A** **Yulia Vorobyeva, research fellow at the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center at Florida International University:**

"Prisons have been the epicenter of Covid-19 outbreaks even in the most advanced countries, let alone the decrepit and overcrowded Central American penitentiaries. Occupancy rates, reaching 400 percent in some facilities, coupled with the lack of basic sanitation, have turned these prisons into true virus incubators. Although the prisons have been closed to visitors and some governments began releasing eligible inmates to reduce overload, the response has been slow and insufficient, fraught

**In the long term, governments are likely to reduce funding and neglect reforms while being preoccupied with the economic downturn."**

— Yulia Vorobyeva

with low testing rates and flawed information sharing. As a result, prison personnel and newly arrived detainees may continue spreading the virus between the community and the prisons. The poor management of the crisis has broader security implications. The isolation in inhumane conditions, regular violations of basic human rights and the looming threat of disease are a dangerous recipe for acts of aggression and violent prison uprisings. The crisis can be effec-

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tively addressed only through concerted measures. The governments should speed up the process of releasing eligible inmates; increase testing capacity; and provide adequate medical care to detainees to deal with mental and physical health issues. The pandemic has exposed serious chronic conditions in the countries' penitentiary systems. In the long term, governments are likely to reduce funding and neglect reforms while being preoccupied with the economic downturn. In a more optimistic scenario, political leaders could seize the moment and finally treat the disease, rather than its symptoms, by implementing international norms regarding the treatment of prisoners. Which approach will prevail depends only on their political will."

**A**  
**Tiziano Breda, analyst for Central America at the International Crisis Group:** "Covid-19 has seeped into numerous Central American prisons, some of which are among the most dangerous, overcrowded and unhealthy in the world. The three countries have reported more than 350 infected inmates and prison staff, but human rights advocates point to limited testing and a growing number of suspected deaths as evidence of higher numbers. With large parts of Central America's public health systems already at full capacity, a massive outbreak of Covid-19 in prisons could have catastrophic humanitarian consequences. Jails in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala house approximately 85,000 inmates, 40 percent of whom are in pretrial custody and may end up being released for lack of evidence in some cases. The prison population in each country is more than twice the official capacity. Even before the pandemic, health conditions were notoriously poor. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights reported that around 60 percent of tuberculosis cases in

El Salvador are in prisons. Jails are also the operational headquarters for criminal groups across the region, with more than 20,000 inmates belonging to gangs, and a site for clashes between them. Four such skirmishes have killed more than 45 inmates in the past six months in Honduras, while President Bukele's recent decision in El Salvador

 **The prison population in each country is more than twice the official capacity."**

— Tiziano Breda

to mix in shared cells active members of opposing gangs—as a punitive response to a gang-driven uptick in homicides—has raised concerns that internecine violence between them could intensify. So far this has not happened. But increased psychological stress on inmates, aggravated by a ban on family visits and coupled with fear of the virus, creates a fertile ground for possible riots. The health crisis provides governments with an opportunity to address prison systems' chronic weaknesses and some of the gangs' core grievances. Authorities could transfer to house arrest or release inmates at high-risk, or nonconvicted ones, as Honduras recently did for 1,600 prisoners, and could also improve hygiene and testing efforts. They may also use some gang members' eagerness to contribute to fighting the pandemic—by producing face masks or cleaning up prison facilities, for example—to start stepping up rehabilitation programs, which have long been neglected in the region."

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org).*

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