



SC: Security Council

Student Officer: Efe Oğuz Aktaş

Issue: The situation in Ecuador

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I. Introduction

Cocaine has long plagued South America due to the extraordinary profit margins that come with it. Until a few years ago, Ecuador was one of the most peaceful countries in South America, especially considering the region's record of criminal activity and violence. However, a chain of events that can be traced all the way back to the United States tightening drug regulations has resulted in the Ecuador we see today: gang violence, corruption, states of emergency, turmoil, and disorder.

Ecuador is a country with an expansive coastline that neighbors two of the world's biggest cocaine producers: Colombia and Peru. These nations had exported cocaine to the US for a long time before the collapse of the Soviet Union, which opened up a lucrative European market with a greater profit margin. Due to the continental distance, South American ports became points of interest for gangs and one of the most popular ones was the port of Guayaquil, Ecuador. This situation was how Ecuador was first introduced to the cocaine trade in a more holistic respect, yet gang violence and homicide rates were still relatively low due to an influential and robust gang called the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (F.A.R.C.) having control over most of the region's drug trafficking, including the Guayaquil port. The F.A.R.C.'s dissolution in 2017 created a vacuum after which various gangs competed for control of the Ecuadorian route to Europe. Due to the rising presence of these various gangs, bad policy decisions, decreased funding on defense, cutting ties with the US Narcotics division, and a weak infrastructure against gangs; Ecuador is currently suffering one of the greatest human rights crises that it has ever seen and a record-breaking number of homicides.

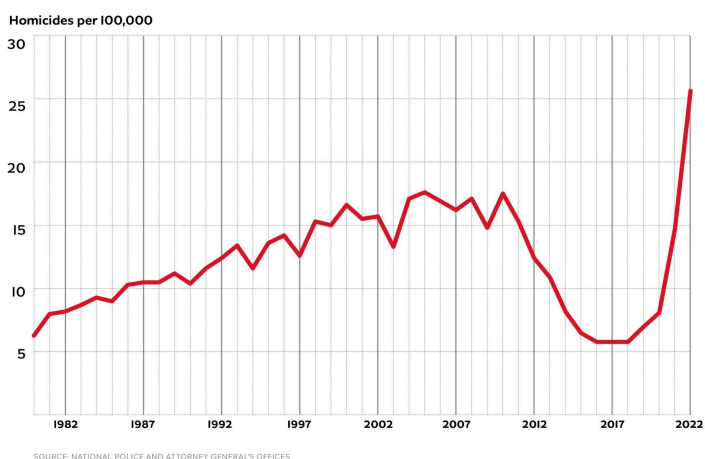


Fig 1.1 Homicides in Ecuador per 100,000¹



II. Involved Countries and Organizations

Ecuador

Ecuador is the primary country of concern when it comes to this issue. It is the medium of the conflict, the nation that has the most to gain and the most to lose, and the one which is in an active battle with criminal enterprises. Its geopolitical position makes it a prime spot for cocaine smuggling into Europe, especially the port of Guayaquil, which has proven to be a more profitable route than the US which has increased defense spending against narcotics in the last decades. The Ecuadorian government has taken significant measures to curb gang activity during the presidency of Rafael Correa. During this time, an effort to legitimize gangs and reintegrate their members into society was made and, as a result, “the whole concept of gangs changed, which was incredible to see.”² However, the Correa government also closed down the U.S. Manta military base which did anti-narcotics operations³ (which the government is currently trying to re-establish⁴) and cut ties with the U.S. International Narcotics Agency⁵. The Ecuadorian government currently recognizes drug cartels and gangs as “transnational organised crime, terrorist organisations, and belligerent non-state actors”⁶ (equivalent to being recognized as terrorists by the state). The stance of the current president Daniel Noboa is as follows: “We are at war. We cannot surrender to these terrorists,”⁷

Colombia

Colombia is the northern neighbor of Ecuador and the biggest cultivator of cocaine’s primary ingredient – the coca bush – by far⁸. According to the UNODC, this accounts for “over 70 percent of world cocaine production.”⁹ Colombian gangs have been active in Ecuador since the dissolution of F.A.R.C., trying to seize control of what has been called the “cocaine highway”¹⁰ of South America. Two drug trafficking routes cross Ecuador from Colombia.¹¹ The following Colombian gangs currently operate in Ecuador: The National Liberation Army (prominently), La Empresa, Gente del Orden, Guerrillas Unidas del Pacífico, Los Negritos, Los Mexicanos, Nuevo Grupo, Peasant Resistance, Steven Gonzáles Front.¹² As it stands, Colombia has collaborated with Ecuador in counter-narcotics, notably having busted the \$2 billion per annum drug cartel Los Curva¹³. However, it is also important to note that the assassination of presidential nominee Fernando Villavicencio has been linked to 6 Colombian individuals who are suspected to have ties to organized crime¹⁴.

Peru

Peru is the southern neighbor of Ecuador and the second largest cultivator of the coca bush⁹. Although it is not as actively involved in the issue as Colombia is, Peruvian drug cartels still utilize Colombian



routes for cocaine shipments to Europe. The situation with Peru is unfortunately typical, wherein the drug trade “undermine[s] state functioning.”¹⁵ Peru is a concern for Europe as well as South America as most of the drug traffic in Peru heads to Europe¹⁶. The nation’s president has made a commitment to combating drug trafficking¹⁷ but some experts fear that Peru may experience an explosion of drug-related violence just like Ecuador has¹⁸.

European Nations

The port of Guayaquil is a critical location because of the fact that it enables drug cartels from Colombia and Peru to ship their cocaine directly to Europe, so Europe is very much involved in the issue considering that it is the main recipient of cocaine from these nations. Many cocaine seizures have been made in European ports such as a singular seizure of 9.5 tons of Ecuadorian cocaine in Spain¹⁹ and 116 tons in 2023 in the port of Antwerp²⁰. The European Union Drugs Agency’s annual reports on cocaine often mention Colombia and Ecuador when talking about seizures²⁰ and according to UNODC data, a concerning number of cocaine routes from all over the world, especially the Andean countries, end up in Europe²¹. The European market has been consuming more cocaine every year and more dangerous forms, like crack-cocaine, have been introduced to the European consumer base. It is in European nations’ best interest to seize cocaine shipments from Ecuador as soon as possible.

Albania

The Albanian mafia has been the most prominent European crime syndicate(s) operating in Ecuador. These gangs use Ecuador as a port to transfer goods directly into Europe - as other gangs do - but unlike some South American gangs, “Albanian gangsters ship [cocaine] all over Europe.”²² The Albanian gangs are often safer than the Ecuadorian gangs as they are a crucial part of the shipment process²³, which also means that eliminating their presence is a great way of curbing the cocaine trade in Europe. An Albanian drug trafficking network has recently been raided and linked to 9.5 tons of cocaine seizures, and it has been found that such gangs have connections at the highest levels of government²⁴.

III. Focused Overview of the Issue

1. A Brief Contemporary History of South American Cocaine Trade

Until fairly recently, many South American gangs were using maritime routes to smuggle cocaine into the US to sell it to their markets. Due to the lucrative nature of cocaine and the huge profit margins, this was a trade that spawned many gangs within South America. However, a combination of factors has caused Europe to become a much more lucrative market than the US. The US became less lucrative due to two reasons: significant spending on counter-narcotics and a shifting demographic. The US spending on



counter-narcotics made it so it was harder and more costly to smuggle drugs into the country with an increased chance of seizure. This, of course, made the route less desirable for many gangs. The second point is that the US market shifted from cocaine to opioids, and the decreased demand resulted in the prices of cocaine dropping. Alongside the “push” of the US against cartels, there was also a newly emerging “pull” from Europe. Countries recovering from the Soviet regime had been amassing enough wealth and, most importantly, a supply route to Europe was established in 2012⁸. The fact that the European market paid twice to thrice the amount that the US market did was already reason enough for cartels to be intrigued, but the European gangs also made the deal better. Due to the existence of European gangs, the cartels would no longer have to be concerned about distribution; and, due to the increased prices, even after splitting their gains, they would earn more money than they did when selling to the US. This opportunity resulted in certain ports in South America being valuable for these cartels, and the port of Guayaquil in Ecuador was especially lucrative.

2. The Power Vacuum

The port of Guayaquil was lucrative, but the instability didn't quite start around 2012 with the establishment of this supply route. Rather, it began in 2017. Until that time, the Colombian insurgent group/cartel F.A.R.C. had also been in control of the drug routes in Ecuador. Due to the F.A.R.C.'s big size and vast experience, smaller gangs couldn't really crop up easily, which meant that there was the domination of a single gang for a long time, which, in turn, meant that there was no gang warfare. When the F.A.R.C. signed a disarmament treaty with the Colombian government on the 27th of June, 2017, the stability that Ecuador had come to know was gone. Many cartels, some local, some backed by European gangs or Mexicans, tried to establish their dominance over the region. The homicide rates started creeping up, 116 inmates died in a prison brawl not long after the signing of the deal. During this time, President Moleno cut the prison budget by 30% and eliminated the Department of Justice, effectively impairing the country's counter-narcotics capabilities. The current situation in Ecuador and the current gangs that are fighting for power span from this point onwards, in a way the dissolution of the F.A.R.C. set off a chain of events that eventually led to gangs competing for the port of Guayaquil.

3. “We are fighting every day so that we do not become a narco-state,”

The assassination of a presidential candidate brought a lot of attention from the global community to the situation in Ecuador, but it also signified a new, more intense era of gang violence. From that point onwards, violence escalated like never before. There were multiple prison riots where guards were held hostage and



the gangs seemingly had too much power for the government to handle – around this time, the Ecuadorian president was forced to resign (he did not exactly resign, rather he used a constitutional right to call for an early election, it's a complicated and irrelevant matter for the most part, except that this implies that Noboa's term is actually only 2 years long which might have affected his policy-making). The 'flash election' in November saw Daniel Noboa to be victorious, who promised much stricter regulations against the gangs in Ecuador. Indeed, Noboa declared gangs as terrorist groups relatively early into his term, but this also triggered a set of events known as the 'week of terror' which started with the raiding of a TV station. During this time in January, plenty of gang attacks were seen all over the country, prominently, a prosecutor was killed and many drug kingpins escaped prison. As it stands today, the country is still in the middle of a narco-war. The government is not necessarily powerless nor too corrupt to be immobile, but this is still a significant undertaking that might require an extraordinary amount of effort. Noboa and some other government officials have been showing similarities to the El Salvadorian model of gang warfare (although Noboa also had some negative things to say about the El Salvadoran president), which has been very effective in decreasing gang activity and homicide rates. The issue is multifaceted, as always, and past attempts should be taken into consideration in its discussion. However, there is one question in particular that needs to be answered: Should Ecuador follow the same radical route that El Salvador has, perhaps jeopardizing human rights in the process, or should they seek other methods to combat narcotics operations?

IV. Key Vocabulary

Drug Trafficking: A "global illicit trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of substances"²⁵ as defined by the UNODC. Drug trafficking routes are the primary reason as to why Ecuador is currently in a tumultuous situation involving so many gangs trying to take control.

Narco-state: "A nation state whose government, judiciary, and military have been effectively infiltrated by drug cartels, or where the illegal drug trade is covertly run by elements of the government."²⁶ Many South American countries, especially Ecuador's neighbors Colombia and Peru, can be considered narco-states as there is a high level of corruption in all parts of the government, involving collusion with drug cartels. In his first interview after what is colloquially known as 'the week of terror', "Ecuador's 36-year-old leader said he was determined to stop his country becoming a 'narco-state'"²⁷.

Counternarcotics: "The enforcement of laws against the use or distribution of narcotics."²⁸ Ecuador has actively been increasing counternarcotics measures but as it does not have a history of drug trade, most of the necessary counternarcotics infrastructure is lacking in the country.



V. Important Events & Chronology

Date (Day/Month/Year)	Event
2007	Effective 'legalization' of gangs in Ecuador by turning them into youth groups for a pledge of non-violence - Historic low in murder rates over next decade
2009	Ecuador refused to renew the lease of US military base in Manta
2009	Ecuador cuts ties with the US Narcotics Agency
2015	Big spike in UNODC indicators of cocaine demand report for Europe
27 June 2017	Dissolution of the F.A.R.C. - Power Vacuum
September 2017	116 inmates die in a massive prison fight between gangs
2018	Newly elected President Moleno eliminates the Department of Justice and cuts the prison budget by 30%
October 2020	A state of emergency is declared
2021	Ecuador's homicide rate started doubling annually
August 2023	Presidential candidate Villavicencio is assassinated by gang members during campaign
July 2023	100 guards are held hostage in prison emergency, 60-day state of emergency declared
September 2023	57 guards are held hostage over six prisons by gangs
November 2023	Daniel Noboa is elected president of Ecuador
December 2023	Noboa declares 22 gangs as terrorist organizations
January 2024	The Ecuadorian 'week of terror' - the most tumultuous time in terms of gang violence
9 January 2024	An Ecuadorian TV station is raided by gang members, a major drug kingpin escapes prison, state of emergency declared
14 January 2024	'Scores of hostages' are released from Ecuadorian prisons, Daniel Noboa declares that the country is 'at war with gangs'
18 January 2024	Prosecutor investigating TV station attack shot and killed by gang members



18 November 2024

Ecuador declares a 60-day state of emergency amidst drought and wildfires that have been going on for 4 months

VI. Past Resolutions and Treaties

[Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 20 December 2006 \[on the report of the Third Committee \(A/61/445\) 61/183. International cooperation against the world drug problem](#)

This resolution puts forth a framework for a holistic approach to combating drugs per past United Nations treaties and efforts. It is a comprehensive list of possible solutions and a great reference for what the UN has done and is planning to do regarding drugs. Since it's not based on taking action, this resolution cannot be said to be successful or unsuccessful, but it is an important document nonetheless.

[1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs \('Single Convention'\)](#)

The 'Single Convention' can be thought of as a framework that consolidates previous agreements on narcotics. It has helped establish a standardized, universal policy against the non-medical use of drugs and reduced the legal trade of cocaine. Although standardization is an important step, the convention was not successful in curbing drug trafficking as a whole.

[United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances](#)

This convention is significant in that it has helped establish a more international approach to combating drug trafficking. The convention emphasizes collaboration between countries in addressing the increasingly transnational issue of drug trafficking which is very much relevant to the situation in Ecuador. Even though the convention succeeded in establishing a framework, it has failed to address the issue of increasing demand sufficiently, which is why Ecuador is suffering from political instability – increased demand for cocaine in Europe.

[United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\)](#)

The UNODC has implemented programs in over 150 nations and has been a platform for global cooperation within the UN on issues like drug trafficking. Although it is, in theory, very beneficial, its real-world impacts are very limited due to a low translation to the achieved influence on the policies of Member States. The UNODC could be empowered to address the issue, but this would likely be a long-winded and complicated process that is too indirect to be effective.



VII. Failed Solution Attempts

One of the most successful attempts to curb gang violence had already been established from 2007 to 2017 during the presidency of Rafael Correa. By 2017, the homicide rate had dropped to just 5 per 100,000 whereas today it stands at 26 per 100,000²⁹. However, despite some missteps by the next president, the main reason that gang violence got so high was due to the fact that the F.A.R.C. had left a massive power vacuum. Therefore, although this attempt was successful at the time of its implementation, such a policy would not function today as there are too many interest groups fighting to gain control over an incredibly valuable drug route.

Many of the solution attempts are fairly new as it has been less than a year since Noboa came into power, so it is impossible to definitively say whether these attempts succeeded or not. However, these are still worth mentioning. One of the most radical steps Noboa took was to declare certain gangs as terrorist groups, increasing the amount of hostility that armed forces are allowed to display and effectively enabling gang members to be killed by the military much more easily. There has also been a strengthening of military personnel in terms of equipment, as well as a reinforcement in prisons. As a matter of fact, Ecuador is attempting to trace El Salvador's footsteps and build a maximum security prison in Bajada de Chanduy³⁰ and one of Noboa's campaign promises was floating prisons on sea to stop gangs from conspiring within prisons.

VIII. Possible Solutions

It is worth remembering that the Ecuadorian government is actively pursuing action against the gang violence and drug trade which means that the solutions that are to be proposed should consider these efforts. Many South American nations have witnessed the effectiveness of the radical measures that El Salvador has taken in its war against gangs, which has caused a 70% drop in murders³¹ in 2023. The country has indeed attempted to adopt a similar stance with its state of emergency which was declared about a year ago, where within a few months 1100 have been arrested³². Almost absolute power to law enforcement, a streamlined judgment, and an incarceration process have proven undeniably effective, yet these have also been subject to a significant amount of criticism that should be considered before such solutions are presented: many non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch have criticized the detrimental impact of the campaign on human rights and the infringements that have resulted in 153 dead in government custody last year. Still, it is undeniable that the state of emergency has drastically



decreased gang activity in El Salvador, making it one of the safest countries in South America and this has inspired some public officials in Ecuador to push for a direction that mirrors El Salvador.

Perhaps a possible solution can be found on the European side as the main reason that gangs are so prevalent in Ecuador is that it enables easy access to maritime trade routes with Europe. Simple regulations that make the trade of cocaine and other narcotics more challenging and costlier will result in the European market becoming less enticing for sellers as they will take a hit to the lucrative profit margins – this would benefit both the European countries by preventing a drug epidemic and Ecuador by decreasing the desirability of control over its ports. Collaboration between port authorities, especially within Europe, would also be massively beneficial when it comes to regulating the drug trade and cutting into the gangs' margins. Seeing as there have been 116 tons of cocaine seized at the port of Antwerp in 2023 alone, securing the ports is the first step in cutting the flow of cocaine. Due to the presence of some European gangs in Ecuador, this is also an area that is open to collaboration, though it is not as critical as the other two.

Collaboration with the US can also be reconsidered – as a matter of fact, the Ecuadorian president has proposed “lifting [the] ban on foreign military bases” this September, just two months ago³³. Although it is definitely not the sole reason, Ecuador letting their contract with the US expire and banning the US Manta military base has contributed to how ubiquitous gangs have become. With the US' advanced counter-narcotics capabilities, expertise, and geographical location, Ecuador would greatly benefit from reinstating a US military base or at least considering collaborating with the US. There is some significant deliberation to be made, especially for the implications that this would have for Ecuador's short and long-term sovereignty, which means that this is a great opportunity for detailed and intricate clauses. The implementation of such an agreement would be almost as important as its contents, so finding solutions to effectively employ US assistance is a challenge that needs to be addressed.

The multifaceted nature of Ecuador's crisis should be kept in mind and some consideration should be given to tackling poverty or combatting corruption within the government. It is also important to note the very recent 60-day state of emergency caused by wildfires and drought as it is part of the 'situation in Ecuador' and could hinder or paralyze a lot of proposed operations. Though the focus should obviously be counter-narcotics, it is still important to understand that the current political climate is mercurial and that there have been forest fires for over 120 days at this point³⁵, which have naturally shifted the country's immediate attention. In this tumultuous climate, Ecuador's challenge is as follows: the government needs to find a way to navigate gang violence and address international drug trade, all while improving its record on poverty and corruption.



IX. Useful Links

1. [**UNODC Global Report on Cocaine 2023**](#)
2. [**InSight Crime -Especially their reporting on Ecuador**](#)
3. [**Comprehensive List of Reporting on the Conflict in Ecuador**](#)
4. [The Guardian - Ecuador*](#)
5. [United Nations Digital Library](#)
6. [UNODC Report on Ecuador and Colombia](#)
7. [EU cooperation with Latin America: Combating drug trafficking in the Andean region](#)
8. [Transnational Tentacles - Global Hotspots of Balkan Organized Crime \(Report by official UNODC partner\)](#)

*Compared to other sources, The Guardian might be considered to have some bias (refer to their article 'The Guardian view on El Salvador's crime crackdown: a short-term, high cost fix') but a lot of the reporting on Ecuador is not opinion-based and it provides a good framework for the last year or so, chronologically. Please avoid relying on a single source, as news outlets can show bias by choosing what to report and what to leave out.



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