



April 30, 2020

Re: COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Deadly Virus in a Vulnerable Region

The coronavirus outbreak is seriously affecting life in Latin America and the Caribbean. This memo lays out concerns related to public health, economic impact, and governmental responses that affect basic human rights. It then outlines the impact of U.S. policies.

We recommend that Congress take the following actions:

- Urge the Department of Homeland Security to immediately suspend deportations to Latin America and the Caribbean, which are putting vulnerable people at risk and exporting the virus to countries with fragile health systems;
- Substantially increase global health and development assistance to Latin America with emergency funding in stimulus supplementals and medium-term responses in FY21 funding. This should include funds targeted towards communities' immediate health needs and secondary impacts of food security, primary education, livelihoods, and child protection. Continue to urge the administration to release all suspended prior year humanitarian assistance to Central America;
- Monitor carefully and publicly express concerns via social media, letters, statements and dialogue with embassies about specific countries' measures where they violate human rights and democratic norms and/or open up opportunities for corruption;
- Insist that the administration cease using political criteria--such as compliance with deportation flights--in providing humanitarian and public health assistance and in decisions regarding access to personal protective equipment, ventilators, and other medical equipment and medicines. Providing aid and access to medical supplies should be based on need rather than used as political leverage; and
- Urge the administration to suspend all sanctions immediately that affect the humanitarian and public health situation, as in Cuba and Venezuela.

Latin America and the Caribbean: Fragile Health Care Systems & Initial Government Responses

On April 8, 2020, 260 experts in public health and demography wrote an [open letter](#) to the governments of Latin America and international public health organizations urging a dramatic increase in testing and tracing in the region. According to the experts, Latin America is particularly vulnerable to the virus “given the epidemiological profile of the population, the precarious healthcare infrastructure, and the large income inequality in the region. These conditions will dramatically exacerbate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of the number of infected people, deaths from the virus, overload of the health system, and general wellbeing of the population.”



Latin America [invests](#) less in healthcare than most regions of the world: \$949 per capita every year, almost four times below the Organization for Economic Development (OECD) countries' average of \$3,973. Latin America has fewer than [2 hospital beds](#) per 100,000 inhabitants (indeed, countries such as Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, and Nicaragua have fewer than 1), compared to approximately 3 for Spain or Italy, which still found their hospitals overwhelmed. The potential [impact](#) of COVID-19 on Venezuela's devastated health care system and on Venezuelan migrants and refugees in surrounding countries is frightening.

A number of regional governments, such as Peru, Colombia, and El Salvador, reacted quickly to the pandemic with measures to flatten the curve—although some of their policies raised concerns. While many governments moved quickly to close airports and borders and set social distancing guidelines, others, such as Mexico, Brazil, and Nicaragua, were far slower to react. Cuba increased its medical missions which were welcomed even by governments that had recently sent Cuban doctors home.

Brazilian President Bolsonaro minimized the threat of the illness, referring to it as a “little flu” and attacking the media for its coverage of the pandemic. He has [defied](#) strict guidelines announced by his own health minister, encouraging Brazilians to get back to work and participating in a rally surrounded by hundreds of his supporters. Bolsonaro even unsuccessfully attempted to bar state and local governments from instituting social distancing policies. On April 16, he [fired](#) his health minister and replaced him with a doctor focused on reopening the economy. When [asked](#) about the record 474 deaths on April 28, Bolsonaro responded, “So what? I’m sorry. What do you want me to do?”

As Latin America and the Caribbean face the crisis, we should keep a close watch on several issues:

- whether governments resort to repressive or anti-democratic measures or open up opportunities for corruption;
- how governments deal with three economic vulnerabilities of the region, the extensive informal sector and the dependence of some nations on remittances and tourism;
- the impact on vulnerable populations, including indigenous persons, women, and LGBTQ+ persons.

These are described below, followed by the U.S. policy response.

Repressive or Anti-Democratic Measures, Corruption

Some governments have taken advantage of the pandemic to institute unnecessary authoritarian measures. In addition, some countries expanded the role of the military to address the crisis: Ecuador, Chile, Honduras, Guatemala, Colombia, and El Salvador are among the countries that granted the armed forces an extensive role in enforcing curfews and maintaining



public order. Below, a closer look at the governmental responses in Honduras, El Salvador, and Colombia.

Honduras. As part of mandatory stay-at-home orders, the Honduran government suspended constitutional guarantees. Journalists, human rights defenders, and anti-corruption activists could not circulate freely to report on the crisis, protect citizens' rights, and conduct oversight. Rights organization COFADEH [documented](#) that during the first weeks of the crisis, 45 human rights defenders suffered attacks, harassment, or reprisals for their work and 7 journalists were assaulted, detained, and/or had their [equipment](#) taken and camera footage deleted. Journalists were subsequently [allowed](#) to circulate using their press passes, but no such provision was made for defenders, and mistreatment of journalists and defenders continued. The restraints on the activities of defenders and journalists made it difficult to defend the rights of the thousands of people being detained.

Government detention policy was repressive, unequal, and violated public health norms. Over [6,000](#) people were detained by April 9 due to violating curfews and lockdown restrictions or for protesting over lack of food and layoffs. While many were released within 24 hours, being held in confinement was not a measure designed to protect public health. Members of the Military Police (PMOP) and police used teargas against people protesting lack of food, water, and medicine in Tegucigalpa, Comayagua, San Pedro Sula and other places. In Choloma, members of the PMOP [beat](#) protesters. Human rights group COFADEH reported that punishment for violating curfews was applied unequally, focusing on street vendors, [small rural producers](#), and others with few resources. On April 24, members of the Military Police [shot at and beat](#) three brothers from [El Paraíso](#) returning from selling bread; one brother, Marvin Rolando Alvarado, died the next day of his wounds, one was seriously injured, and the third was detained.

The economic impact landed quickly as industries, including the maquiladora sector, laid off tens of thousands of workers and the country's tourism industry was shuttered. On March 13, the Congress passed a \$420 million package to respond to the crisis. The law, bypassing contracting rules for building hospitals and clinics, and excluding the National Anticorruption Council from oversight, [offers](#) another opportunity for corruption. The government's program to provide sacks of food and sanitary supplies to citizens was [criticized](#) for focusing distribution on members of the governing Nationalist Party—as well as for being insufficient to meet increasing demands for food. The economic situation will be worsened by the likely plunge in remittances from Hondurans abroad, as nearly 20 percent of Honduras's GDP [relies](#) on remittance flows (see our blog, [Honduras: Repression in the Time of COVID-19](#)).

El Salvador. Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele told the armed forces to “get [harsher](#) with people in the street” who were not following quarantine rules, authorizing up to 30 days of detention. Over [1,200](#) people were detained as of April 8. On April 10, police [reportedly](#) shot twice in the leg a man who was violating curfew. As of April 13, [4,236](#) people were being held in containment centers, some for violating stay-at-home restrictions and others quarantined after



returning from abroad, including some detained for violating the mandatory home quarantine and others after returning from abroad. Those detained for violating stay-at-home orders were often held [without charges](#) or access to a lawyer. On April 15, Bukele [announced](#) via Twitter that he would not abide by a Constitutional Court ruling that security forces should not jail violators of quarantine unless the legislature established clear guidance for doing so. On April 17, an unnecessary show of force including small military tanks and heavily armed soldiers [enforced](#) a “sanitary cordon” blocking access to La Libertad, with police and military [patrolling](#) streets looking for curfew violators. *The Washington Post* published a dramatic [photo](#) showing prisoners forced to sit closely together while their cells were searched, potentially exposing them to the virus.

According to [Human Rights Watch](#), “President Nayib Bukele’s statements have encouraged excessive use of force and the draconian enforcement of measures imposed by his government. His comments, through Twitter and nationwide broadcasted speeches, have most likely emboldened abusive law enforcement agents and contributed to the disproportionate police response.” The Bukele Administration’s attitude towards the press is also concerning, with no questions permitted at press conferences and high-level officials [disparaging](#) journalists.

Colombia. While the Colombian government moved relatively efficiently to control the pandemic, there were deeply concerning human rights impacts. As guards responded to a riot in the Modelo jail in which prisoners were demanding protections from COVID-19, [23 prisoners were killed](#) and many prisoners and 7 guards were injured. Human rights defenders [warned](#) that illegal armed groups are using the distraction of the pandemic to escalate attacks on social leaders and human rights defenders. A unilateral ceasefire [declared](#) by the ELN guerrillas was welcomed, but it has not stopped the [deadly toll](#) against social leaders--and it may not be extended. The quarantine has complicated peace accord implementation, postponing some vital outreach to victims by the Truth Commission, for example, likely making it necessary to extend its short timeline. On a positive note, demobilized FARC guerrillas whose reintegration project was a textile workshop started [producing masks](#).

Three issues complicate the economic impact in Latin America and the Caribbean:

Lack of policies for the informal sector. Over half of non-agricultural employment in Latin America is in the informal sector and remains largely uncovered by national labor laws and government benefits, while even many of those in the formal sector lack benefits and labor protections. People who earn their living as street vendors, market sellers, domestic help, and tradespeople often live day to day with few reserves. Those in the informal sector are already in a precarious situation after several weeks of quarantine and curfew, and many will make the choice to risk violating restrictions to survive. “If I stay home, I’ll starve,” a 64-year-old Salvadoran market woman [told](#) online magazine *El Faro*.



Yet few governments have yet successfully applied COVID-19 benefits to their country's informal sector. Many governments have applied restrictions to informal market vendors while allowing supermarkets and other established stores to continue sales. Argentina, El Salvador, and Chile are among countries that have created payouts that include informal sector workers, although they are struggling with how to implement them, and the help they provide is limited. A program in El Salvador to provide \$300 payments to people affected by the crisis caused confusion and public health risks as thousands of people without access to bank accounts or internet [crowded](#) into government offices to obtain the subsidy.

Remittances. Latin America receives \$100 billion per year in remittances sent by families abroad. As those families abroad [lose](#) their employment, remittances could [drop](#) some 7 percent in 2020 compared to 2019, according to a conservative estimate by the Inter-American Dialogue. Countries with the [greatest](#) percentage of remittances per GDP would be the most affected, such as Haiti, [Honduras](#), El Salvador, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic.

Dependence on tourism revenues. For Caribbean nations in particular, but also some Central American nations, the impact of COVID-19 drying up tourism revenues will have a substantial impact. [Eleven](#) of the world's 20 most tourism-dependent nations are in the Caribbean.

Impact on Indigenous Persons, Women and LGBTQ+ Persons—and Inequality

Particularly concerning is the impact of the pandemic on Latin America's indigenous peoples. More than a dozen indigenous groups had [reported](#) cases of COVID-19 by April 9. The UN expert on indigenous persons [warned](#) that indigenous communities, already facing conflicts over land and resources, may be at the mercy of additional conflict as people fight for access to water and food. Indigenous communities across Latin America issued a [plea](#) for protection from COVID-19, including the right to limit access to their territories. In Colombia, the Wayuu people, already facing drought and widespread malnutrition, lack health care to address COVID-19. Quarantine restrictions remove their access to employment as many travel to cities to work in the informal sector. They face threats and attacks by paramilitary and guerrilla groups.

In many parts of Latin America, women's organizations warned that stay-at-home orders would [trap](#) women with abusive partners. In Mexico, for example, [calls and messages](#) sent to the National Network of Violence rose more than 80 percent between mid-March and mid-April compared to the previous month. Women's organizations however [cautioned](#) that in some cases it would be difficult for women to [report](#) violence as well as escape from it. The discrimination in health care often faced by LGBTQ+ persons in many parts of the region is a complicating factor for the LGBTQ+ community. Transgender persons [risked](#) detentions in places such as Peru and Panama which mandated days when women or men could leave their homes, although Bogotá, Colombia's LGBTQ+ mayor Claudia López [declared](#) transgender persons could choose their days according to their preferred gender.



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Finally, the pandemic is exposing the gaping inequality in Latin America. “In the end, what is going to kill us is the virus of inequity, the virus that feeds inequality and keeps 7 out of 10 people living in poverty and extreme poverty,” [said](#) Guatemalan human rights defender Iduvina Hernandez. “We die because... a few have eaten all the bread and many are left only with the crumbs.”

The United States’ Response

The administration has insisted on continuing deportations during the crisis, sending deportees without proper COVID-19 screening to countries unprepared to receive them, where migrant shelters and public transport were closed. Multiple flights have carried deportees—including men, women, and children—to Haiti, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Brazil, Colombia, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic since the [pandemic](#) started. CEPR [documented](#) 232 ICE flights to Latin America and the Caribbean between February 3 and April 24. At least 6,500 Guatemalans, 5,000 Hondurans, and 1,600 Salvadorans were [deported](#) between March and mid-April. Deportees with COVID-19 have been reportedly sent to Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico, and other countries. At least [100 persons](#) deported to Guatemala have tested positive for COVID-19, according to Guatemalan officials. Some immigrants are being deported from Immigrant and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities where there have been outbreaks of COVID-19, but ICE and CBP lack medical screening so it is impossible to determine if individuals have already been exposed to the virus or are carriers of it.

Upon landing, deported migrants face many of the conditions already mentioned as well as inadequate (and sometimes unsafe) quarantine measures,, deepening poverty, severe food insecurity, repressive policing of public health measures, and restrictions on public transportation, affecting the ability of families to meet their relatives upon arrival, as well the ability to move to their communities before curfew.

The Trump Administration [threatened](#) to withhold visas and cut off assistance to countries refusing to accept deportees.

The U.S. government also reportedly blocked shipments of personal protective equipment (PPE) already scheduled for some Latin American and [Caribbean](#) nations. A presidential [memorandum](#) prohibits “diverting such materials overseas.” President Trump promised via [tweet](#) ventilators to Honduras and El Salvador, mentioning their cooperation on immigration, while leaving out Guatemala whose government has twice temporarily refused to accept deportation flights without steps to screen deportees for COVID-19. According to *The New Humanitarian*, USAID grants [cannot](#) be used to purchase PPE or ventilators. While it seems understandable that countries limit exports to ensure their own public health needs are met, this will have a disproportionate impact on poor nations without adequate medical supplies. In any case, medical equipment and medicine should not be withheld based on political criteria.



Intensified sanctions on Cuba and Venezuela remain in place despite UN recommendations from the UN [Secretary General](#) and the UN human rights [chief](#) to ease up on sanctions due to humanitarian concerns during the pandemic.

It is positive that the Congress included additional funding for a global response to COVID-19 in the first and third supplemental spending packages to address the pandemic, for a total of \$1.1 billion in global health, disaster assistance, and refugee aid. In Central America, the administration is finally releasing a portion of the over \$500 million frozen by the Trump Administration since mid-2019 due to President Trump's anger over continued refugee flows from the region, though the exact distribution of these [funds](#) remains unclear.

While U.S. humanitarian aid and global health aid to the region will be welcome, the scale of the funding is still inadequate. And the more visible U.S. responses are: sanctions and deportations— including of people suffering from COVID-19.

See policy recommendations listed at the start of this memo.

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