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## Latin America Advisor

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## FEATURED Q&amp;A

## What Will Come of a Drug Kingpin's Killing in Mexico?



Mexican forces last month killed drug lord Nemesio Rubén Oseguera Cervantes, also known as "El Mencho," the leader of the powerful Jalisco New Generation drug cartel (CJNG). // File Photo: psych\_p via Adobe Stock.

**Q In a shootout on Feb. 22, Mexican soldiers killed Nemesio Rubén Oseguera Cervantes, also known as "El Mencho," the leader of the powerful Jalisco New Generation drug cartel (CJNG). Authorities said the operation left more than 70 people dead, including soldiers, cartel members and civilians, and the cartel set off a wave of violence and roadblocks across Mexico in retaliation. How damaging is Oseguera's killing to the CJNG, and what is the cartel's future? What now faces Mexico now as the CJNG regroups and other leaders fight for control? What does the operation say about cooperation between Mexico and the United States, which contributed intelligence to the mission?**

**A Rebecca Bill Chavez, president and CEO of the Inter-American Dialogue:** "El Mencho's demise is a major operational victory that demonstrates the Mexican state can marshal the intelligence, coordination and political will needed to target even the most powerful criminal actors. It also challenges the assumption that President Claudia Sheinbaum would simply replicate AMLO's approach, as evidenced by closer security cooperation with the United States and a greater willingness to confront cartels directly. Mexico executed the mission, but U.S. intelligence played a critical role, reflecting a more pragmatic relationship after several years of strained cooperation. That said, decapitation is not dismantlement. The CJNG is a diversified, territorially embedded organization. Removing a kingpin can trigger violent competition as factions jockey for control. The real test is whether this strike is followed by sustained pressure targeting financial

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## TODAY'S NEWS

## ECONOMIC

### Brazil's Congress Ratifies Mercosur-E.U. Trade Deal

Brazil's Congress on Wednesday ratified the trade deal between the Mercosur trade bloc and the European Union, with the country's Senate giving its approval. Brazil's lower house of Congress passed the measure last week.

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## POLITICAL

### Ecuador Expels Cuban Envoy, Embassy Staff

Ecuador's government on Wednesday declared Cuba's ambassador and his entire staff "persona non grata" and ordered them to leave the country within 48 hours. Ecuador's foreign ministry did not say its reason for the action.

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## ECONOMIC

### Venezuela Planning Reforms to Mining Law

Venezuela is planning reforms to a key mining law, interim President Delcy Rodríguez said after meeting with U.S. Interior Secretary Doug Burgum.

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Burgum // File Photo: U.S. Department of the Interior.

## ECONOMIC NEWS

## Venezuela Eyes Mining Reform Law: Rodríguez

Venezuela is planning reforms to its main mining law, with changes including provisions that would allow foreign companies to exploit the country's deposits of gold, diamonds and rare-earth elements, Interim President Delcy Rodríguez said Wednesday after meeting in Caracas with U.S. Interior Secretary Doug Burgum, Reuters reported. Accompanying Burgum in the meeting with Rodríguez were representatives of more than two dozen U.S.-based mining and minerals companies, the wire service reported. Burgum said the companies could bring billions of dollars in investment to Venezuela. "When we are working together it can only mean two things, which is prosperity for the people of Venezuela and for the citizens of the United States, and it also brings peace and stability for the world," Burgum, who heads U.S. President Donald Trump's National Energy Dominance Council, told reporters alongside Rodríguez, the Associated Press reported. He also lauded Rodríguez for her efforts "to cut the red tape and allow capital investment to flow," the AP reported. Burgum's visit to Caracas followed a trip last month by U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright, who met with Rodríguez to discuss Venezuela's oil sector. The Trump administration has been seeking to bolster supplies of critical minerals needed for electric vehicles, smartphones, missiles and other high-tech goods after China last year restricted minerals imports to the United States in response to Trump's imposition of tariffs on imports from China.

## Brazil's Congress Ratifies Mercosur-E.U. Trade Deal

Brazil's Congress has ratified the text of the landmark free-trade agreement between the

European Union and South America's Mercosur bloc, with the Brazilian Senate on Wednesday voting in favor of the deal, Reuters reported. Brazil's lower house of Congress approved the E.U. trade agreement last week, and Argentina and Uruguay ratified the deal last month. Paraguay is the only core Mercosur country yet to approve the deal, with its lower house of Congress set to vote later this month. Although the European Commission approved the trade agreement with Mercosur in January, the European Parliament—the European Union's main legislative body—failed to pass the free-trade deal and referred it to the European Court of Justice, kicking off a review process that could take multiple years, Politico reported. Last week, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced that she would "provisionally" implement the trade agreement while the Court of Justice reviews its text, the Associated Press reported. The Mercosur deal has met fierce resistance from some agricultural and labor groups in Europe, especially in France, which opposed the agreement at the European Commission vote in January. French President Emmanuel Macron has called for additional measures to guard against agricultural products from Mercosur countries flooding the European market, the AP reported. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Jan. 27 issue of the Advisor.]

## POLITICAL NEWS

## Ecuador Expels Cuban Ambassador, Embassy Staff

Ecuador's government on Wednesday declared the Cuban ambassador to the South American country, Basilio Antonio Gutiérrez, and the entire staff of the Cuban embassy in Quito "persona non grata" and ordered them to leave the country within 48 hours, the Associated Press reported. Ecuador's foreign ministry said the move came in accordance with international diplomatic law, but it did not explain why it took the action, the wire service reported. The

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Mexican Authorities Discuss World Cup Security With FIFA

Mexican officials including Security Secretary Omar García Harfuch met with representatives from FIFA on Wednesday to review intelligence and operational protocols ahead of Mexico's hosting of 13 World Cup events later this year, the Associated Press reported. FIFA officials voiced concerns in response to violent incidents that followed the capture and killing of the leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel on Feb. 22, the AP reported. Mexico is set to hold World Cup matches in Mexico City, Monterrey and Guadalajara beginning in June.

## Sudden Blackout Hits Two-Thirds of Cuba

A sudden power outage affected approximately two-thirds of Cuba's territory on Wednesday, Cuba's national electrical union said in a statement on social media site X. All major cities west of Camaguey, including Havana, lost power, Reuters reported. Government and union authorities did not disclose what caused the power outage. Cuba's government has stepped up fuel rationing in recent weeks amid U.S. efforts to choke off the island's supply of oil, which powers all of Cuba's large-scale power plants.

## Wendy's to Open 62 New Restaurants in Mexico

The Wendy's Company announced Wednesday that it plans to open 62 new restaurants in Mexico in the coming years after entering new franchise agreements with two Mexican property development firms. A deal with AJ Group will lead to the opening of 50 Wendy's locations in Mexico City and the states of Mexico, Hidalgo and Morelos, and another agreement with WS Pacific will lead to 12 locations in Sinaloa and Durango states, Wendy's said in its statement.

expulsion came a day after Ecuadorean and U.S. forces launched joint military operations against organized crime groups in Ecuador. It also happened just ahead of Ecuadorean President Daniel Noboa's planned participation this Saturday in a summit in Florida between U.S. President Donald Trump and allied Latin American leaders, Bloomberg News reported. Cuba's government denounced the expulsions in a statement late Wednesday, calling it an "unfriendly and unprecedented act that significantly damages the historic relations of friendship and cooperation between both countries," the AP reported.

## BUSINESS NEWS

### Air France to Halt Flights to Cuba Amid Fuel Shortage

Air France said Wednesday that it will suspend flights to Cuba for a period of several weeks because of fuel shortages in the Caribbean nation, the Associated Press reported. Flights from Paris to Havana will be suspended as of March 28 and are to restart on June 15, the airline said. Due to severe fuel shortages amid U.S. government efforts to restrict oil supplies to Cuba, Air France flights from Havana to Paris have been stopping in the Bahamas to refuel, the AP reported. Cuba's government notified airlines on Feb. 8 that fuel would be unavailable at nine airports across the country, including Havana's José Martí International Airport, until March 11, the AP reported. The move led several airlines to halt flights to Cuba. Among them was Air Canada, which issued a statement last week saying that it would delay the resumption of service to Cuba until Nov. 1. The U.S. Treasury announced on Feb. 25 that it would allow the resale of some Venezuelan oil to Cuba in "support and solidarity for the Cuban people." However, experts say Cuba's energy crisis is likely to persist, the AP reported, [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Feb. 19 issue of the Advisor.]

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networks, weapons supply chains and political protection networks. Institutionally, the challenge is also significant. With judges now selected through popular elections, political and criminal pressures could erode judicial independence, increasing the risk that arrests end in impunity rather than convictions. Operational gains must be matched by credible prosecutions and strong rule-of-law institutions. For the bilateral relationship, the operation demonstrates that cooperation can deliver results while respecting Mexican sovereignty. But U.S. pressure over fentanyl and cartel violence will not abate. If cooperation deepens through intelligence sharing, financial tracking, arms interdiction and coordination on precursor chemicals, both countries stand to benefit. If it falters, calls in Washington for unilateral military action will resurface. A unilateral incursion on Mexican soil would trigger a profound diplomatic rupture and undermine cooperation across the bilateral relationship."

**A** **Vanda Felbab-Brown, senior fellow for foreign policy at the Brookings Institution:**

"The retaliatory, demonstrative violence that the CJNG unleashed after El Mencho's death has subsided. Killing some 70 people, destroying private properties and businesses, jeopardizing roads and causing a national security emergency, the violence served no material purpose. The mayhem instead sought to reinforce the group's brand as Mexico's most brutal and brazen criminal group. If the CJNG fails to do that, far more intractable violence will escalate in Mexico and potentially last for months or years as rival criminal groups seek to increase their turf at the CJNG's expense. Moreover, the various smaller criminal groups which the CJNG's coercion kept in vassal-like relationships may seek to break away, especially if the Sinaloa Cartel promises them smaller duties or violently pressures them to switch sides. Examples of escalation-ready areas include Michoacán, where the Carteles

Unidos have intensely fought with the CJNG; Chiapas, where the CJNG fought the Sinaloa Cartel; as well as Baja California and Baja California Sur, where La Mayiza has been hammering both the CJNG and La Chapiza. Indeed, a fragmentation of the CJNG or a prolonged uncertain leadership transition may further weaken La Chapiza, which has been rumored to rely on CJNG help in its 'civil war' with La Mayiza. A reconfiguration of CJNG leadership and power may also trigger violence over corruption networks—such as in Chiapas. Recent revelations show the state's elite police force was on El Mencho's payroll. Getting El Mencho was an important deliverable of the Claudia Sheinbaum administration to the United States to keep Washington satisfied with bilateral security cooperation and deflect U.S. military strikes in Mexico. With luck, the Mexican government may be able to build on El Mencho's death to further weaken the CJNG, with the group falling apart like the Zetas did a decade ago. More likely, however, the resulting lasting violence will consume Sheinbaum's presidency."

**A** **Jane Esberg, assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania:** "El

Mencho's killing means Mexico has 'won' a battle in its criminal conflict, but it is no closer to winning the war. Research on the effects of leadership removal suggests that the CJNG will either splinter or experience significant internal conflict over succession, particularly because Oseguera has no clear successor. This might weaken the CJNG, but, if anything, is likely to exacerbate violence—including against civilians—as turf wars break out. Specific cartels rise and fall. The structural conditions that allow criminal groups to thrive, including corruption, impunity and economic development, remain. We have seen this time and time again. The arrest of the head of the Guadalajara Cartel in 1989 spawned several competing groups,

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including the Sinaloa Cartel. After the killing of its leader in 2009, the Beltrán Leyva Organization splintered into warring parts. Truly addressing the criminal conflict requires tackling major systemic problems alongside strengthening security. That both Mexico and the United States are treating El Mencho's death as a victory shows the emphasis placed on 'quick wins' in a conflict where there are no silver bullets. The incident has certainly helped Sheinbaum demonstrate her willingness to use a strong hand against the cartels, pleasing Trump. But the 'kingpin strategy' of removing cartel leadership is a continuation of policy that has not worked in the past."

**A** **Amanda Mattingly, former U.S. diplomat and founder of ACM Global Intelligence:** "Going after 'El Mencho' was a bold and gutsy move by Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum. The operation demonstrated that the Mexican military can confront cartels if and when there is political will, as well as enough pressure. And Sheinbaum is under enormous pressure from the U.S. government to do more to address the drug cartels and criminal networks that engage in drug production, drug trafficking, human trafficking, migrant smuggling and money laundering, among other 'business lines.' Yes, Sheinbaum came into office in 2024

with a more security-forward approach than her predecessor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. However, U.S. President Donald Trump's economic pressure and veiled military threats have forced her hand. The economic risks alone are significant. After all, 80 percent of Mexico's exports are destined for the United States, which translates to about \$535 billion. Threats of tariffs or the breakdown of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement are just too great for Mexico to ignore. As it turns out, the operation against El Mencho also demonstrated that security cooperation between U.S. and Mexican authorities is actually quite good. Intelligence sharing and tactical coordination likely enabled Mexico's seizure of about 1.8 tons of fentanyl, destruction of almost 2,000 drug production labs, arrests of about 40,000 people linked to the CJNG and Sinaloa cartel, and an unprecedented number of extraditions to the United States in the last year. Sadly, despite this progress, it is also likely that the CJNG will regroup. Past drug kingpin takedowns have led to fierce infighting and turf wars as cartel members battle for control. As one former CIA officer once told me, 'You can take out the snake, but you're left with a lot of serpents.'"

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta.*

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**Upcoming Event**

**ONLINE EVENT: AI in The Global South – A Debrief on India's AI Summit**

March 5, 2026 | 1:00 p.m. ET


