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LATIN AMERICA: Cities face persistent violence

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Abstract

Ranking of most violent cities.

Urban violence is a persistent problem in Latin America, with cities such as San Pedro Sula, Acapulco and Caracas notorious for their high rates of crime. This is owing to a combination of factors including political instability, the growing presence of powerful criminal groups and the inability of the security forces to crack down on crime.

Full Text

SUBJECT: Ranking of most violent cities.

SIGNIFICANCE: Urban violence is a persistent problem in Latin America, with cities such as San Pedro Sula, Acapulco and Caracas notorious for their high rates of crime. This is owing to a combination of factors including political instability, the growing presence of powerful criminal groups and the inability of the security forces to crack down on crime.

ANALYSIS: Impacts.

Political turmoil appears to have a high negative effect on the rankings.

Drug trafficking will remain a major source of instability, potentially prompting improved cross-border security initiatives.

High crime rates act as a major disincentive to business investment in certain areas.

In early 2013, Mexican non-governmental organisation (NGO) Seguridad, Paz y Justicia released a report examining the most violent cities in the world. The study listed the 50 most violent cities based on murder rates and found that 47 of these were in the Americas --the majority of which in Latin America. An analysis of the shifts between 2011 and 2012 indicates that Honduras, Venezuela and Mexico experienced the greatest increases in violence last year, despite some improvements in particular areas of the latter. The study excludes countries currently involved in war or civil conflict, and therefore cities in areas that may experience higher levels of violence.

According to the report, San Pedro Sula in Honduras was the most violent city in the world in 2012, registering 169 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. Mexico's Acapulco was second with 142 murders per 100,000, followed by Venezuelan capital Caracas with 118 murders per 100,000.

Latin America's violent cities.

Mexico, Venezuela and Honduras increased most in terms of numbers of violent cities in 2012, although Brazil still had 15 cities in the top 50:

Honduras is the most violent country in the world and the situation worsened in 2012, as a result of the ongoing political turmoil (see HONDURAS: Electoral cycle moves towards its peak - January 31, 2013), the growing presence of criminal gangs and an increasingly criminalised environment. Since the military-backed coup that ousted then President Manuel Zelaya in 2009, the political environment has been febrile and the holding of elections in late 2009 failed to relieve domestic tensions. In addition, Honduras is home to both domestic criminal gangs and transnational trafficking groups. The breakdown of political and social norms has allowed these to operate with relative impunity, with illegal drug shipments moving through Honduran territory.

Mexico is experiencing similar issues of organised crime as the powerful drug trafficking cartels fight back against the military-led state crackdown (see MEXICO: New anti-violence strategy lacks clarity - October 3, 2012). There were some grounds for optimism in the report, with some Mexican cities falling out of the top 50 and even Ciudad Juarez, notorious for its levels of violence, experiencing a decline, with the murder rate falling to 56 per 100,000, down from 229 in 2010. However, these declines are not indicative of a general reduction in violence across Mexico. They also demonstrate the speed with which violence can migrate to different areas, as criminal gangs react to military action. For this reason, states such as Guerrero, Coahuila and Tamaulipas have experienced spikes in violence, ensuring that Mexican cities remain high up in the rankings.

In Venezuela, violence has been rising steadily for several years, stemming from the extreme political polarisation between supporters and opponents of late President Hugo Chavez (see VENEZUELA: Elections augur unstable outlook - May 1, 2013). The security forces have proved unable to cope with the rising violence, while surging drug trafficking through the country out towards the Caribbean has had a knock-on effect in terms of rising crime.

The Caribbean is also experiencing a rise in violence. Haitian capital Port-au-Prince is one of the highest-ranked Caribbean cities, with 40 murders per 100,000. Port-au-Prince not only suffers from high levels of poverty and social disruption, but also a weak and corrupt security force. This has encouraged criminal groups to route drug shipments through the country, knowing they face little risk of detection.

Brazilian cities comprise 15 of the top 50 most violent cities, with Maceio, Joao Pessoa, Manaus, Fortaleza, Salvador and Vitoria all being in the top 20. Neither Sao Paulo nor Rio de Janeiro fall within the top 50, despite their global notoriety as centres of crime (see BRAZIL: Crime trends point to state weaknesses - January 27, 2012). This may partly reflect strong efforts by the security forces to crack down on crime ahead of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games. In addition, city boundaries may skew data -- much of the population of Rio de Janeiro, for example, actually lives outside the official circumscription.

Prospects for 2013.

Violence is set to remain high in Honduras, Venezuela and Mexico in 2013, with only the latter likely to experience selected areas of improvement:

Chavez's death on March 5 has put Venezuela into a situation of acute political tension. The new administration will be preoccupied with cementing its political control and addressing economic issues, and will have little time to focus on improving the security situation. Violence is only likely to increase as various factions struggle for control, potentially leading to protests and sustained social unrest.

Honduras is facing elections in November, which will severely exacerbate political tensions, particularly as Xiomara Castro, the wife of ousted president Zelaya, is running for office. Violence is likely to spike around the elections in relation to rallies and protests, while any disputed result could lead to prolonged political confusion and violence, facilitating an increasingly criminalised environment.

In Mexico, there are prospects for some improvement in localised areas, as the military strategy continues to focus on blanket coverage of them, encouraging a shift by drug cartels into other locations. Pena Nieto plans to bolster the police force capability, as well as increasing social programmes, but these will be medium-term projects and are unlikely to have a significant impact in 2013.

Overall, no major new security initiatives are underway in any of these three countries, meaning that there is little likelihood of an abrupt alteration to these negative trends in 2013.

CONCLUSION: High levels of violence will persist in Honduras, Mexico and Venezuela, with political instability in the latter likely to contribute to an increasingly criminalised environment. Similarly, forthcoming elections in Honduras will prevent a major crackdown on the various criminal groups, while Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto is unlikely to be able to improve security significantly during his first year in office. Conversely, in Brazil, the emphasis on reducing crime rates ahead of 2014 and 2016 will mean that urban areas should experience an overall declining trend this year, even if some cities do rise up the rankings.

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