



Regional Responses to the Crises in Latin America and the Caribbean: Andean States Subregional Session

Cúcuta Forum | June 2021

Translated into English from the original Spanish version.

This document presents the discussions and topics addressed during the subregional workshops held through the Latin American and Caribbean Civil Society Forum for the Prevention of Mass Atrocities (Cúcuta Forum).

Within the design of the Cúcuta Forum, organized by La Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales (CRIES) and the Stanley Center for Peace and Security, the main goal has been to bring together members from civil society organizations and academics, offering a space that enables network building, strengthens and generates the tools necessary for forum participants' everyday work, and produces recommendations that promote greater awareness about the risks faced in three subregions of Latin America and the Caribbean: Central America, the Andean states, and the Southern Cone. Using the Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes prepared by the United Nations in 2014, which was given to participants in advance of these meetings, the small subregional committees employed a regional analysis of problems to focus specifically on those underlying trends and situations related to the subregions, aiming to advance a joint approach to the design of both regional and local strategies and actions that build resilience and prevent mass atrocities.

Context

The third subregional workshop was held June 23, 2021, and addressed the prevention of mass atrocities in Andean states. In the last decade, these countries have suffered great social and structural upheaval resulting from years of state neglect, a lack of strong institutions, drug trafficking, extreme poverty, corruption, authoritarian governments that have perpetuated their power, and other problems that have prevented these countries from becoming less exclusive and more equitable.

In October 2019, social unrest led thousands of people to protest in different parts of the world. In the Andean region, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela faced protests for different reasons, with violent overtones that have left people dead, wounded, and surrounded by destruction. Some of the motivations behind the protests included the lack of recognition of rights, increased costs of basic goods and services, high unemployment rates, assassinations of social leaders, and political disputes.

The Chilean uprising left 36 dead after the protests held between October 2019 and March 2020. Although the riots were originally



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triggered by increased public transportation rates, several social organizations and citizen groups joined the social unrest, resulting in changes to the Chilean constitution. The protests produced a great number of grievances about the abuse of force by the military and police. Accusations about repression and attempts at authoritarianism were also made against high-ranking officials of the Chilean state because of the measures imposed on citizens in order to prevent social uprising.

A similar case occurred in Bolivia after the opposition parties of the former president, Juan Evo Morales Ayma, of the MAS party, accused his government of holding fraudulent elections after the vote count was halted for more than 24 hours. The citizens and political parties protested in the streets for a recount of the votes, resulting in a second round of elections. These protests led to the resignation of Morales. Sympathizers of the former president took to the streets, claiming that the interim president, Jeanine Añez Chávez, the temporary head of government, was installing a regime against the pluralist beliefs of Indigenous Bolivians and that she represented a racist and classist party that wanted to seize power. These latest demonstrations led to clashes between armed forces and protesters, which produced more than a dozen arbitrary detentions, hundreds of injuries, and approximately five deaths.

In Ecuador, from October 3–13, 2019, protests led by different social groups were reported—including Indigenous people, students, shipping carriers, and other workers—who demonstrated against the elimination of fuel subsidies decreed by President Lenín Moreno in response to an agreement with the International Monetary Fund. After Moreno decreed a state of emergency and imposed a curfew, protests continued for 11 days, concentrated mostly in Quito. Subsequently, Moreno suspended the measure and agreed to speak with various sectors of society before establishing a policy to target fuel subsidies. The protests left 10 people dead and more than 1,340 wounded.

In Colombia, several social sectors joined forces to express their discontent about the presidency of Iván Duque for different reasons, including tax reform, lack of protection for the country's social leaders, the government's handling of the 2016 peace agreement with the FARC-EP (the country's once largest rebel group) and attempts to repeal the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz), government corruption cases, and the environmental policies adopted. Multiple grievances were registered for raids on independent journalism centers and social organizations. The protests lasted two months, ending in February 2020, and reports of arbitrary detentions and excessive force by the Anti-Disturbance Squadron emerged. Grievances were also filed for criminalization of the protests by political leaders. These protests resulted in thousands of injuries among the uniformed forces and protesters, almost 200 cases of violence against journalists, thousands of people missing during this time, and 100 civilian deaths.

In the case of Venezuela, constant uprisings against the regime of Nicolas Maduro, as well as the mass exodus of its inhabitants due to the political, economic, and institutional crises threatening the country, have caused serious conflicts that are aggravated by the lack of immigration-management capacity in other Latin American countries, which have received thousands of Venezuelans on their soil. Venezuela continues to be mired in extreme poverty, hyperinflation, and border closures. The illegal human trafficking markets on the borders with Colombia, Ecuador, Perú, and Brazil exacerbate the fragile immigration status of people who are forced to leave their country of origin. In addition, clashes on the border with Colombia against illegal armed actors have trapped those who choose to stay.

The problems described are in addition to the COVID-19 global pandemic, which required a redirection of public funds to face the health emergency, producing serious consequences such as high levels of inequality, an inability to access basic rights, and social protests due to how governments handled the health crisis.

Common Risk Factors

Based on the UN Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes, common factors were identified in the workshop that lead to an environment where an escalation of violence generates a greater likelihood that atrocity crimes may be committed. Some of these factors are structural, but others are related to specific events that have caused social conflicts with great repercussions in the Andean region.



Andean Note: UN Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes



The boxes above summarize points made by participants during the June 23 workshop related to common risk factors (dark blue) and specific risk factors (gray) as described in the Framework of Analysis.



Situations of Armed Conflict or Other Forms of Instability

The workshop participants considered some of the structural factors in the Andean states to be an inability to redistribute resources adequately so that their inhabitants can enjoy basic benefits, lack of employment opportunities, institutional fragility, political instability, and corruption and mismanagement of the economy before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. These factors have generated inequality and democracies with little trust on the part of their citizens.

Furthermore, workshop participants reached consensus that one of the preeminent risk factors was the prevalence of illegal markets and their connection to poverty. On this point, a discussion was held on the broad relationship between this illicit activity as an “easy out” from the adversities caused by structural inequalities and the lack of political commitment to provide a solution beyond prohibition and criminalization of users.

The influence of drug trafficking can be observed throughout the subregion. Clashes over territories, drug trade routes, control of the internal market, and money laundering turn some districts into battlefields. The evolution of guerrilla and paramilitary structures into drug traffickers (in the case of Colombia), and the expansion of illegal crops and specialization in production make it increasingly difficult to put an end to the drug trafficking problem. There are communities where the culture has permeated and made way for the so-called narcoculture, which values the ability to have material and extravagant possessions more than life itself. This has even entailed a reinvention of state tactics to fight the drug trafficking phenomenon jointly with other countries, as is the case between Colombia and Ecuador where the conflict has successfully crossed borders and generated crisis in border populations.

Weakness of State Structures

The authoritarian government regimes that have remained over recent years in most Andean states have weakened both the public institutions and civil society. For this reason, civil society in the Andean countries faces great challenges to overcome its fragmentation, recover its citizen participation, and return as an important actor in the public sphere.

Furthermore, the institutional fragility has created paths for illegal armed groups and drug traffickers to generate parallel states that implement functions that would correspond to the state, such as protection, justice, guaranteed work, and food provision—a situation that was aggravated by the pandemic and mismanagement of this health crisis.

These regional challenges, combined with certain risk factors specific to each country, have caused unrest, indignation, and disagreement among the population in the Andean states, to the point of leading them to protest, as mentioned above. The social protests in most Andean states have been met with poorly strategized government responses, with imposing dialogue processes

that have only elevated the conflict, presenting repression in which excessive use of force and the criminalization of protests are common.

Capacity for Committing Atrocity Crimes

In all the cases mentioned above, the lack of capacity for dialogue between the government and civil society is evident, adding to the shrinking of civic space. The excessive force used to pacify the social protests brought not only detentions and reprisals against social leaders but also the use of armed groups with supposed “nonlethal” weapons, which caused a number of deaths and injuries.

Participants from Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela identified the presence of armed groups in the protests, whose origin cannot be clearly determined, that generated instability and violence in the streets, polarizing the actors and increasing the level of conflict. Despite claims from both the government and civil society sectors that these groups did not belong to them, no country has taken any measure to properly identify or punish this action. These actions are in addition to the failure to hold trials for those who committed crimes and offenses at the social uprisings.

Added to this is the need for judicial reform in the region, which would implement a transparent and corruption-free system. Furthermore, the participants believe that although citizen security is important, abuses of force and the use of “nonlethal” weapons fracture the ability of civil society to participate and access advocacy efforts.

Specific Risk Factors

Considering the common risk factors explained above, there are three specific risk factors that were identified by the workshop participants and that must be considered: (1) tensions between the government and different sectors of the civilian population, (2) the generalized attack against the civilian population, and (3) threats against people protected by international humanitarian law.

Tensions between the Government and Different Sectors of Civil Society, and Generalized Attacks against Various Actors of the Civil Population

In the Andean countries, tensions that generate conflicts, inequality, or pursuit by political leaders of their own interests have caused tears in the social fabric that are increasingly difficult to repair. Among the specific risk factors, participants found that the region lacks national mechanisms or initiatives for managing tensions or conflicts between various actors in the public sphere, and particularly between the government, the citizens, and political parties.

In the case of Bolivia, it was observed that the electoral processes respond to the logic of power of the standing government, lacking transparency. This factor has also been present in other countries



in the region, which highlights the need to implement open systems that guarantee an independent and clear electoral process.

On the other hand, in countries like Ecuador and Peru, civil society has identified the need to strengthen itself as a whole, to be able to influence and bring a citizen voice to the government agenda, preventing tension with the government from turning into an uncontrollable social conflict. However, strategies and tools are needed to achieve this goal, and most of all, to handle the matter of interculturality.

In Colombia, attacks on former FARC-EP members within the zones marked for societal reintegration after signing the peace agreement fall under a specific risk factor that should be considered, since it has led to the murder of around 250 people. Similar risks face social leaders who participated in the agreement and headed initiatives to promote development in the rural and poor areas of Colombia, as 1,200 of those leaders have been murdered since the agreement was signed.

Each country has its particularities within the conflicts and threats against certain groups; these examples denote the complexity of each case, which makes it difficult to identify the dynamic of the conflicts and offer recommendations to install processes for more-viable and humane solutions.

Threats against People Protected by International Humanitarian Law

The participants pointed out that conflicts based on identity and interculturality have increased in the Andean region. In other cases, like Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, and Bolivia, the right to assembly was violated during the social protests, with direct attacks on journalists, human rights advocates, and Indigenous leaders, among others, in addition to social protest being criminalized.

In the case of Venezuela, despite efforts of the international community to keep in the back of everyone's mind any type of atrocities committed, abuses of authority, or use of force against the large number of citizens who have left the country, the government does not recognize the humanitarian emergency. This situation endangers both the human rights advocates and nongovernmental organizations that have been pressured and harassed in various ways, which makes humanitarian work not only dangerous but extremely difficult.

As evidenced, threats against human rights advocates and humanitarian missions are present in the Andean region, regardless of political ideologies or situations of presumed stability. The work of making space for transparency and oversight without taking risks is fundamental to progressing toward achieving social development.

Recommendations

- Generate mechanisms that open space for dialogue within the different social groups, with the goal of clarifying their demands and generating advocacy strategies to influence public policy.
- Develop capacities for dialogue with population bases, to identify demands and create road maps to resolve the conflicts that have arisen in recent years.
- Give priority to empowering civil society instead of police and military groups, as these groups need to better learn to manage conflicts without violence, to prevent escalation and have more successful interventions.
- Promote a new process of judicial reforms in the Andean region that regains the trust of citizens and responds to demands for justice of different actors in society.
- Support the naturalization and integration of Venezuelan immigrants in the different Andean states in which they are found, to stabilize this issue and prevent problems with repression and xenophobia.
- Develop employment-generation strategies in the Andean states that improve the situation for citizens and incorporate Venezuelan immigrants.
- Protect social leaders in their duty to defend human rights and their work with the population they belong to.
- Seek alternative measures to fight drug trafficking beyond prohibition, as a tool for controlling and reducing the negative impact it has on society.
- Develop projects that seek to mitigate the damage caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and relaunch the economy to address social demands.
- Make adjustments to legislation and take measures that avoid criminalization of protests, to prevent the escalation of conflicts.
- Promote accountability and take disciplinary measures against those members of public forces who have been proven to have abused their authority.

This Discussion Takeaway summarizes the primary findings of the workshop as interpreted by the authors. It should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.





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