

# The Washington Post

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## Colombia planned well for the pandemic. The region is reeling.

By **David Ignatius**

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Colombian President Iván Duque began a lockdown in March that has spared his country some of the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic. But that hasn't helped his neighbors in hard-hit Latin America, and Duque says the lesson is that countries must work better together to prevent the spread of disease.

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“This pandemic could have been better managed by all of us if we had better multilateral coordination when the problem first started,” Duque said in a telephone interview Wednesday from Bogota. Countries in Latin America that resisted “draconian measures” like those taken in Colombia, hoping to protect their economies, have been hit hardest, he said.

Latin America is at the trailing edge of this pandemic, but it's taking a brutal blow. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the region a new “epicenter” of covid-19 in May. On Friday, 44,072 new cases were reported in the region, up 124 percent from a week earlier, according to the Inter-American Development Bank. Latin America registered three of the top 10 countries — Brazil, Peru and Chile — in the global compilation of coronavirus cases by John Hopkins University. as of Monday.

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Latin America receives insufficient attention in the U.S. media, in coverage of covid-19 and everything else. The interview with Duque last week offered a useful window on a country and region that matter increasingly to U.S. trade, immigration and security policy. Duque said he had been studying warnings late last year from the WHO about the danger of a respiratory pandemic, so when covid-19 emerged in Wuhan, he paid attention. He declared a national health emergency on March 6, closed Colombia's schools March 14, ordered the elderly to stay at home March 20, and imposed a national quarantine March 25.

Those early moves helped keep Colombia's rate of infection low, by comparison with its neighbors, but it didn't spare the country entirely. According to data gathered by Johns Hopkins, Colombia had recorded 68,836 cases and 2,353 deaths as of Monday. That is a tiny fraction of Brazil's 1,083,341 cases and 50,591 deaths — which ranks second only to the United States in both categories — but is still a hefty burden.

Colombia is still recovering from a decades-long insurgency fueled by its powerful drug cartels, and Duque has tried to maintain the national reconciliation and recovery. He confirmed recent news reports that remnants of the notorious Medellin cartel had helped provide covid-19 relief in that region. He said Medellin has become a center for combating the virus using a computer app that helped provide food and money to needy residents during the quarantine. According to the Associated Press, Medellin had recorded just 741 Covid-19 cases as of June 13.

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Coca production has surged again in Colombia in recent years, after falling sharply a decade ago because of eradication efforts. Duque said he is trying to reduce production, but carefully. On the day we spoke, he announced there had been a 9 percent reduction in cultivated coca areas last year, a gradual rate of decline he expects to maintain over the next three years.

For Latin America countries, the covid-19 crisis has been compounded by poor health-care infrastructure and scarce resources. A report released last week by the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development notes that as of 2017, per-person health spending in Latin America and the Caribbean was only about a quarter of what was spent in developed OECD countries.

A World Bank blog noted this month, “The impact of the pandemic will itself be highly unequal in Latin America: both in terms of health and economic outcomes, and along income, spatial, gender and racial dimensions.”

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Duque said Colombia's health-care system was more modern than those of some neighbors, and that the country officially joined the OECD this year. But he noted that Colombia's social safety net was still fragile and that under the national quarantine, he had directed food and other subsidies to about 30 million of the country's roughly 50 million people. Duque said his government had also offered wage subsidies to about half of Colombia's formal workforce this month.

Asked about neighboring Venezuela, which has spilled 1.8 million refugees into Colombia, Duque repeated his sharp criticism of President Nicolás Maduro, whom he called a "dictator" and "war criminal," and his support for opposition leader Juan Guaidó. Working with the United States and regional allies, Duque has pressed for a Venezuela transition plan that includes a coalition government, elections and an economic recovery plan.

But political change remains stalled. Duque warned that if Venezuela isn't stabilized, amid the regional health crisis, "this will become day by day a time bomb."

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