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**SITUATION REPORT**

February 23, 2024

# INTERNAL CONFLICT IN ECUADOR

GANG VIOLENCE AND PRISON RIOTS

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## Overview

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On January 8, Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa declared a state of emergency following the escape of the country's most dangerous drug lord from prison and an increase in associated unrest nationwide, including amongst penitentiaries.<sup>1</sup> The state of emergency will last for 60 days. The military will be deployed to combat criminal groups responsible for spreading violence, a curfew has been established, and the right to assembly has been paused.<sup>2</sup> Law enforcement officials from the United States have been sent to Ecuador to collaborate with the government to prevent the growth of transnational criminal organizations in light of José Adolfo Macías Villamar's escape.<sup>3</sup>

## Key Takeaways

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1. **On January 7, the disappearance of José "Fito" Adolfo Macías Villamar, leader of the Ecuadorian cartel Los Choneros, from a maximum security prison prompted violent riots in prisons and deadly attacks across the country.** In the most notable incident, a local news station in Guayaquil was held hostage by gang members demanding the release of gang members currently in prison. These events have demonstrated the lack of control the Ecuadorian government has over its prisons and organized crime networks.
2. **The Ecuadorian Government considers the gangs to be terror groups and has labeled the unrest an internal armed conflict.** Due to the terrorist group designation, the Ecuadorian military can and is being utilized in quelling unrest. This significantly increases the manpower and operational abilities of security forces in Ecuador in the hope of enabling the government to regain control of prisons and crack down on the public presence of gangs.
3. **Significant risks to travelers will persist at least through the end of the 60-day state of emergency.** Through at least the duration of the 60-day window, and likely in the weeks following, travelers can expect to encounter frequent disruptions to travel and business operations throughout the country, but especially in the city of Guayaquil. Travelers should also expect to encounter security checkpoints and random stop-searches.

## Prison Riots and Gang Violence

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On January 7, José "Fito" Adolfo Macías Villamar, leader of Ecuadorian drug cartel Los Choneros,<sup>4</sup> escaped from the maximum security prison where he was serving a 34-year sentence for drug trafficking and organized crime, sparking violent prison riots and deadly attacks across Ecuador.<sup>5</sup>

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<https://www.france24.com/en/americas/20240108-ecuador-declares-state-of-emergency-after-narco-boss-escapes-prison>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/09/americas/armed-men-interrupt-live-tv-ecuador-intl/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://time.com/6552988/ecuador-most-wanted-criminal-fito-escape-guayaquil-prison/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-imposes-sanctions-ecuadors-los-choneros-gang-2024-02-07/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/09/1223770490/ecuador-tv-studio-armed-men-break-in>

During a police inspection in Guayaquil's main prison on January 7, Villamar was declared missing.<sup>6</sup> It has been reported that Villamar, who was enjoying a life of relative luxury in his prison cell, escaped after he caught wind of plans by the government to transfer him to the far more secure maximum security facility nearby. The day after Villamar's disappearance, President Daniel Noboa announced a 60-day nationwide state of emergency.<sup>7</sup> In response to government measures, particularly the order to send the military into prisons, gang members led prison riots and attacks across Ecuador, including the storming of a television station in Guayaquil on January 9.<sup>8, 9, 10</sup>



At about 2:00 PM, gunmen invaded the headquarters of the TC Televisión network during a live broadcast. They were armed with pistols, shotguns, machine guns, and explosives. According to a video posted on the social media account of the General Commander of the National Police of Ecuador, a tactical team secured the perimeter, entered the station, and arrested the perpetrators.<sup>11</sup> Ecuador's Office of the Attorney General later stated that those arrested would be

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<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-01-09/ecuador-under-emergency-as-drug-lord-fito-escapes-jail/103298002>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-01-10/tv-studio-in-ecuador-taken-over-by-gunmen/103300634>

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<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240108-manhunt-for-extremely-dangerous-ecuador-gang-boss-vanished-from-jail>

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<https://www.france24.com/en/americas/20240111-what-we-know-about-fito-ecuador-s-notorious-gang-leader-who-escaped-jail>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/09/americas/armed-men-interrupt-live-tv-ecuador-intl/index.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://twitter.com/CmdtPoliciaEc/status/1744876884318470489>

charged with terrorism.<sup>12, 13</sup> This incident shocked the public and has become symbolic among the media of the lack of control that Ecuadorian Authorities hold throughout the country. The impact of this incident instilled a further wave of violence in prisons and caused President Noboa to label the crisis an internal armed conflict.

**Travel Security | Travelers should exercise increased caution when traveling to Ecuador, especially in provinces and cities that are considered to be a higher risk. Violent crime commonly occurs in tourist-heavy areas of Ecuador, and the ongoing crisis has only exacerbated this risk.**

At the time of writing, the U.S. State Department classifies Ecuador as a whole under a Level 2 travel advisory;<sup>14</sup> however, non-essential travel should be avoided completely in the province of Esmeraldas,<sup>15</sup> the towns of Machala and Huaquillas in the province of El Oro, and Guayaquil in the Guayas province.<sup>16, 17</sup> The following map is provides recommendations on non-essential travel within Ecuador in light of the current situation.<sup>18</sup>



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<https://apnews.com/article/ecuador-tv-studio-violence-explainer-prison-escape-037de9eb7a257fd1cd6aaf9a36053d45>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/09/ecuador-gangs-wave-terror-state-of-emergency>

<sup>14</sup> <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/ecuador-travel-advisory.html>

<sup>15</sup> <https://travel.gc.ca/destinations/ecuador>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/ecuador>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/ecuador/safety-and-security>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/about-foreign-commonwealth-development-office-travel-advice>

Additionally, civil demonstrations are currently widespread in Ecuador, with protesters often blocking major highways and other roads with durations of several days up to weeks. These demonstrations typically occur with little to no prior notice. Travelers should avoid all large public gatherings, and take notice that it is illegal for foreigners to participate in political demonstrations.<sup>19</sup> Officials reserve the right to detain or deport violators.

## Background

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**The security situation in Ecuador and government control of the country's prisons have been in decline since 2021 due to overpopulated prison systems leading to violence. Prison violence in Ecuador is assumed to have escalated due to the heavy gang presence in many Ecuadorian prisons, exacerbated by overcrowding after former President Rafael Correa's crackdown on law and order caused more and more inmates to fill Ecuador's prisons.<sup>20</sup>**

Due to prisons being filled beyond maximum capacity and the heavy presence of gangs within Ecuador's prisons, prison authorities struggled to maintain authority over the inmates under their supervision. As a result, the guards relinquished much of this supervision to the gangs that made up most of the prison population, instead focusing on the physical security of the buildings.<sup>21</sup>

In September 2021, a massacre at the Litoral Penitentiary, known as the Guayaquil Prison Riot, resulted in 118 inmate deaths, at least 5 of which were beheadings, and 76 others were injured. This incident stands as the deadliest prison incident in Ecuador's history.<sup>22</sup> 60 more inmates were killed during another riot at the Litoral Penitentiary in November 2021.<sup>23</sup>

In 2022, 5 prison riots were recorded, with the most deadly occurring on May 9, 2022.<sup>24</sup> 44 prisoners were killed, and 108 escaped the Centro de Rehabilitación Social Bellavista prison in Santo Domingo, a province to the west of Ecuador's capital, Quito.<sup>25</sup> In July 2023, former President Guillermo Lasso declared a 60-day state of emergency, deploying 2,700 soldiers to regain control of the overcrowded Guayas 1 Prison in Guayaquil.<sup>26</sup> The state of emergency announcement prompted multiple instances of unrest and even direct attacks on police units in the city of Esmeraldas.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.smartraveller.gov.au/destinations/americas/ecuador>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/ecuador>

<sup>21</sup>

<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/gang-control-ecuadors-prisons-leave-inmates-families-terrified-2022-10-25/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-58733202>

<sup>23</sup>

<https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2022/07/28/ecuador-gang-control-prisons-enabled-massacres>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-61388001>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/09/world/americas/ecuador-prison-riot.html>

<sup>26</sup>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/25/ecuador-declares-state-of-emergency-in-prisons-amid-fatal-attacks>

<sup>27</sup>

<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/ecuadors-lasso-declares-state-emergency-across-prison-system-2023-07-25/>

On August 9, 2023, presidential candidate Fernando Villavicenio was assassinated while at a campaign event in Quito, Ecuador's capital.<sup>28</sup> Villavicenio ran on a platform of eliminating government corruption and was one of the few candidates to acknowledge the issue of organized crime and its link to the Ecuadorian government.<sup>29</sup> In the wake of the assassination, seven inmates held at Litoral Penitentiary in Guayaquil were accused of ordering his death; however, they were all killed while being investigated for the crime.<sup>30</sup> Villavicenio reported receiving threats from Los Choneros before this campaign event.<sup>31</sup> He specifically stated that Villamar, the head of Los Choneros, was sending him death threats.<sup>32</sup>

### What is Los Choneros?

Los Choneros is one of Ecuador's most prominent criminal groups, originating in Chone, Ecuador, in the late 1990s.<sup>33</sup> They are now based in Guayaquil and are considered the primary drivers of the rising violence in Ecuador since 2020.<sup>34</sup> Los Choneros controls the key trafficking routes for cocaine throughout Ecuador and works closely with the Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico. In addition to drug trafficking, Los Choneros have continuously engaged in contract killing, extortion, and contraband.

### Government Response

**The Ecuadorian government's response to the events of January 7 has been severe and swift, listing 22 gangs as terrorist organizations to justify utilizing the military to combat these gangs and utilizing the allowances of the state of emergency to crack down on gang-related activity.<sup>35</sup>**

Rear Admiral Jaime Vela Erazo, head of the Joint Armed Forces Command of Ecuador, stated that every terrorist group identified has become a military target.<sup>36</sup> The President has taken a firm stance on imprisoning drug traffickers and organized crime leaders, as Ecuador's citizens worry they will lose their country to the influence of the drug trade.<sup>37</sup> Despite the harsh crackdown, the people of Ecuador have vocalized their support for President Noboa's policies. Politicians such as

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/10/ecuador-presidential-candidate-killed>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-66457472>

<sup>30</sup>

<https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-10-07/colombian-hitmen-who-killed-presidential-candidate-fernando-villavicencio-murdered-in-an-ecuadorian-prison.html>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/10/ecuador-presidential-candidate-killed>

<sup>32</sup>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/13/ecuador-gang-boss-who-threatened-villavicencio-moved-to-high-security-jail>

<sup>33</sup> <https://insightcrime.org/ecuador-organized-crime-news/los-choneros/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2082>

<sup>35</sup>

<https://warontherocks.com/2024/02/a-plan-ecuador-is-needed-u-s-assistance-should-draw-lessons-from-the-past/>

<sup>36</sup>

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/10/ecuador-tv-station-tc-television-gunmen-gang-violence-noboa-fito-macias/>

<sup>37</sup> <https://americasquarterly.org/article/ecuador-actually-has-a-chance/>

Aquiles Alvarez, the mayor of the city of Guayaquil, have thrown their support behind Noboa, applauding his iron fist approach and asserting that it has brought relative peace so far.<sup>38,39</sup>

On April 21, 2024, a referendum will be held by the electoral court to determine increased security measures, a reformation of the constitution, and better ways to fight organized crime.<sup>40</sup> President Noboa has revealed "Plan Phoenix" to address the situation, but details have not yet been released. It may be similar to El Salvadorian President Bukele's approach to violent crime, which suspends the right to due process and militarizes police action. These methods brought El Salvador's homicide rate down to 2.4 per 100,000 in 2023, down from a staggering 38 per 100,000 when Bukele took office in 2019.<sup>41</sup>

The current state of emergency guidelines, however, allow military operations to occur wherever gang violence and conflict are apparent, although it is largely concentrated in major cities. The conflict and increased military presence have made transport and business disruptions much more common, and there are frequent stop-and-search operations around metros and public transport systems.<sup>42,43</sup> The Ecuadorian Education Ministry has also closed all in-person schools and switched students and faculty to online learning until further notice.<sup>44</sup>

**Military Intervention | Since President Noboa declared a national emergency in January, the government has deployed the Ecuadorian Federal Army across the country to maintain public safety and order.**<sup>45</sup> The main role of the military is to provide the necessary force required to retake control of the prisons from Ecuador's gangs and to provide extra manpower for general policing duties. This action has led to the arrest of over 5,000 suspects and the recapture of 10 of the 35 major prisons in Ecuador.<sup>46,47</sup> Increased contact between civilians and soldiers can result in human rights violations and civil unrest since soldiers are mostly untrained in policing operations.<sup>48</sup> There have already been allegations of this happening in Ecuador by federal

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<https://www.irishtimes.com/world/americas/2024/02/08/terrorised-by-gangs-ecuador-embraces-the-hardline-noboa-way/>

39 <https://frontierview.com/insights/noboa-finds-good-relations-with-the-assembly/>

40

<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/ecuador-sets-april-21-referendum-tightening-security-2024-02-14/>

41

<https://www.barrons.com/news/el-salvador-claims-lowest-murder-rate-in-decades-amid-gang-crackdown-8472cb28>

42 <https://warontherocks.com/2024/02/how-does-ecuadors-internal-armed-conflict-end/>

43

<https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/2024/01/ecuador-increased-security-measures-and-criminal-violence-like-ly-through-at-least-march-as-state-of-emergency-remains-in-effect-update-4>

44 <https://www.plenglish.com/news/2024/01/09/ecuador-suspends-classes-due-to-serious-security-crisis/>

45

<https://bnnbreaking.com/world/ecuador/ecuadorian-federal-army-deployed-in-guayaquil-amidst-emerging-crisis/>

46

<https://www.plenglish.com/news/2024/02/09/ecuador-dipicted-a-month-after-declaring-internal-armed-conflict/>

47 <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/20/americas/ecuador-prisons-los-choneros-figo-intl-latam/index.html>

48

<https://warontherocks.com/2024/02/a-plan-ecuador-is-needed-u-s-assistance-should-draw-lessons-from-the-past/>

judges.<sup>49</sup> Travelers are advised to avoid all instances of unrest and any civil demonstrations during this time.

**Curfews | As of January 23, 2024, instead of a nationwide curfew, they are now specific to each canton, which are now classified according to risk level.**<sup>50, 51, 52</sup> High-risk cantons have a curfew of 12:00 AM to 5:00 AM. Medium risk cantons have a curfew of 2:00 AM to 5:00 AM. Low risk cantons have no curfew. Individuals traveling to and from airports during scheduled curfew hours are exempt from the curfew guidelines; however, travelers must carry their flight itinerary and passports during this time to qualify.<sup>53</sup>

**International Response | Allies of Ecuador have expressed their support for President Noboa and his military crackdowns following the events of January 7.**<sup>54</sup> On February 7, the United States imposed sanctions on Los Choneros.<sup>55</sup> The U.S. Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson also released a statement declaring that the U.S. stands in support of Ecuador in its fight to combat drug trafficking, prison gangs, and prison violence. The U.S. is also providing 20,000 bulletproof vests and over \$1 million worth of security and emergency response equipment, such as ambulances. As tensions rise, American travelers in Ecuador must remain vigilant, as members of Los Choneros may perceive them as extensions of the U.S. government's efforts against the gang, potentially making them targets of misguided, isolated instances of retaliation.

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<sup>49</sup>

<https://www.plenglish.com/news/2024/02/15/ecuadorian-president-rejects-criticism-for-rights-violations/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://ec.usembassy.gov/updated-travel-advisory-and-changes-to-curfew-restrictions/>

<sup>51</sup>

<https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/2024/01/ecuador-government-modifies-state-of-emergency-and-curfew-effective-jan-23-update-5>

<sup>52</sup> <https://ec.usembassy.gov/updated-travel-advisory-and-changes-to-curfew-restrictions/>

<sup>53</sup> <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/ecuador-travel-advisory.html>

<sup>54</sup>

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/10/ecuador-tv-station-tc-television-gunmen-gang-violence-noboa-fito-macias/>

<sup>55</sup>

<https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2024-02-07/us-imposes-sanctions-on-ecuadors-los-choneros-gang>



## Implications for International Education

**SafeAbroad Analysts predict that Ecuador will be an elevated-risk study-abroad location through the majority of 2024.** Increased crime rates, prompting significantly heightened security measures and increased civil unrest, may pose challenges to student travelers in the year ahead.

With proper training, preparedness, and practical safety precautions, travelers can navigate these risks confidently.

The following recommendations may help mitigate the risks outlined in this report:

- Travelers should register their travel with the U.S. State Department STEP system to receive emergency alerts. Carry contact information for the nearest Embassy or Consulate.
- Travelers should avoid all non-essential travel to Guayaquil, Huaquillas, Arenillas, Quevedo, Quinsaloma, Pueblo Viejo, Duran, and Esmeraldas City.
- Travelers are advised to carry photographic identification at all times and expect checkpoints and random searches while traveling. Travelers should follow the guidance of authorities.
- Travelers are advised to obey all curfews. If traveling to or from airports during curfew hours, travelers must have their ID and flight information with them.
- Travelers should avoid all protests and demonstrations. Officials may detain or deport foreign participants. Avoid all large public gatherings.
- Travelers should avoid all travel near border areas, other than official border crossings, due to drug trafficking and high rates of violent crime.
- Travelers are advised to closely monitor their surroundings at all times and be aware of high rates of organized crime. Although gangs and criminal groups are less likely to target tourists, there is a possibility that bystanders become involved in incidents of gang activity due to their prevalence.
- Travelers should frequently monitor local media for information about the evolving situation and follow all directives, such as avoiding specific locations or updates to curfews.

