

Fighting Gangs Under the State of Exception in Honduras

On 6 December 2022, Honduran President Xiomara Castro implemented a state of exception in several neighborhoods of Honduras' capital, Tegucigalpa, and the second-largest city, San Pedro Sula, as part of a plan to fight criminal groups and extortion. Amid mounting pressure to address insecurity and the government's decreasing popularity, Castro's implementation of the state of exception came less than a year into her mandate.¹[Henry Shuldiner, 'Extorsión desenfrenada en Honduras desencadena estado de excepción,' InSight Crime, 29 November 2022](#) As a result of numerous extensions, the state of exception has reached a year mark and has been implemented in 158 of the country's 298 municipalities. The government also took measures setting provisions for the delegation of public security to military forces, including the management of the country's prisons, in contrast to the president's electoral promises to stem organized crime with anti-corruption measures and a community police approach.²[Parker Asmann and Seth Robins, '3 Security Takeaways from Xiomara Castro's Historic Win in Honduras', InSight Crime, 30 November 2021](#)

Over the years, criminal groups have wielded considerable influence across Honduras, a country that geographically constitutes a key transit point for transnational drug trafficking. They have penetrated state institutions, as evidenced by frequent cases of collusion between organized crime and high-level politicians, most notoriously Castro's predecessor Juan Orlando Hernández, who was indicted on drugs and weapons charges in the United States.³[US Department of Justice, 'Juan Orlando Hernández, Former President of Honduras, Indicted on Drug-Trafficking and Firearms Charges, Extradited to the United States from Honduras,' 21 April 2022](#) Despite some alleged progress in the fight against crime since Castro was sworn in as the new president of Honduras on 27 January 2022 – with a drop in homicides in 2022 compared to 2021 that the government has attributed to its security measures⁴[Arturo Matute, 'Honduras progresa en controlar la violencia, ¿es posible hacerlo de forma sostenible?,' United States Institute of Peace, 19 January 2023](#) – violence and extortion have persisted at high levels, prompting the government to boast steadfastness against rampant crime.

A year after the implementation of the state of exception on 6 December 2022, this report explores the evolution of violence likely related to gang activity between January and November 2023. ACLED data show that the security measures implemented thus far have yielded mixed results. Armed clashes and violence targeting civilians have continued unabated throughout 2023 due to persisting competition among gangs, especially in the country's overcrowded prisons where violence has surged. Gangs continue to extort transportation workers in order to generate revenues, albeit the rate of these events has slowed down in 2023 compared to 2022. The geography of the violence points to gang violence moderately increasing and spreading beyond the crime hotspots of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. This finding substantiates claims that criminal groups have expanded to other strategic areas for drug trafficking and production, a phenomenon potentially exacerbated by state of exception measures and increased pressure on gangs in the most populous urban areas due to frequent law enforcement operations.

Security Measures Fail to Curtail Inter-Gang Violence

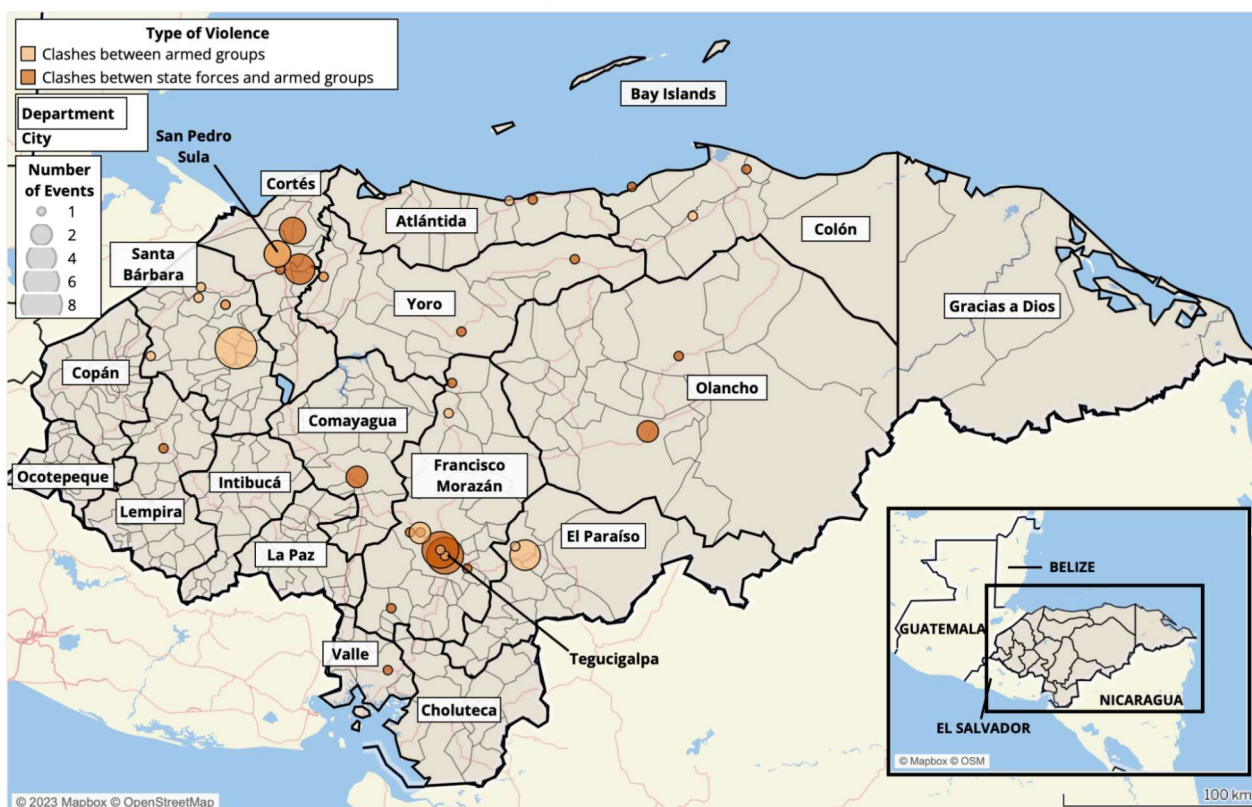
At the start of 2023, the Honduran government reported that homicides decreased in 2022 compared to the year prior and directly attributed this drop to its new security strategy.⁵[France24, 'Honduras registra en 2022 la tasa de homicidios más baja en 16 años,' 2 January 2023](#) The government also alleged that the state of exception and deployment of police and military forces led in the first half of 2023 to over 1,000 gang members arrested, criminal groups dismantled, drugs

and weapons seized, and a decrease in homicide levels in multiple municipalities.⁶[Tiempo](#), ‘DIPAMCO reporta más de mil capturas bajo el estado de excepción,’ 6 June 2023; [TeleSUR](#), ‘Honduras extiende estado de excepción hasta el 19 de agosto,’ 6 July 2023; [La Prensa](#), ‘Enorme despliegue militar para iniciar el Plan de Seguridad Nacional,’ 3 April 2023

Reflecting some of these developments, between January and November 2023, Castro’s security measures arguably drove a rise in armed clashes between state forces and armed groups, which were 45% higher compared to the same period in 2022. Most recorded violent incidents expectedly took place in the urban areas close to Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, respectively in San Francisco Morazán and Cortés departments, where the government deployed 20,000 police officers in December 2022 to support anti-gang operations (*see map below*).⁷[France24](#), ‘Honduras despliega a cientos de policías al activar el “estado de excepción” contra las pandillas,’ 7 December 2022

Clashes Involving Gangs and Unidentified Armed Groups

1 January - 24 November 2023



Although the government launched several security operations to confront armed groups across the country, ACLED data suggest that the security measures have thus far failed to meaningfully restrain clashes between armed groups. Such violence remains at similar levels compared to the previous year largely as a result of a surge in prison riots. In 2023, prison riots have reached some of the highest levels since ACLED began coverage of Honduras in 2018, even after the government began decreeing emergency measures in the penitentiary system and its demilitarization as early as March 2022.⁸[La Gaceta](#), ‘Decreto Ejecutivo Número PCM-03-2022,’ 10 August 2022

Criminal groups have garnered significant power within the penitentiary system, with imprisoned members running illicit operations on the outside.⁹[International Crisis Group](#), ‘Fight and Flight: Tackling the Roots of Honduras’ Emergency,’ 25 October 2019 In April, simultaneous riots in four prisons involving incarcerated members of criminal groups resulted in several injuries and the killing of one inmate. Gang rivalries and detention conditions have often been identified as the main causes of prison violence, a phenomenon exacerbated by overcrowding, poor management, and corruption among officials. However, a local organization has stressed that the April 2023 string of riots may have been linked to unaddressed prisoners’ demands, including the separation of rival gang members into different cells, and complaints that former detainees have been harassed

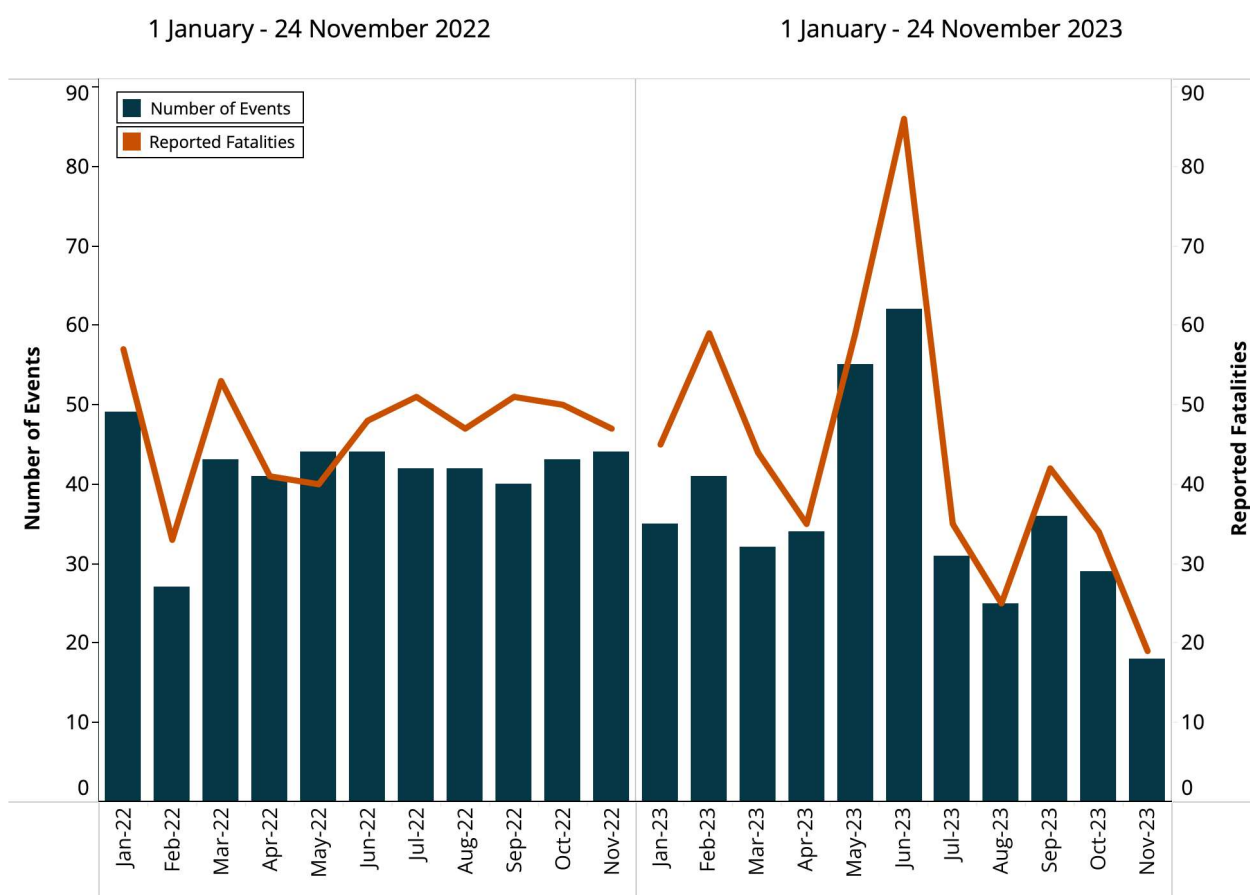
during the state of exception by the anti-gang police forces (DIPAMCO) created by Castro's government in 2022.¹⁰[María Celeste Maradiaga and Jennifer Avila, 'Crisis en cárceles de Honduras pone en entredicho estrategia de seguridad del gobierno de Xiomara Castro,' Contracorriente, 13 April 2023](#) Despite the introduction of new measures to curb corruption and violence,¹¹[Elvin Sandoval, 'El Gobierno de Honduras dice que no busca imitar las medidas de Bukele en El Salvador para controlar sus centros penales,' CNN Español, 24 April 2023](#) another 46 women were killed on 20 June after members of the Barrio-18 gang attacked rivals inside a women's prison in Támara, Francisco Morazán.

In response to the crisis of the penitentiary system, President Castro ordered that the Military Police of Public Order would coordinate Honduras' prison security system from 1 July, after it was previously demilitarized in March 2022.¹²[Asier Vera, 'El Gobierno de Honduras militariza las cárceles y destituye al ministro de Seguridad tras la muerte de 46 mujeres en una prisión,' El Mundo, 22 June 2023; Diario Oficial de la República de Honduras, 'Decreto Ejecutivo Número PCM-03-2022,' 10 August 2022](#) Castro also announced a project to build a high-security prison on the Swan Islands, which could deprive prisoners of contact with their relatives and lawyers.¹³[Marcia Perdomo, 'Construcción de cárcel en Islas del Cisne debe garantizar derechos de visita y debido proceso a privados de libertad,' Criterio, 28 June 2023](#) Both moves further contribute to the remilitarization of public security and heightened concerns about the violations of prisoners' rights as relatives reported beatings and degrading treatments inflicted on inmates.¹⁴[Célia Pousset, 'Familiares de privados de libertad denuncian torturas tras militarización de los centros penales,' Contracorriente, 7 July 2023](#)

Risks for Civilians Persist Despite Moderate Progress in Combating Extortion

Amid persisting clashes between armed groups, civilians continue to endure the deadly effects of criminal groups' activity. The successive security measures adopted in the framework of the state of exception have yielded mixed results for the protection of civilians from gang-related violence. The number of reported civilian deaths has decreased by 7% despite a 14% decrease in civilian targeting by gangs and unidentified armed groups between January and November 2023, with nearly 500 reported fatalities against at least 520 in 2022 (*see graph below*). The Observatory of Violence of the National Autonomous University of Honduras has linked the high lethality of violence to a recrudescence of multiple-victim homicides in 2023, often attributed to feuds between criminal groups.¹⁵[El Herald, 'Más de 140 muertos en 25 masacres en los primeros seis meses de 2023 en Honduras,' 29 June 2023; Proceso Digital, 'Víctimas de matanzas han aumentado en 79 %, según el OV-UNAH,' 3 July 2023; Hondudiaro, 'Diez masacres se registran solo en el mes de junio en Honduras,' 25 June 2023](#) They have allegedly been reorganizing their network following the extradition of former President Hernández and the handover of power to Castro's government, which ended the National Party's 12-year rule.¹⁶[Jared Olson, 'Explosion in land violence forces Hondurans to migrate, strains aid response,' The New Humanitarian, 18 May 2023](#) Notably, on 24 June, alleged members of the Barrio 18 (B-18) gang killed at least 13 people in Choloma, Cortés, which has been attributed to an act of reprisal following the deadly gang-led incursion in the Támara prison days earlier.¹⁷[El Herald, 'Capturan a sospechoso de participar en la masacre de Choloma,' 26 June 2023](#) In contrast, government data suggest a 17% drop in the number of homicides in the first semester of 2023 compared to the previous year.¹⁸[Secretaría de Seguridad Nacional – Honduras, 'Secretario de Seguridad: "Tenemos 313 homicidios menos en comparación al primer semestre del año anterior",' 8 July 2023; Deutsche Welle, 'Honduras vuelve a extender estado de excepción por 45 días,' 21 May 2023](#) However, the disaggregated results of the government data for the first half of 2023 indicate that the decline significantly affected homicides linked to interpersonal violence rather than homicides attributed to gangs and extortion activities only.¹⁹[Secretaría de Seguridad, PNUD, and USAID, 'Análisis sobre violencia y seguridad ciudadana en Honduras | enero – junio 2023,' 14 September 2023](#) Hence, even when considering the government's reported statistics, it could be misleading to exclusively link the drop in homicides to a significant decrease in gang violence.

Civilian Targeting Perpetrated by Armed Groups

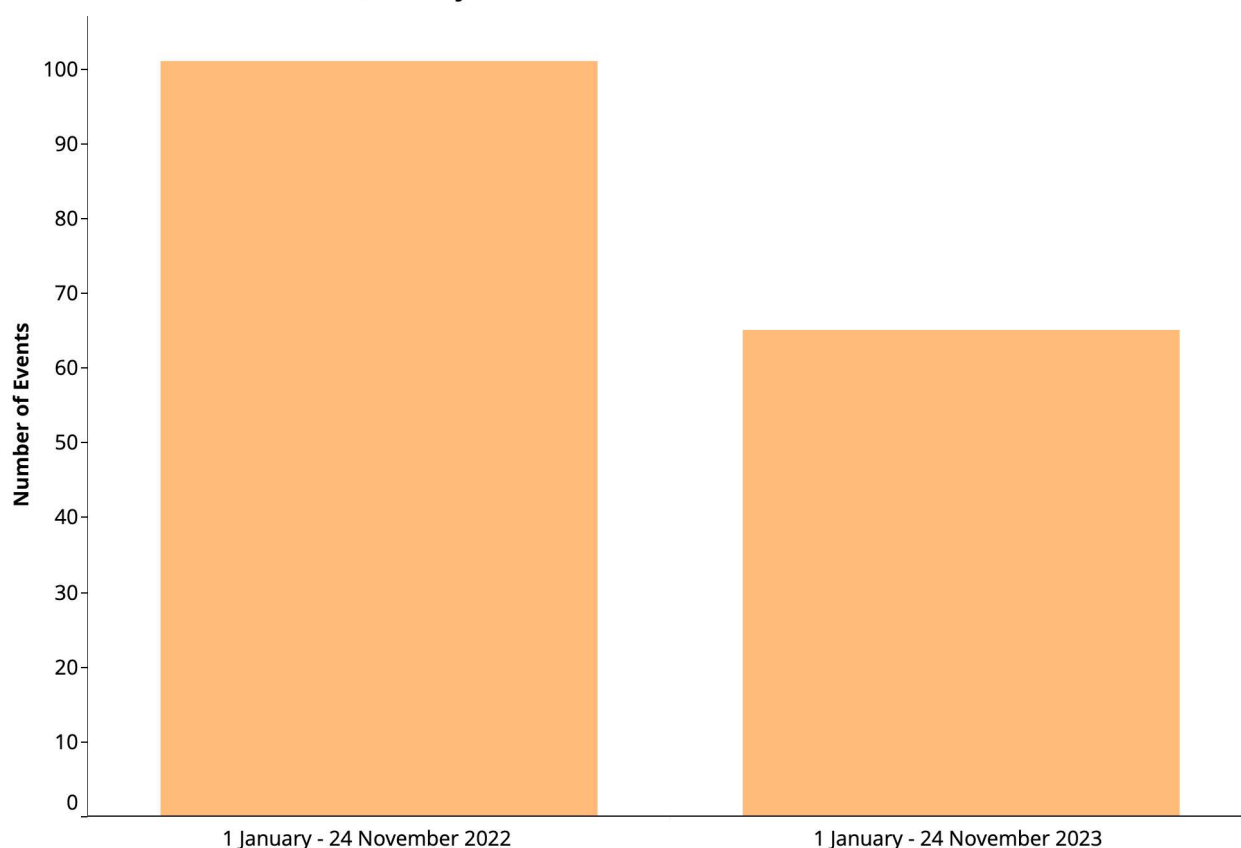


During the initial announcement of the state of exception in November 2022, the government identified extortion as a major driver of violence in the country.²⁰ [Aimée Cárcamo, ‘El nuevo plan contra la extorsión del gobierno de Honduras recicla varias ideas que nunca han funcionado,’ Expediente Público, 2 December 2022](#) Amid an overall decrease in violence targeting civilians, ACLED data show falling numbers of abductions and shootings targeting transport workers – a decline that could more clearly be related to the security measures to fight gang activity. Transportation workers are at particularly heightened risk as the group most targeted by gang violence; they account for 16% of attacks and abductions in 2023. Gangs have long relied on extorting transportation workers as a significant source of income, in particular, by threatening or killing those who refuse to pay the ‘war tax.’²¹ [Alex Papadovassilakis, ‘Honduras Gangs Turn to Bus Workers to Collect Extortion Fees,’ InSight Crime, 25 July 2019](#)

To avoid law enforcement operations, gangs have even infiltrated taxi and bus driver collectives, using middlemen and creating networks for collecting extortion fees.²² [Seth Robbins, ‘MS13 Grows Extortion Empire Through Honduras Mototaxi Fleet,’ InSight Crime, 7 June 2019](#) While measures deployed as part of the state of exception have thus far shown limited results in significantly reducing overall violence levels likely related to gang activity, between January and November 2023, ACLED records a 35% decrease in violence targeting taxi and bus drivers compared to the same period in 2022 (*see graph below*).

Violence Targeting Transportation Workers Perpetrated by Gangs and Unidentified Armed Groups

1 January - 24 November 2022 and 2023



These findings show some encouraging progress in the fight against extortion. Nonetheless, the Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa, a local non-governmental organization, has emphasized that most promised measures to fight extortion remain to be implemented and that most arrests are often not related to acts of extortion.²³ [Andreas Daugaard and Nelson Castañeda, ‘Extorsión bajo la lupa. Evaluando los 6 meses de estado de excepción y el plan antiextorsión,’ Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa, June 2023, p.3, p.12](#) The decrease in violence targeting workers, especially in the transport sector, was also not uniform across Honduras. Gains were primarily apparent in Tegucigalpa, where early security measures were deployed in neighborhoods that displayed high criminality levels and gang presence. In contrast, in San Pedro Sula, violence targeting these groups has slightly increased in 2023. Transportation unions even reported that in addition to Honduras’ main criminal organizations B-18 and Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), new gangs have begun to extort workers from their sector, thus stressing the security plan’s limits in tackling extortion in certain areas.²⁴ [Helen Montoya, ‘Honduras Makes Few Advances Against Crime During 6-Month State of Exception,’ InSight Crime, 5 June 2023](#) Some have also argued that the decrease in violence and extortion in certain urban areas might have been related to agreements between criminal groups, rather than additional security measures.²⁵ [Allan Bu, ‘Sector Rivera Hernández en San Pedro Sula reporta baja de homicidios ¿a qué se debe?,’ Contracorriente, 4 May 2023](#)

While the decrease in violence targeting transportation workers could signal mild progress in curbing extortion-related violence, the durability of these results remains to be seen. This trend is notably contrasted by persisting violence targeting these groups in San Pedro Sula, amid testimonies contesting that improved security is imputable to the government measures.

Shifting Beyond Traditional Epicenters of Organized Crime

Francisco Morazán and Cortés departments are traditional hotspots of organized crime, where criminal groups fight for control of key drug trafficking routes and coastal access points.²⁶[Tiempo, '¿Pelea de territorio? En la Rivera Hernández hay ocho maras y pandillas: DPI', 18 May 2021](#); Ariel Trigueros, 'Cortés, el departamento más sacudido por la violencia en Honduras,' *La Prensa*, 28 August 2019; [Proceso Digital, 'Violencia en Honduras se concentra en siete departamentos: Migdonia Ayestas,' 8 June 2021](#) Within these departments, violence is generally concentrated in areas that are densely populated with high economic activity, particularly the national capital Tegucigalpa, Francisco Morazán, and San Pedro de Sula, Cortés.²⁷[Allan Bu, 'Sector Rivera Hernández en San Pedro Sula reporta baja de homicidios ¿a qué se debe?,' Contracorriente, 4 May 2023](#)

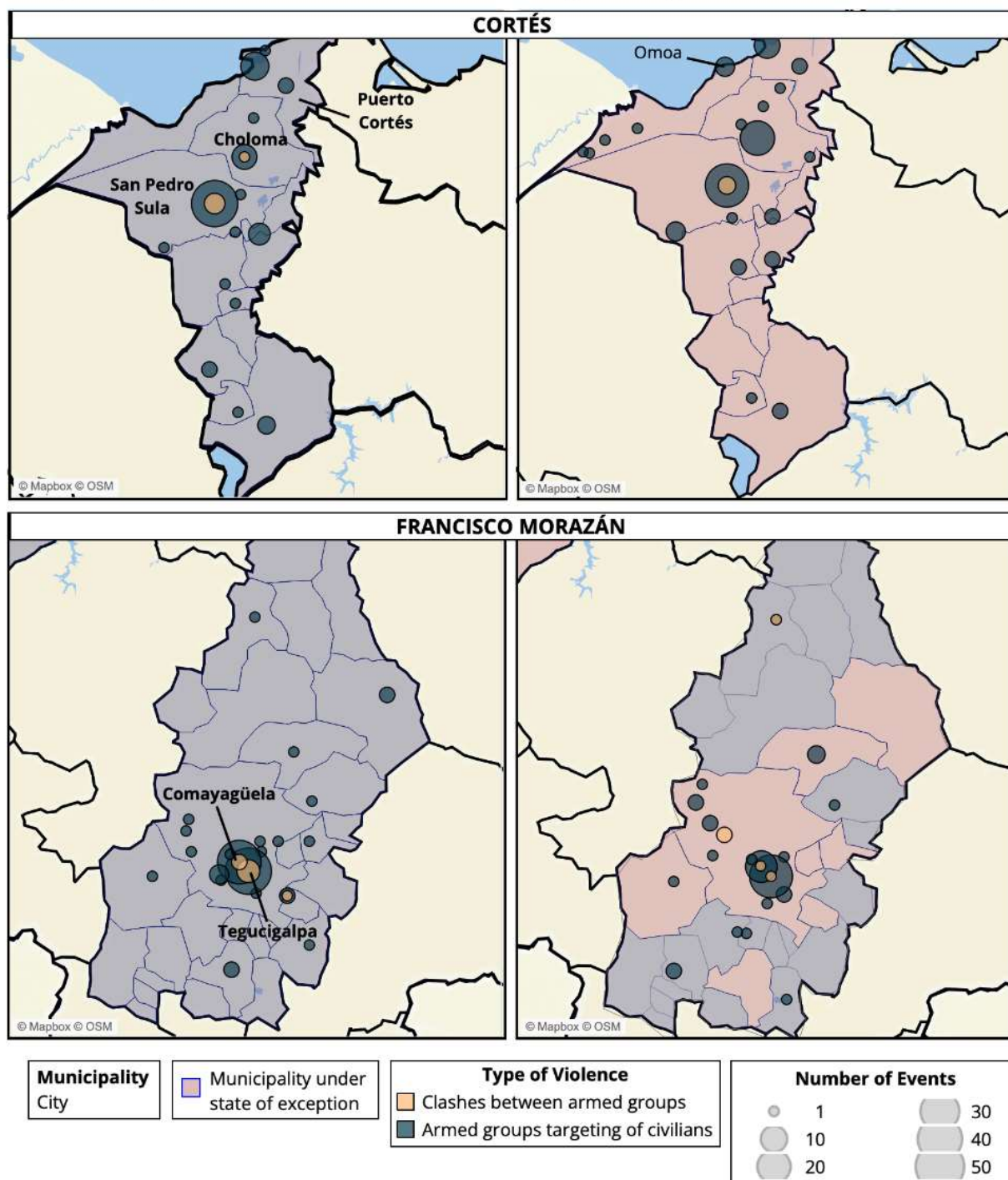
Although Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula continue to be among the most violent municipalities in the country in 2023, ACLED records a drop in violent events and reported fatalities following the establishment of the state of exception. In comparison with 2022, reported fatalities resulting from violence likely related to gang activity (excluding clashes with state forces) dropped by 23% and 40% in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, respectively. In San Pedro Sula, local actors have attributed the decrease in homicides in certain neighborhoods to greater collaboration between police and the community and agreements between organized crime groups rather than the implementation of the state of exception.

While the lethality of the violence has decreased in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, the trend does not seem to be mirrored in other municipalities of the departments. Between January and November 2023, civilian targeting and inter-gang clashes have remained consistent with 2022 levels in other municipalities of Francisco Morazán, with several violent incidents recorded in cities south of the capital. Meanwhile, in Cortés, it has grown by 39% – even in those under the state of exception measures (*see map below*). This finding suggests that the additional law enforcement pressure in urban centers has likely led to criminal groups' activities newly spreading to or intensifying in rural areas and the fringe of urban centers, a trend that has been observed as early as 2014.²⁸[Proceso Digital, 'La mutación de las maras y su diversificación criminal,' 12 January 2021](#); [Proceso Digital, 'Golpes a la MS-13 evidencian su nivel de expansión territorial,' 8 August 2021](#) In Choloma, Cortés, violence increased and grew even deadlier, as illustrated by the B-18 mass shooting of 13 people on 24 June. The attack prompted the government to order additional operations and a special curfew in Choloma and San Pedro Sula cities to recover areas taken over by criminal groups.²⁹[Carlos S. Maldonado, 'La presidenta Xiomara Castro impone un toque de queda tras 21 asesinatos en un día en Honduras,' El País, 25 June 2023](#) Violence also similarly increased in Omoa, Cortés, a strategic drug trafficking location to access Puerto Cortés port and the Guatemala border.

Civilian Targeting and Clashes Involving Gangs and Unidentified Armed Groups in Cortés and Francisco Morazán

1 January - 24 November 2022

1 January - 24 November 2023



Yet, violence is not limited to departments home to Honduras' large urban centers. In 2023, other departments have also experienced increasing levels of civilian targeting and clashes likely related to gangs, relative to 2022. In Intibucá department, the number of violent incidents and related fatalities surpassed that of 2022 in its entirety, amid reports that members of MS-13 have crossed into the department from El Salvador to escape Salvadorean anti-gang operations.³⁰ [InSight Crime, 'Intibucá, Honduras,' 16 February 2021](#) Similarly, in Santa Barbara, violence has surpassed 2022 levels, likely caused by a turf war around the control of the main road connecting San Pedro Sula and the Guatemalan border, the expansion of extortion activities, as well as armed clashes in El

Pozo prison in Ilama.³¹[InSight Crime, ‘Santa Bárbara, Honduras,’ 16 February 2021; International Crisis Group, ‘New Dawn or Old Habits? Resolving Honduras’ Security Dilemmas,’ 10 July 2023](#)

Elsewhere, in Colón department, reported civilian targeting and clashes between armed groups in 2023 have also exceeded levels recorded in 2022. Some of the violence in this department has occurred as part of the Bajo Aguán environmental conflict. Organized crime groups, in collusion with political elites, have targeted activists opposed to mining projects and their negative impact on water resources.³²[Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action, ‘El Conflicto en Bajo Aguán,’ 3 April 2019](#) Notably, on 15 June, armed men killed an environmental defender in Guapinol, Colón, months after the killing of his brother, who was also an environmental activist. Moreover, ACLED records similar violent events in the municipalities under the state of exception, such as Tocoa and Trujillo. Between January and November 2023, armed men killed at least 11 land defenders and environmental activists in the country, which surpasses levels recorded in previous years – suggesting that state of exception measures have had a limited impact on political assassination as well.

Armed violence in Honduras has begun spreading beyond its traditional hotbeds, despite efforts to strengthen the capacity and presence of state forces across the country. Criminal organizations have notably operated across the state with known operations in the coastal city of La Ceiba, Atlántida, in the Mosquitia forest area in Gracias a Dios department, in the coca-growing departments of Colón and Olancho, and also departments bordering Guatemala along strategic drug trafficking routes. Recognizing criminal groups’ wider reach, the government has announced military police operations in Atlántida, Copán, and Yoro, and the deployment of additional military forces in Colón, Olancho, El Paraíso, and Gracias a Dios in April 2023.³³[Florecia Trucco and Elvin Sandoval, ‘Gobierno de Honduras anuncia despliegue de militares en 7 departamentos para combatir el crimen,’ 4 April 2023](#) However, the effort is contrasted by reports that residents have not felt increased state forces’ presence in targeted areas, and that law enforcement’s lack of resources and personnel, especially in rural areas, have likely limited the efficiency of security measures.³⁴[International Crisis Group, ‘New Dawn or Old Habits? Resolving Honduras’ Security Dilemmas,’ 10 July 2023](#)

Addressing Impunity and Root Causes of Violence

The government’s implementation and progressive expansion of its state of exception has coincided with a drop in violence in some of the most violent areas of Honduras, including Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. However, at the countrywide level, Castro’s state of exception has not yielded uniform results in curbing gang violence. Rather, inter-gang violence has continued posing threats to civilians and the violence has spread beyond the main areas targeted by the security measures. Overall, these data indicate that the state of exception has failed to adequately respond to the underlying drivers of this violence.

The security measures, multiple extensions of the country’s state of emergency, and associated restriction of civil rights, including the freedom of assembly and movement, have raised concerns that the policies could set fertile grounds for human rights violations.³⁵[Andreas Dugaard and Nelson Castañeda, ‘Extorsión bajo la lupa. Evaluando los 6 meses de estado de excepción y el plan antiextorsión,’ Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa, June 2023, p.3; Héctor Silva Avalos, ‘Stages of Exception: The New Security Model in Central America?’, WOLA, 22 February 2023](#) Law enforcement operations have notably been criticized for using excessive force and arresting individuals without concrete evidence of their participation in extortion crimes.³⁶[Celia Pousset, ‘El verdadero estado de excepción en Honduras: capturas arbitrarias, abusos y 49 casos judicializados’, 24 February 2023](#) In June, the Comisionado Nacional de los Derechos Humanos reported 193 complaints of police and military force abuse during the state of emergency, including the use of physical force to obtain information, police surveillance outside of civilians’ property, and the firing of shots during raids to intimidate.³⁷[Comisionado Nacional de los Derechos Humanos \(CONADEH\), ‘193 denuncias de la población contra policías y militares por abusos durante el](#)

[Estado de excepción,](#) 15 June 2023 Additionally, the transfer of control of the prison system to the military police in late June and the proposed construction of a high-security prison have also been interpreted as a sign that Honduras could harden the security measures. The proposal is reminiscent of the construction of the largest prison in the Americas, in El Salvador – denounced for breaching international standards on prisoner rights. There are fears that Castro’s government might pursue a *mano dura* policy (or ‘iron fist’) [in line with the war on gangs of Salvadoran president Nayib Bukele](#), reneging on its commitment to upholding human rights and implementing adequate monitoring and complaint mechanisms for victims of violence.

Seemingly overlooking the root causes of gang violence, the state of exception fails to include reforms that focus on the fight against corruption within police and judicial institutions to ensure the end of impunity and the prosecution of the perpetrators of violence. Castro’s government pledged to establish an anti-corruption body, the International Commission on Corruption and Impunity, to investigate and prosecute crimes, although reform requirements of Honduras’ national law have stalled its installation.³⁸ [Marlon González, ‘Misión de la ONU llegará a Honduras previo a instalar CICIH,’ Associated Press, 4 May 2023; Jeff Abbott, ‘Anti-Corruption Efforts in Honduras Are Gaining Steam,’ The Progressive, 8 August 2023](#) Additionally, recent disagreements between Castro’s LIBRE party and the opposition over the election of officials to the Public Prosecutor’s Office could further jeopardize anti-corruption efforts.³⁹ [Gustavo Palencia, ‘Honduras lawmakers elect interim prosecutor, opposition cries foul,’ Reuters, 1 November 2023](#) In fact, the dubious legal grounds under which the new Attorney General and Deputy Attorney General have been appointed have raised concerns in the U.S., the country’s main foreign partner and potential donor of the anti-impunity body, weakening trust in Castro’s government’s commitment towards transparency and the rule of law.⁴⁰ [Roman Gressier and José Luis Sanz, ‘Honduran Government Push to Control AG Dims Horizon for Future CICIH,’ El Faro, 14 November 2023](#) Corruption within state institutions continues to reduce the state’s ability to effectively tackle gangs, including cases covering the participation of anti-gang forces in extortion and extrajudicial executions – some allegedly in collusion with criminal actors. Therefore, any long-lasting effects of Castro’s efforts in reducing violence are cemented in the government’s ability to effectively dismantle networks linking political actors with criminal groups – which have thus far allowed the latter to operate unpunished.