

Eight dead in more suspected gang violence in Ecuador

June 26, 2023

Online Desk: Eight people died Sunday in Ecuador in the third suspected gang-related shooting this month, police said. Another five people were wounded in the violence outside a night club in the Pacific coast town of La Concordia, police told news outlets in a WhatsApp chat group.

Ecuador is enduring a surge in violence as rival cocaine trafficking gangs fight over turf and supply routes. Violence that is at times gruesome in nature, with people beheaded or set on fire, has left hundreds dead in recent years in the streets and in prisons, AFP reports.

In the latter, gangs have fought each other viciously in some of the worst prison massacres in all of Latin America. Several other attacks Sunday left four people dead in the capital Quito, police said.

Last Monday, six people were killed and eight wounded in an apparent gang shootout in Guayaquil, a port city that is the hardest hit by the drug-related violence. Guayaquil is the country's largest city, biggest port and economic hub. The location of the city, home to three million of Ecuador's 18 million people, makes it a strategic launch point for shipments of drugs to the United States and Europe.

On June 4, an attack at a home in the city left five dead, including a police officer. Ecuador is located between Colombia and Peru, the world's top producers of cocaine. So far this year, authorities have seized 100 tons of drugs in operations. For 2022, the haul was just over 200 tons, and in 2021, a record 210 tons.

The country's murder rate almost doubled between 2021 and 2022, from 14 to 25 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, according to official figures. The authorities estimate that Ecuador has more than a dozen organized crime groups within its borders, some with several thousand members. Some are believed to have links to the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, both in Mexico.

Since taking office in 2021, President Guillermo Lasso has issued repeated states of emergency to mobilize the military in the streets and implement curfews in the face of high crime rates. In April, the government declared members of organized crime groups to be terrorists, a distinction that allows the military to pursue them with fewer restrictions.