

Latin American Responses to the Coronavirus: Some Initial Highlights

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Since Latin America began to see the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in March, we have charted the dates and measures taken by mainland Latin American countries and Cuba. Below we highlight some notable aspects of the responses of Latin American states. [Click here](#) for a table of the most salient policy responses of the mainland Latin American governments and Cuba as of March 26.

- 1) **The region's governments unnecessarily delayed responding to the outbreak, like every other region worldwide.** They could have gotten a jump on containment by implementing testing schemes more quickly and more widely, and by monitoring or limiting incoming flights. Mexico was testing people entering the country who exhibited symptoms early, but ignoring the possibility of non-symptomatic entrants.
- 2) **However, beginning around March 11, most countries began implementing a series of common measures.** These included banning foreigners and flights from affected countries, closing schools, limiting large gatherings, shuttering nonessential businesses, and implementing quarantines in specific cities or the entire country.
- 3) **However, government responses vary in both the substance and timing of anti-coronavirus measures.** Some of the earliest measures were taken by El Salvador's President Bukele and Paraguay's President Mario Abdo Benítez, followed shortly by Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, and Ecuador. At the other extreme were Brazil, Mexico, and Nicaragua, whose presidents showed a cavalier attitude. Mexico still had not banned foreigners' entry as of March 25.
- 4) **The Northern Triangle countries acted quickly and decisively.** El Salvador's Nayib Bukele acted early and comprehensively. His government was the first in the region to ban flights from China on Jan. 31, then South Korea and Italy by Feb. 26, and closed the airport and placed all nationals returning to the country into quarantine – all before the country registered a single case. The Congress authorized a state of emergency, and Bukele ordered a national shelter-in-place order on March 21. El Salvador is also providing targeted economic support (\$300) for people affected by Covid-19, freezing credit card and mortgage debt and spreading out the next three months of utility bills over 2 years. Honduras imposed a national quarantine on March 16.
- 5) **Despite their ideological differences, populist presidents Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) of Mexico have been widely criticized for downplaying the need for a strong response.** Bolsonaro has wandered the street and claimed he could beat the virus himself, despite the fact that 20 people in his February delegation to meet with President Trump in Florida tested positive. In a defiant press conference on March 24, he called on governors to reverse the closure of beaches and businesses in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro and called Covid-19 a “little cold.” He is the president who has shown least regard for combatting the virus in the hemisphere. AMLO has not banned foreigners' entry nor imposed a quarantine, while his governors and health officials have sought stronger

measures in defiance of his policies. Nicaragua has dithered, and President Daniel Ortega organized a "Love in the Time of Coronavirus" parade on March 14.

- 6) **Venezuela is especially poorly positioned to respond to the pandemic.** Maduro has taken some proactive measures, but the combination of plummeting oil prices, a devastated health care system, economic recession that has left many hungry and without access to potable water, and U.S. sanctions will make recovery difficult. Colombia closed its border with Venezuela on March 14.
- 7) **In Chile, a country with one of the highest infection rates in the hemisphere, the pandemic may affect the country's political crisis.** Protestors had been clashing on the street with police for months, right up to President Piñera's March 18 declaration of a state of catastrophe with limits on public gatherings. Piñera announced a complex four-phase progressive quarantine plan, with progressively tighter travel restrictions, and may have been able to use the crisis to allay critics by offering an \$11.7 bn recovery package. Protestors are mostly off the streets; however, the referendum he conceded to hold regarding a rewrite of the constitution has been pushed back six months.
- 8) **Prisons have become a locus of health and security worries.** Some prisons have become breeding grounds for the virus, understandably agitating prisoners in many Latin American countries. Prison riots related to the virus occurred in Bogotá, Sao Paulo and Santa Barbara, Venezuela, among other places. Some countries have permitted mass releases of nonviolent prisoners.
- 9) **Human rights groups fear that the virus will pose specific challenges for women, including worsening domestic violence.** On March 22, Argentina's Civil Court announced an automatic extension of all domestic violence protection orders through May 18.
- 10) **Human rights groups have also expressed concerns about certain measures.** Human Rights Watch warned that lack of access to water could place certain populations at higher risk for infection. It fears that following hygienic practices will be difficult in countries with routine supply shortages, such as Venezuela, and for asylum seekers and refugees. Lawyers in El Salvador express concerns about arrests there during the quarantine, and human rights groups won a court challenge ending the indiscriminate detention of those outdoors during curfew. In Peru, as in Chile and Ecuador, President Martín Vizcarra has tapped the army to help enforce the quarantine. Human rights groups expressed concern about the militarization of the response, but Vizcarra's popularity has risen. In Argentina the military is helping to distribute supplies in poor areas and set up field hospitals.
- 11) **One overlooked population in this crisis are the homeless.** In Argentina, a group of civil society organizations gave a presentation to the City of Buenos Aires about the lack of policies tailored to vulnerable homeless populations. Some homeless people have been arrested for violating quarantine because they lack access to housing.