

Six dead, eight wounded in Ecuador gang shooting

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Six people were killed and eight wounded Monday in an apparent gang shootout in Guayaquil, a port city in Ecuador terrorized by a wave of violence blamed on a spiraling drug war, authorities said. Police Colonel Marcelo Castillo told AFP that six people had died in Guayaquil's second mass shooting this month, which appeared to have been a settling of scores between rival gangs.

The prosecutor's office later said eight others had been wounded and taken to local hospitals, while no one had so far been arrested. Such attacks have become ever-more frequent in Ecuador, especially in Guayaquil, as rival gangs ramp up the fight for drug markets and routes in the country's overcrowded prisons and on the streets — leaving a trail of corpses in their wake, AFP reports.

More than 420 prisoners have died in vicious fighting between rival criminal groups in Ecuadoran prisons since February 2021, many beheaded or burned alive. Widespread corruption among guards has allowed inmates to obtain guns and explosives. As the lawlessness spreads, there have been several car bomb explosions in Ecuadoran cities, and bodies discovered hanging from pedestrian bridges some without heads.

The country is also increasingly plagued by sadistic kidnappings, with criminals sending hostages' fingers to their loved ones to pressure them into paying more ransom. In Monday's shooting, Castillo said the attackers arrived in a black vehicle in a populated neighborhood in the early hours. "Four or five got out" and opened fire, despite several people being in the street. "It is pure retaliation for previous acts of violence," the police colonel said. "They kill each other without mercy."

He added that one of those killed had a record of "criminal association" and one of the wounded was known for involvement in drug trafficking. Some 132 spent cartridges were found at the scene, said Castillo.

— 'Terrorists' —

Guayaquil, on Ecuador's southern Pacific coast, is the country's largest city, biggest port and economic hub, but in recent years has become the increasingly bloody center of a turf war. 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.

Ecuador is located between Colombia and Peru, the world's top producers of cocaine. The country also, conveniently for cartels, uses the US dollar as its currency. 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. In April this year, about 30 armed men on motorcycles and boats opened fire indiscriminately on a crowd at a fishing port in Esmeraldas, killing nine. In the same month in Guayaquil, a dozen people, including a 5-year-old girl, were shot while watching a football game.

Two weeks ago, a police officer and four other people were killed and eight injured when three men opened fire on a house in the city, which is located in the South American country's southwest. The authorities estimate that Ecuador counts more than 13 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 May 2021, President Guillermo Lasso has issued repeated states of emergency in order 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.