Why does Mexico have the world's 'most violent' cities?

In 2020, according to a report by the Mexico City-based Citizen Council for Public Safety and Criminal Justice, seven out of the ten "most violent" cities in the world were located in Mexico.

The organisation ranks cities with populations of 300,000 or more – which are not in declared conflict zones – based on official tallies of intentional homicides.

The city of Celaya in the central Mexican state of Guanajuato came in first with 109.38 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, followed by Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Ciudad Obregón. Guanajuato's Iraquato took fifth place, while Baja California's Ensenada took sixth. Uruapan in the state of Michoacán came in eighth.

For the country as a whole, 2019 and 2020 were the most violent on record, with more than 34,000 intentional homicides each year. Many critics of Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) have blamed his "hugs, not bullets" policy visà-vis the drug cartels for the bloody state of affairs.

But while AMLO is certainly deserving of more than a little criticism – particularly with regard to his appallingly dismissive attitude towards Mexico's surge in femicides during the pandemic – he did not exactly create the current landscape of violence out of thin air.

For starters, although Mexico is of course not officially categorised as a global conflict zone, the country has had the grave misfortune to exist at the mercy of a United States-backed "war on drugs" since 2006, a full 12 years before AMLO assumed the presidency.

Since the start of militarised operations, some 300,000 people have been murdered, and more than 77,000 have disappeared.

In a hypocritical arrangement typical of Mexico's nasty imperial neighbour, the US is itself responsible for not only the demand for drugs but also the criminalisation that makes their trafficking so lucrative and produces such violent competition in the first place – with poor civilians often caught in the crossfire.

And because the capitalist system thrives on the proliferation of strife in general and the marketing of superficial non-solutions to problems, the US response to the narco-showdown it created across its southern border has been to throw heaps of money at corrupt and violent Mexican security forces who are often in bed with – who else? – the cartels.

Furthermore, as a Washington Post article from 2020 notes, the "US-backed kingpin strategy" – whereby cartel leaders were killed or captured – merely caused criminal organisations to splinter and multiply rather than spontaneously cease to exist, as any remotely lucid person might have predicted.

Now, the array of armed groups continues to expand, and they have also diversified their activities to encompass everything from fuel theft and migrant trafficking to contraband cigarette sales and Fentanyl pill production.

The drug war's initial focus on large cities is another factor contributing to the groups' diffusion throughout the country as they battle for trafficking routes and territory – and to the sudden emergence of little-known places like Celaya, Guanajuato, as global epicentres of violence.

Again, the Citizen Council for Public Safety and Criminal Justice study lists only cities that do not fall within official war zones. But as luck would have it, plenty of equipment designed for use in war regularly inundates Mexican territory from – you guessed it – the US.

Another Washington Post article from last year observes that the .50-caliber sniper rifle that has been "used by US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan to strike targets from nearly two miles away" – and that is "sold casually" in the US, as weapons tend to be – is "increasingly being used to target and terrorise Mexicans".

Over the past decade, the article says, approximately 2.5 million illicit US guns have reportedly flowed into Mexico, and the "percentage of homicides committed with firearms has risen" accordingly.

From wars on terror that largely consist of terrorising civilians, then, to wars on drugs that do the same, the imperial dots seem pretty well connected. And the arms industry presumably is not registering too many complaints.

Dawn Marie Paley, author of Drug War Capitalism, commented in an email to me that the "militarisation of Mexico over the course of the last 15 years under the discourse of the war on drugs has led to an increase in violence" – the same "pattern we're seeing in countries throughout the hemisphere, many of which are experiencing violence more extreme than during the military juntas of the Cold War".

Naturally, not all countries of the hemisphere have had the precise honour of being co-signatories to the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which swiftly dispensed with millions of Mexican livelihoods on behalf of US agribusiness and other noble sectors – while also causing many Mexicans to view their own integration into the drug trade as the only viable economic option.

But as Paley emphasised to me, hemispheric "violence on this scale cannot be properly understood as a consequence of criminal activity and state responses to it". More accurately, she said, it must be understood as "neoliberal war, waged against poor and working-class people in the interest of maintaining an increasingly unequal social order".

To be sure, unequal social orders are great in terms of generating the perpetual strife on which capitalism thrives. And the present violent Mexican panorama – in which cities like Celaya are transformed into veritable war zones – constitutes a link in a vicious but profitable cycle.

An ABC News article from May quotes penultimate US Ambassador to Mexico Christopher Landau on how Mexican president AMLO has "basically adopted an agenda of a pretty laissez-faire attitude towards" the drug cartels, which Landau claims "is pretty troubling to our government, obviously".

But there are a lot more troubling things out there.

aljazeera

Chasing the money: FIFA's quest for a biennial World Cup

The recent Super League debacle, created by established large football clubs in Europe to concentrate power, wealth and control in their own hands has been abandoned…for now. The repercussions of the Super League are still to be determined, with UEFA potentially charging Real Madrid, Barcelona and Juventus as they have not yet withdrawn from the franchise project.

However, the sport's infighting has not finished. FIFA, football's governing body, is now investigating the feasibility of holding the World Cup every two years instead of four. If the proposals are introduced it is likely to result in a conflict with UEFA, whose own competition, the Euros, also presently takes place over a four-year cycle.

FIFA's annual accounts reveal that it loses money three years out of every four, and relies on the success of the World Cup to underwrite losses in other years.

UEFA has the benefit of the Champions League taking place amongst club sides on an annual basis, plus the European Championships.

A FIFA World Cup taking place every two years is therefore seen by some as a means of smoothing out the revenue flows and allowing FIFA to become more profitable too.

There were accusations levelled at FIFA president Gianni Infantino that he was not wholly opposed to the Super League proposals because FIFA would have had to sanction the competition. Knowing this his critics, including Spanish La Liga president Javier Tebas have suggested Infantino was willing to trade approval of the Super League if the clubs involved would have committed to a bigger FIFA World Club Championship. This competition would take place annually. This would have further increased FIFA's income while reducing those of UEFA too. Infantino has denied the accusations, but FIFA's initial opposition to the Super League was relatively lukewarm.

FIFA as an organisation is very generous to its member federations (who also, coincidentally, vote to choose the president).

In 2019/20, following the problems caused to football globally by COVID-19, FIFA instigated a $1.5 billion relief plan. FIFA has significant cash and investment reserves and so was able to fund the relief plan from its existing resources.

FIFA funds many worthy football-related projects via annual sums given to its 211 federations. In 2019, pre-COVID, these were worth $1m each, plus sums available for bespoke projects.

It is easy to see why a more regular FIFA World Cup would have some appeal, as extra revenues would result in higher payouts to member associations.

A more regular competition might also increase the possibility of some smaller nations, who have never competed, reaching the finals.

The world's two most populous nations, China and India, have managed to qualify for one set of FIFA World Cup finals and scored zero goals in the finals between them. Such nations would potentially welcome the opportunity to qualify for such a prestigious competition if it were held on a more regular basis. Similarly, it would increase the chances for individual players to compete in the world's pinnacle competition.

The downside of having the tournament take place with such regularity is that it would put further pressure on an already overloaded fixture list. UEFA have made changes to the Champions League with a new 'Swiss Model' which will mean that from 2024/25 it will take 180 matches to reduce 36 teams in the competition to 24.

Footballers who compete in such competitions are well paid, but they are also athletes rather than machines. The risk of injury increases in line with the number of competitive matches that are played. Clubs perhaps would have to keep more expanded rosters of players and rotate their starting eleven to minimise the dangers of losing star players for longer periods due to injury.

Fitting in a more regular FIFA World Cup, expanded FIFA Club World Cup and Champions League, plus the existing European Championships, African Cup of Nations, Copa America etc. and domestic competitions is not feasible.

How teams would qualify for the FIFA World Cup under a two-year cycle is uncertain.

The proposal of having teams in the competition, who qualify by right as opposed to merit, was one of the reasons for the demise of the Super League.

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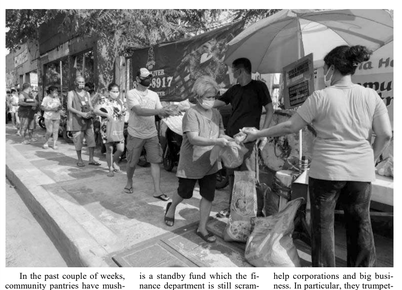
In this pandemic, Duterte has his priorities all wrong



In the past couple of weeks, community pantries have mushroomed all over the Philippines. The poor, left with no other options, formed long lines in the summer heat, under threat of COVID-19, just to get what the government of President Rodrigo Duterte has so far failed to give: economic aid.

The sudden growth of community pantries mirrors not just the extent of the Philippines' economic crisis but also the extent of the government's neglect. Total output, as measured by gross domestic product (GDP), plunged by 9.5 percent in 2020, the Philippines' worst economic slump since World War II. Gross per capita income plummeted to 2015 levels. Countless businesses, especially small ones, were forced to shut down and cut their workers' wages. Joblessness skyrocketed, and more than three million Filipinos remained unemployed by March this year.

The poor were hit especially hard. A whopping six in 10 Filipino households went hungry by the end of 2020, and as many as 5.5 million Filipinos could be pushed into poverty if the government fails to provide them with enough aid.

The Philippines was also hit the hardest among members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, suffering the region's worst economic contraction and the highest unemployment rate. The Philippines is also recovering the slowest.

Duterte's economic managers liked to tout the Philippines' strong macroeconomic fundamentals before the pandemic. But with all the economic indicators going haywire, that is all but a distant memory now.

The current recession, the first in about three decades, stems from the fact that the Duterte government has miserably failed to contain COVID-19 and mitigate its effects.

Unlike countries like Vietnam, in the Philippines, there was no prompt government action to stem the spread of the virus. The government imposed strict lockdowns last year but in the meantime, failed to boost the capacity of the health system to cope with an epidemic. This partly led to the steep rise of COVID-19 cases in April, which forced Duterte to put the capital region and nearby provinces under strict lockdown. This hurt the economy even more.

The Philippines was also the last country in Southeast Asia to start its vaccination programme. To begin with, Duterte's pandemic task force was woefully ill-prepared. While Congress authorised ?82.5bn ($1.7bn) to buy the vaccines, only ?2.5 billion ($50m) of that is readily available for use. The bulk of it, ?70 billion ($1.45bn), is like an unfunded cheque parked separately under "unprogrammed appropriations", while the rest (?10 billion, $200m) is a standby fund which the finance department is still scrambling to bankroll.

The ball was again dropped when the vaccine indemnification law was belatedly enacted. Vaccine manufacturers demanded extra protection from possible lawsuits – likely because of the highly politicised vaccine campaign against dengue fever a few years back. Despite being aware of this indemnity condition, Duterte's task force informed Congress too late. In doing so, the vaccine rollout was needlessly delayed and the Philippines lost out to other countries in securing vaccine supplies from manufacturers besides Sinovac.

As of May, some 7.7 million vaccine doses have arrived from donations and purchases, but vaccination is still moving at a snail's pace. Unable to solve bottlenecks in procurement, logistics and administration, the Duterte government keeps missing its own targets. Not even Duterte's czars know precisely when the next doses will arrive. And to make matters worse, about a third of Filipinos still refuse to be vaccinated.

Scrimping on aid

More and more countries are realising that, besides the need to beef up health systems, economic recovery should be driven by fiscal stimulus. Governments ought to actively, strategically spend to make sure that their economies do not collapse while responding to the pandemic.

But it is painfully clear that the Philippine government's fiscal response is not just wanting in size but also focused on the wrong things.

The Philippines has spent too conservatively relative to the extent of its economic crisis. According to the International Monetary Fund, last year Singapore dedicated about 18 percent of its GDP to its fiscal response, followed by Thailand (9.6 percent), Malaysia (4.9 percent), Indonesia (3.8 percent) and Vietnam (3.6 percent). The Philippines, by contrast, budgeted a measly 3.1 percent.

Duterte's scrimping is also painfully evident in the misguided priorities in the 2021 budget: there is no substantial funding for aid and economic relief, like the cash transfers granted last year. Instead, the government set aside nearly a quarter of its ?4.5 trillion ($93bn) budget for infrastructure, particularly patronage-driven projects, like local roads and multipurpose buildings, that will likely figure in next year's general elections. In short, it is a business-as-usual budget, and poor Filipinos continue to be the least of the government's worries.

In the pre-State of the Nation Address (pre-SONA) forum in April, government officials also emphasised the continuation of their infrastructure project called "Build, Build, Build", and highlighted measures that will mainly help corporations and big business. In particular, they trumpeted a trio of trickle-down economic policies which will lower corporate income tax rates, help banks offload bad loans, and address the liquidity and solvency problems of firms.

Some lawmakers are pushing for a new stimulus package, called "Bayanihan 3", that will give massive economic relief to low-income households, disadvantaged workers, farmers and fisherfolk, among others. But the economic managers have thumbed it down for months, claiming that the government ought instead to spend the 2021 budget and leftover funds from the two stimulus packages passed last year. They also argue that massive aid could not be paid for since additional borrowings may hurt the country's credit ratings.

Such unreasonable scrimping has not just produced watered-down and ineffective quarantine measures – leading to infection spikes that overwhelm the country's health system – but also a dearth of economic relief, pushing more and more Filipinos into poverty. The Duterte government also failed to address another pandemic (African swine fever) which has recently stoked food inflation and worsened economic misery.

No wonder private-sector volunteers all over the nation have banded together to organise community pantries, and taken food and aid distribution into their own hands. Although celebrated as a modern-day incarnation of the revered "bayanihan" or Filipino community spirit, these community pantries are also a damning indictment of the president and his cabinet's failure to lead in this time of crisis.

Give more aid

There is an urgent need to pass Bayanihan 3 that will authorise massive economic aid, specifically cash transfers to the most vulnerable sectors of society, jobs assistance for the unemployed and wage subsidies for small businesses. This package must also make sure that beneficiary families are able to pay for expenses and debts they incurred over the past year or so.

Vaccine procurement and administration also need to be fast-tracked, with a focus on effective diplomacy to secure adequate vaccine supply.

The Philippines is desperate for an economic rebound, but considerable uncertainty still hangs in the air. Absent a significantly ramped-up health system, the economy will continue to stumble. For millions of Filipinos – especially living hand to mouth daily – the future looks as bleak as ever.

In the coming months, the nation's attention will inevitably shift toward the 2022 elections and government officials will increasingly be preoccupied with politics.