Forum: Security Council (SC)

Question of: Implementing initiatives to reduce drug-driven conflicts in Latin America

Student Officer: Kalina Vladimirova Petrova

Position: Co-Chair

Email: kalinavlapetrova@gmail.com, nedavlaapetrova@gmail.com

I. Description of the Issue

Latin America is one of the most violence-affected regions in the world, and much of this violence is directly linked to the drug trade. The region produces the vast majority of the world's cocaine and serves as a major transit zone for a wide range of illicit substances. Drug trafficking organisations, also known as cartels or criminal networks, have embedded themselves deeply into the social, political, and economic fabric of many Latin American countries, fuelling armed conflict, corruption, and widespread insecurity.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the homicide rate in the Americas in 2021 stood at 15 per 100,000 inhabitants, which is nearly three times the global average of 5.8. Countries such as Mexico, Colombia, Honduras, Ecuador, and El Salvador have been particularly affected, with criminal groups fighting for control over drug

production zones, trafficking routes, and local markets. Additionally the violence extends beyond gang realted conlict, to politicions, journalists, judges, and ordinary citizens which are frequently targeted.

The issue is not simply a problem connected to law enforcement. Drug driven conflict is deeply connected to poverty, institutional weakness, corruption, and a lack of economic alternatives for vulnerable communities. Any meaningful solution must therefore address not only the criminal networks themselves, but also the underlying conditions that allow them to be a leading cause for criminal activity. This is the central challenge the international community, involving nations beyond Latin America, as Europe and North America hold most of the consumers of said substances.

II. Definition of Key Terms

Drug Trafficking:

The illegal production, transportation, and distribution of controlled substances such as but not limited to cocaine, heroin, ecstasy, and synthetic drugs. In Latin America, drug trafficking is largely controlled by powerful organised crime groups.

Synthetic Drugs:

The production of chemically based substances, using medical grade bases along with highly toxic compounds to create drugs such as crystal meth, amphitamines and fentanyl. They are

highly fatal due to their low quality materials, used in the process as well as high doses of improper use of pharmaceutical compounds.

Gang / Cartel:

A term originally referring to Mexican drug trafficking organisations, now more broadly used to describe large, hierarchical criminal networks involved in drug production and distribution. Major examples include the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) in Mexico, and the Clan del Golfo in Colombia.

Organised Crime:

Structured criminal groups that operate on a large scale, typically across borders, engaging in illegal activities for financial gain. Organised crime in Latin America is not limited to drug trafficking but also includes arms, organ, human trafficking, money laundering, and extortion.

UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime):

The main UN body which is established and responsible for supporting Member States in combating illicit drugs and international crime. UNODC runs programmes across Latin America focused on law enforcement, prevention, and alternative development.

UNTOC (United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime):

The UNTOC serves as the primary international legal instrument for combating organised crime, adopted in 2000 in Palermo, Italy. Most Latin American countries are members as well as signatories.

Homicide Rate:

The number of intentional killings (terms first and second degree, along with premaditated manslaughter) is counted per 100,000 inhabitants per year. It is a key indicator used to measure the impact of drug related violence in a country or region and an internationally recognized measure for statistics.

III. Background Information

The history of drug driven conflict in Latin America goes back several decades. The cocaine boom of the 1970s and 1980s gave rise to powerful cartels in Colombia, some of the most known ones being the Medellin Cartel under Pablo Escobar and the Cali Cartel. These organisations accumulated enormous wealth and exercised a level of political influence and violence that challenged the authority and legitamicy of the Colombian state itself. After the dismantlement of these groups in the 1990s, drug trafficking did not disappear, instead it

adapted, and regrouped spreading across the region and mutating into new and often more complex criminal structures.

Mexico emerged as a dominant producer and distributor in the drug trade from the 1990s onwards, with cartels like the Sinaloa Cartel and the Tijuana Cartel taking over smuggling routes into the United States. In 2006, President Felipe Calderón declared a “war on drugs” investing cosiderble sums along with deploying the military against organised crime. While this led to the capture or killing of numerous cartel leaders, it also exercized a domino effect triggering very violent wars as criminal organisations splintered and competed for power and domination over the trade. The violence that followed was devastating, and Mexico has consistently recorded some of the highest murder rates in the world in the years since.

Central America, particularly the “Northern Triangle” of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, became increasingly affected by drug-related violence as trafficking routes shifted. Street gangs such as MS-13 and Barrio 18, originally formed among Latin American immigrants in the United States, returned to Central America and became deeply embeded in the drug trade. El Salvador at one point had the highest homicide rate in the whole world.

More recently, Ecuador, a previously considered a relatively stable transit country has been continuously expering a concerning dramatic escalation in drug related violence. A notably after effect is the assassination of the presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio in August 2023 and the prison escape of the cartel leader alias “Fito” in January 2024 shocked the country. President Noboa declared an internal armed conflict against criminal groups, first ever in Ecuador’s history. This case shows how quickly the situation can deteriorate when criminal networks are left unchecked and unprezedented.

IV. Major Countries and Organisations Involved

Colombia:

The world's largest cocaine producer. Despite decades of conflict with groups like the FARC and various cartels, Colombia has also been a leader in developing alternative development programmes and regional cooperation strategies. The peace agreement with the FARC in 2016 was a landmark, though violence linked to drug trafficking persists.

Mexico:

A major drug transit and increasingly production country, particularly for synthetic drugs like fentanyl and methamphetamine. Powerful and influential cartels such as Sinaloa and CJNG operate transnationally and have a global reach mostly targeting North America, particularly the United States.

United States of America:

The largest consumer market for Latin American drugs, particularly cocaine, heroin, and increasingly fentanyl. The US has been the primary external funder of counter-narcotics efforts in the region through programmes such as Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative, which committed over $1.6 billion in law enforcement support to Mexico and Central America. The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) operates actively across the region and maintains extradition agreements with several Latin American countries. Demand within the United States is widely regarded as a principal driver of the drug trade.

Ecuador, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala:

Countries severely affected by drug related violence, often due to their geographic positions as transit smuggler routes. El Salvador under President Bukele has pursued a controversial mass incarceration strategy that has significantly reduced homicides in the short term, though human rights concerns remain serious as there are continued reports of violation of the UNDHR (United Nations Declaration of Human Rights).

UNODC:

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, a lead UN agency on drug and crime issues, operating strategic programmes across Latin America and the Caribbean (2022 - 2027) focused on reducing trafficking, corruption, and criminal justice capacity.

OAS (Organisation of American States):

A regional body that has produced reports on drug use and policy in the Americas and serves as a platform for regional political dialogue on security issues.

Ameripol:

An emerging regional police cooperation platform in Latin America, supported by the EU (European Union) and UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime), aimed at improving information sharing and joint operations against organised crime.

European Union:

A major funder of anti-drug trafficking programmes in the region, including the EL PAcCTO and COPOLAD initiatives, and the recently launched European Ports Alliance in January 2024.

V. Timeline of Events

- 1970s - 1980s: Rise of the Colombian cocaine cartels (Medellín, Cali). Drug trafficking becomes a regional security crisis.

- 1993: Death of Pablo Escobar marks the collapse of the Medellín Cartel, but cocaine production continues and skyrockets.

- 1990s: Mexican cartels take over main trafficking routes to the United States.

- 2000: UN adopts the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC / Palermo Convention).

- 2006: Mexico declares a “war on drugs.” Military deployments lead to fragmentation of cartels and further escalating violence.

- 2009: UNODC launches CRIMJUST programme to strengthen criminal justice cooperation along trafficking routes.

- 2016: Colombia signs a historic peace deal with the FARC. Drug trafficking remains a challenge despite the agreement.

- 2019 - 2020: El Salvador's murder rate drops sharply under President Bukele's security crackdown, later formalised as a state of emergency in 2022.

- 2022: UNODC launches its Strategic Vision for Latin America and the Caribbean (2022 - 2027).

- August 2023: Ecuadorian presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio is assassinated by a Colombian hitman.

- January 2024: Cartel leader "Fito" escapes from prison in Ecuador. President Noboa declares an internal armed conflict.

- January 2024: EU launches the European Ports Alliance to counter drug smuggling via sea routes.

VI. Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Efforts to reduce drug driven conflicts in Latin America have taken many forms over the decades, with varying degrees of success. The most prominent has been the militarised "war on drugs" approach, pioneered in Colombia through Plan Colombia (backed by the United States from 2000) and replicated in Mexico through the Mérida Initiative from 2007. These

programmes invested heavily in military and law enforcement capacity to disrupt trafficking operations and eliminate cartel leadership and following. While they achieved some short term successes, organizations argue they failed to address root causes and in many cases worsened violence as criminal organisations fragmented and competed for power.

Alternative development programmes have been promoted by UNODC and implemented in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, aiming to support farmers in transitioning from coca cultivation to legal crops or livelihoods. These have shown promise in specific regions but face significant challenges, including limited market access for legal products and the continued to uphold the financial attractiveness of the drug trade.

El Salvador's "Bukele model" of mass incarceration and states of emergency has attracted regional attention after dramatically reducing homicides. However, human rights organisations have raised serious concerns about due process violations and the long term sustainability of this approach.

At the international level, UNODC's CRIMJUST programme and the Passenger and Cargo Control Programme (PCCP), with over 197 inter-agency units in 94 countries, have strengthened border controls and transnational criminal justice cooperation. The EU and UNODC partnership has been described as an important part of global counter-trafficking efforts.

VII. Possible Solutions

1. **Strengthening regional law enforcement cooperation:**

Countries should be encouraged to share intelligence, coordinate operations, and develop joint task forces targeting transnational criminal networks. Bodies such as Ameripol should be strengthened and better funded. The EU - UNODC partnership should serve as a model for border control could be expanded.

2. **Investing in alternative development:**

UNODC's alternative development programmes should be scaled up and better integrated with rural development policies. Supporting legal value chains and market access for affected farming communities is essential to make legal livelihoods genuinely competitive.

3. **Addressing corruption:**

Drug trafficking organisations thrive where state institutions are weak or corrupt. Targeted anti-corruption measures, judicial reform, and transparent governance are prerequisites for any long-term reduction in drug driven violence, along with monitoring those said reforms via NGOs.

4. **Social investment in vulnerable communities:**

Employment programmes, education, and youth outreach in communities affected by gang recruitment and drug violence are widely recognised as essential complements to law enforcement. Communities with strong social infrastructure are less susceptible to criminal infiltration.

5. **Drug demand reduction:**

Addressing consumption in destination countries, particularly in North America and Europe is a necessary part of any comprehensive strategy. This includes public health approaches to drug treatment and prevention, as promoted by the UN Common Position on Drugs.

6. **Human rights safeguards:**

Any security strategy must be accompanied by robust human rights protections to avoid the kind of abuses associated with past militarised forceful approaches. States of emergency and mass incarceration models may show successful short term results but risk undermining the rule of law and the fundamentals.

VIII. How to Prepare as a Delegate

Delegates should research the specific situation of their assigned country in relation to drug-driven conflict in Latin America. Consider whether your country is a producer, transit state, or destination country for illicit drugs, and how this shapes your government's approach to the issue. Additionally, think about your country's position on the following questions:

- Does your country favour a law enforcement-led or public-health-led approach to drug policy?
- What is your country's record on human rights in the context of anti-drug operations?
- Has your country ratified the UNTOC and relevant UN drug conventions?
- Is your country a donor to UNODC programmes, or a recipient of technical assistance?

Consider potential alliances: countries from Latin America and the Caribbean will have shared interests in many areas, while donor nations from Europe and North America may prioritise different aspects of the issue such as funding and enforcement. Countries that have implemented notable policies, such as Colombia, Mexico, Ecuador, or El Salvador should be taken into account when proposing amendments and possible solutions.

IX. UN Resolutions

The following UN Security Council resolutions are directly relevant to this topic and should be consulted during your preparation:

- S/RES/2482 (2019) – "Preventing and combating terrorism, including terrorism benefitting from transnational organised crime." This Security Council resolution, adopted unanimously, addresses how terrorist groups benefit from drug trafficking, arms trafficking, money laundering, and corruption. It calls for enhanced cooperation between Member States and directs UNODC and the Counter-Terrorism Committee to coordinate responses. Available at: https://undocs.org/S/RES/2482(2019)

- S/RES/1373 (2001) – A landmark Security Council resolution adopted after 9/11, recognising the close connection between international terrorism, transnational organised crime, illicit drug trafficking, and money laundering. It calls for national, regional, and international cooperation to combat terrorism financing and related criminal activity. Available at: https://undocs.org/S/RES/1373(2001)

X. Useful Links

- UNODC Strategic Vision for Latin America and the Caribbean (2022–2027): https://www.unodc.org/ropan/en/

- International Crisis Group – Curbing Violence in Latin America's Drug Trafficking Hotspots (March 2025): https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/latin-america-caribbean/108-curbing-violence
- WOLA (Washington Office on Latin America) – Analysis on militarisation and states of emergency: https://www.wola.org
- European Parliament Briefing on Drug Trafficking in the Andean Region (2024): https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762286/EPRS_BRI(2024)762286_EN.pdf
- UNODC Global Study on Homicide 2023: https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html
- UN Security Council Press Coverage – Debate on Transnational Organised Crime (December 2023): https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15516.doc.htm

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- European Parliament Research Service. Combating Drug Trafficking in the Andean Region. EPRS Briefing, April 2024. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762286/EPRS_BRI(2024)762286_EN.pdf
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