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WORLD

# Thousands take to Colombia's streets to protest 50 percent increase in gasoline prices

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Motorcycle riders hold a caravan to protest the increase in gas prices in Bogota, Colombia, Monday, Aug. 28, 2023. (AP Photo/Fernando Vergara)

**BOGOTA, Colombia**—Thousands of protesters on cars and motorbikes took to the streets of Colombia's main cities on August 28 to reject recent hikes in gasoline prices that have drastically increased the price of fuel in the South American country.

Protesters say that the monthly price hikes set by Colombia's first leftist government are making it harder for small businesses to operate and could push up the price of food.

But the government of President Gustavo Petro says the gasoline subsidies cost about \$11 billion a year. It says it must eliminate the subsidies to pay debts to the national oil company [Ecopetro](#), which produces most of the country's fuel, and to free up more funds for social programs.

The protest comes as discontent grows with Petro's administration a year after he took office promising to reduce poverty and make peace with the nation's remaining rebel groups.

Petro's administration has struggled to stop violence in rural parts of the country and to

boost Colombia's economy, which is expected to grow by just one percent in 2023, according to the International Monetary Fund.

"This government is making decisions that are anti-business," said Alejandra Mendoza, the manager of a small company that transports frozen food and other goods for supermarkets in Colombia. She attended the protest wearing her company's yellow jacket.

"Our costs have gone up by a third, and we have to adjust our budget each month because of the gasoline hikes" Ms. Mendoza said.

The price of gasoline in Colombia has risen from 9,000 pesos a gallon in August of last year (\$2.50) to more than 14,000 currently (\$3.40) as Colombia's government cuts back on subsidies each month.

Officials in Colombia's Finance Ministry have said they want gasoline to reach a price of 16,000 pesos per gallon—about \$4—by the end of the year, which would mirror current gas prices in the U.S., where the federal minimum wage, however, is more than four times greater than Colombia's minimum wage of \$280 a month.

In July, the ministry said that subsidies for diesel, which is used by most cargo trucks in Colombia, will be removed after municipal elections in October, and that the price of diesel fuel will double by the end of next year.

Petro has argued that the nation's gasoline subsidies mostly benefited wealthier Colombians who own vehicles. But he has shown signs that he is willing to negotiate gasoline prices with some groups.

Recently, Petro's administration cut a deal with the nation's taxi driver unions, under which gasoline prices will be frozen for the country's estimated 200,000 yellow taxis.

However, members of Colombia's opposition say that the government needs to go further because gas hikes are also hurting delivery workers, drivers and small business owners who are struggling to recover from the pandemic.

Jennifer Pedraza, a congresswoman who helped to organize the protest, pointed out that the government could moderate the hikes in fuel prices, by charging less sales taxes on gasoline and diesel.

"The people are asking the administration to negotiate a different gasoline policy" she said, adding that its time for Colombia's national oil company to "take an interest, in making gasoline affordable for all." (AP)

## Hundreds of thousands trafficked into online criminality across Southeast Asia

Criminal gangs in southeast Asia are using torture and abuse to force hundreds of thousands of people into an online scam operation that generates billions of dollars per year, the UN Rights Office (OHCHR) said on August 29.

OHCHR said that at least 120,000 people across Myanmar and another 100,000 in Cambodia may be held in situations where they are forced to execute lucrative online scams—from illegal gambling to crypto fraud.

Other States including Lao PDR, the Philippines, and Thailand have also been identified as main countries of destination or transit.

### Victims, not criminals

“People who are coerced into working in these scamming operations endure inhumane treatment while being forced to carry out crimes,” said UN rights chief Volker Türk. “They are victims. They are not criminals,” he insisted.

The latest OHCHR report sheds new light on cybercrime scams that have become a major issue in Asia, with many workers trapped and forced to participate in scams targeting people over the internet.

The report notes workers face a range of serious human rights violations, and many have been subjected to abuses such as torture, arbitrary detention, sexual violence and forced labor.

Victims of such operations can be scammed an average of \$160,000 each, often through sophisticated scripts sent via unregulated social media applications.

According to OHCHR, these victims come from across the ASEAN region as well as mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, South Asia and even further afield from Africa and Latin America.

Mr. Türk called on States to ensure justice “for the people who have been so horrifically abused.”

### **Noticeable trends**

Speaking in Geneva, Pia Oberoi, OHCHR’s Senior Advisor on Migration and Human Rights in Asia Pacific, said ongoing regional “economic distress” paired with the COVID-19 pandemic has meant there is a lack of regular and safe pathways towards decent work opportunities.

“This has meant populations are more likely to rely on recruitment forums or intermediaries,” so criminal gangs are increasingly targeting individuals through these platforms, suggesting victims are destined for real jobs.

“There weren’t red flags being raised”—particularly for the more educated, multilingual young men who the report notes are frequent victims.

“It follows a pattern of how labor migration has taken place in the region, and also speaks to the sophistication of these fraudulent recruitments,” added Ms. Oberoi.

### **Weak regulations**

According to OHCHR, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated response measures had a drastic impact on illicit activities across the region—with increased virtual work and the movement of businesses to less regulated spaces.

Ms. Oberoi said the situation is “unfolding in locations where regulation is weak,” such as conflict affected border areas in Myanmar, “with little to no rule of law” and in “laxly regulated jurisdictions such as special economic zones in Laos PDR and Cambodia.”

Describing the trends across the region, she added that the ability of ASEAN nationals to travel across borders without a visa, also means there is a “lack of protection-sensitive screening,” as officials don’t always have the training to “identify protection-sensitive responses.”

### **Justice for victims**

Although there are several regional legal frameworks to prosecute such crimes, OHCHR said there is a lack of implementation by States and often forced criminality is not seen as a legal violation.

Even when victims are rescued or escape, rather than being protected and given access to the rehabilitation and remedy they need, they are often subjected to criminal prosecution or immigration penalties, OHCHR said.

"All affected States need to summon the political will to strengthen human rights and improve governance and the rule of law, including through serious and sustained efforts to tackle corruption," said Mr. Türk.

"Only such a holistic approach can break the cycle of impunity and ensure protection and justice for the people who have been so horrifically abused." (UN News)

Me gusta 0



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