

Headless bodies and deadly bombs: cartel violence escalates in Ecuador

On Tuesday, President Guillermo Lasso announced a curfew under a new state of emergency in Guayas and Esmeraldas regions

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The week began with the discovery of two headless bodies, left dangling from a pedestrian bridge. Then prison guards were taken hostage by inmates, nine car bombs detonated in two coastal cities and five police officers were shot dead.

The string of horrifying attacks across [Ecuador](#) this week would once have been unthinkable, but this kind of bloodletting is now becoming almost routine in the Andean country, as gang violence escalates to levels never seen before.

Late on Tuesday, President Guillermo Lasso announced a 9pm curfew under a new state of emergency in the affected Guayas and Esmeraldas regions. He called the violent incidents “a declaration of open war” and said he was “prepared to act harshly”.

He added that soldiers and police had raided jails and seized weapons, ammunition, explosives and phones.

On Wednesday, police arrested 28 people, and seized thousands of explosives and dynamite sticks, but fresh prison clashes were reported in Guayaquil.

Analysts say criminal gangs emboldened by lucrative links to Mexican drug cartels are using terror tactics to intimidate the authorities and civilians as the country of nearly 18 million teeters on the edge of becoming a narco-state.

Ecuador’s interior minister, Juan Zapata, said the two officers shot dead on Tuesday “lost their lives at the hands of organized crime”. Two more officers were injured in a separate attack on a police station.

“This year has been very sad and tragic for the national police, said Zapata. “With these two cases we now have 61 police heroes fallen in the line of duty.”

The latest spate of attacks is believed to have come in response to the transfer of detainees from Guayaquil’s Litoral prison, the scene of the [worst prison massacre](#) in the country’s history last year, which left at least 119 dead.

The latest bloodshed comes just months after a deadly bomb attack killed at least five and injured 17 people in Guayaquil, marking an escalation of terror tactics against civilians, and prompting a [fourth state of emergency](#) in the violence-torn city.

“In certain areas, the state has been displaced,” said Col Mario Pazmiño, the former director of Ecuador’s military intelligence, referring to parts of Guayaquil and Ecuador’s Pacific coast. “We are talking about criminal rule with this new escalation in the level of violence.

More than 400 prison inmates have been killed – many burned alive or beheaded –since February 2021 [in an explosive rise in murders as rival gangs fight for control](#) of lucrative cocaine trafficking routes to the US and Europe.

Ecuador – which sits between Colombia and Peru, the world’s two largest cocaine-producing countries – is a strategic smuggling route due to its long Pacific coastline and large shipping and fishing fleets.

Analysts say the spike in violence started when [local criminal gangs began vying to work](#) with the rival Mexican Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation drug cartels.

During the first eight months of this year, there were 2,785 violent deaths in Ecuador, a [10-year record](#) which has already exceeded the total number of murders in 2021, according to police figures. About two-thirds of those deaths were in coastal regions.

The rate nearly doubled in 2021 to 14 per 100,000 inhabitants and reached 18 per 100,000 between January and October this year.

Luis, 42, a hydraulic parts dealer in Guayaquil, the coastal city which has been the focus of the violence, said he was afraid to leave his home because criminals hang out on his street corner.

“You can’t go out of the house in the evening. It’s really tough,” he said. “Every day there are more criminals, you don’t even want to catch a taxi,” he added.

He was also suspicious of the police, believing like many Ecuadorians that the institution had been penetrated by narco-trafficking.

As for the government’s response, he responded: “It’s really lukewarm. Trying to impose a curfew, [the criminals] will just laugh in your face.”