

Why is Venezuela so violent?

With 19,000 murders last year, the Latin American country is now considered one of the most dangerous in the world.

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The Venezuelan government has banned private gun ownership in its latest attempt to tackle high crime levels.

"People don't blame him [Chavez], he never mentions the problems, he always blames his own ministers so he tried to avoid the confrontation with the problems The government since two to three years ago realised that it was a political problem but before they thought it was part of a class struggle."

- Roberto Briceno-Leon, a sociologist and criminologist

The Latin American nation is considered one of the most dangerous places in the world with more than 19,000 murders last year, according to police and civil society organisations.

Venezuela's murder rate is more than three times that of Mexico, and is surpassed only by El Salvador and Honduras.

Along with the murder rate, levels of robbery and kidnapping have also been going up under the rule of Hugo Chavez, the president.

But a majority of voters do not hold him responsible for the insecurity.

Last November, Chavez deployed a 3,000-strong military force to support police on the streets of the capital, Caracas, and other regions with high crime levels.

The government has also offered a gun amnesty to encourage people to give up their illegal arms.

"It is an outrageous statement to say that the Chavez government has done nothing to combat crime ... this is a government that's looking at the root cause to create a long-term solution in addressing the inequalities, the imbalances in the country."

- Eva Golinger, Venezuelan-American writer/investigator

And now it has passed a law banning the commercial sale of guns. Only the army, police and approved security companies will be able to buy arms.

But Chavez's opponents say these measures are only the latest in a long list of failed attempts to boost security.

Crime is certain to be a key issue in the presidential elections in October.

Inside Story Americas asks: What is behind the high crime rate in Venezuela? And is the government doing enough to cut down on murders and kidnappings?

Joining presenter Anand Naidoo to discuss these issues are guests: Roberto Briceno-Leon, a sociologist and criminologist who is the director of the Venezuelan Observatory on Violence; Eric Fransworth, the vice-president of the Council of the Americas; and Eva Golinger, the author of *The Chavez Code: Cracking US Intervention in Venezuela*.

"[It is a combination of] a narcotics culture that has been developing in the country for some time ..., a long-standing poverty element and issues of over-politicisation of some of the security forces that make the job of on-the-beat policing more difficult to do."

-Eric Farnsworth, the vice-president of the Council of the Americas

STATE OF CRIME IN VENEZUELA:

* In 2005, the Venezuelan interior ministry stopped reporting crime statistics, but in February 2011, the interior minister told congress that the murder rate in 2010 was 48 per 100,000.

* Other groups, however, report higher numbers. The Venezuelan Observatory on Violence says there were 57 people killed per 100,000 that year, or approximately 17,600 murders.

* The group also says the number of people murdered in 2011 rose to over 19,000. That is a rate of 67 people killed per 100,000 residents.

* In neighboring Colombia, the murder rate in 2011 was around 38 per 100,000.

* The rate in Mexico for the same year was around 15 per 100,000, and that is in a country reeling from deadly drug violence.

Source: Al Jazeera