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# PARADISE LOST?

**FIREARMS TRAFFICKING AND  
VIOLENCE IN ECUADOR**

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JUNE 2024

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Cover: A soldier stands guard after a riot in El Inca prison, Quito, January 2024.  
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## **FROM VISION TO ACTION: A DECADE OF ANALYSIS, DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE**

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: THE ALARMING GROWTH OF VIOLENCE IN ECUADOR

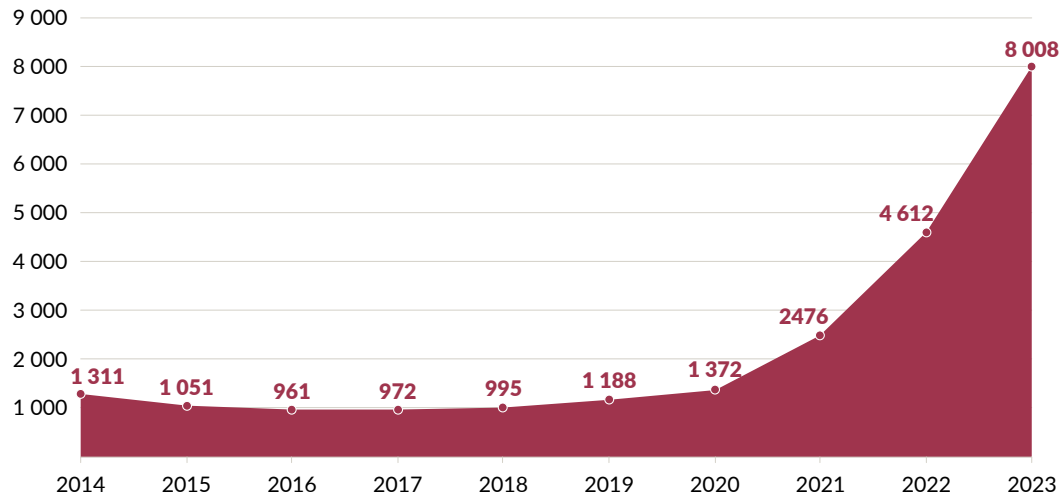
**E**cador is experiencing an unusual growth in violence and criminality. In addition to being among the 10 countries with the greatest incidence of criminality in the world,<sup>1</sup> it currently has the highest rate of violent deaths in Latin America, 47.25 for every 100 000 residents,<sup>2</sup> eight times higher than in 2016, the year Ecuador recorded its lowest rate since 1980.<sup>3</sup> In less than a decade, it has gone from being the second safest country in South America (after Chile)<sup>4</sup> to becoming the most violent.

Firearms play a central role in this security crisis. According to the 2023 Global Organized Crime Index,<sup>5</sup> arms trafficking is one of the largest-growing criminal markets in the country. Firearms have become an instrument for strengthening the capacity of criminal organizations dedicated to drug trafficking and illegal mining, as well as a way to assert territorial control. In 2023, firearms were involved in nine out of every 10 violent deaths in the country.<sup>6</sup>

As shown in Figures 1 and 2, since 2020 the number of homicides has virtually doubled year after year, as well as the recurrence of the use of firearms. These figures exceed the regional and worldwide averages of violence committed with these devices.<sup>7</sup> In addition, while young men have accounted for the majority of the violent deaths recorded, the assassinations of women have also grown significantly in recent years. In the case of the femicides recorded in 2023, a total of 321 violent deaths of women were gender-related, 37% of which were committed using firearms.<sup>8</sup>

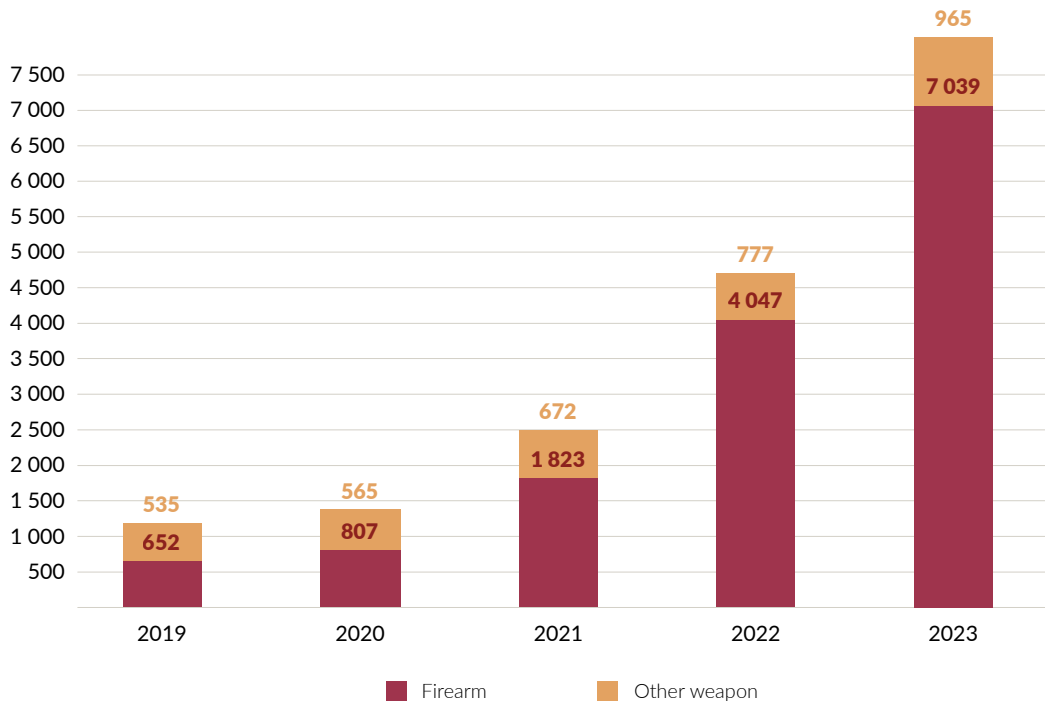
The centrality of firearms in the dynamics of violence in Ecuador is the result of the loosening of internal regulations that permit the import, manufacture, commerce and carrying of weapons. Despite the growth in armed violence, on 1 April 2023 the Ecuadorian government relaxed several measures that expanded the legal market for firearms. These decisions were adopted despite the institutional inability of the state to exercise effective control over the permits to carry and possess weapons;<sup>9</sup> the growing corruption in security-related institutions;<sup>10</sup> and the harsh criticism by some sectors of civil society of the government for having fostered the adoption of measures on self-protection and the privatization of security instead of promoting a public security policy.<sup>11</sup>

This change has facilitated the proliferation of arms amid a process of expansion of criminal activities in the country, which has in turn led to the growth of an active and concerning market for arms. Without a doubt, the increase in violence is related to the increase in arms trafficking, which, in addition to being lucrative, facilitates other crimes, such as drug trafficking, extortion, illegal mining, contract killings and kidnappings.



**FIGURE 1** Violent deaths in Ecuador, 2014–2023.

SOURCE: National Police, Office of the President of the Republic of Ecuador



**FIGURE 2** Intentional homicides in Ecuador by type of weapon used, 2019–2023.

SOURCE: OECO, *Boletín anual de homicidios intencionales en Ecuador: 2023, 2024*, <https://oeco.pdf.org/boletin-semestral-de-homicidios-intencionales-en-ecuador/>

This report examines the connections between arms trafficking in Ecuador, regulatory changes, the growth in criminality and the increase in violence. It also sheds light on the arms that are currently present in the country, by showing the place of manufacture, type and costs, as well as the routes taken for the illegal trade. The report concludes with recommendations calling for urgently dealing with the arms trade from national and regional approaches, so as to stop the current cycle of violence and growing capacity of criminal organizations.

## **Methodology**

This report employs a primarily qualitative methodology. It combines information obtained through interviews performed in 2024, and data gleaned from official documents, analyses and media monitoring.

It is based on interviews with members of the police, Ecuadorian civil society, academics, investigative journalists, prison guards, businesspersons and members of shooting clubs. To protect their anonymity for reasons of security, we do not include the names of our participants.

The data obtained through our fieldwork has been triangulated with data gathered in the national press, resulting from a review of the news and reporting published in 2022 and 2023. This report is also based on the laws promulgated by recent Ecuadorian administrations during the period 2017–2023 and official documents issued by the principal public institutions responsible for national security. Lastly, the paper is also based on broader analyses by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime on organized crime globally and in Ecuador as well as by the Ecuadorian Observatory of Organized Crime (OECO).



## REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

**E**ccuador approved its first law for regulating the production, import, sale and export of arms in 1963, thanks to the initiative of the military junta that governed the country at that time.<sup>12</sup> In 1979, a new law was passed that is still in force today, 45 years later. This law laid responsibility at the feet of the national defence ministry and joint command of the armed forces to issue, through the arms control department (DCA), permits to carry and possess arms.

Starting in 2007, as a result of the violence in Ecuador, the government of former president Rafael Correa decided to change the country's arms-control policy by enacting the following four measures:<sup>13</sup>

- **Prohibit imports:** This measure's goal was to temporarily suspend the import of arms and ammunition.
- **Raise taxes:** This measure levied a 300% tax on the sale of firearms and ammunition.
- **Prohibit the bearing of arms:** In 2009, it became illegal nationally to bear and possess weapons for the purpose of self-protection. In addition, through supplementary regulations, it became difficult for businesses, private security companies, sports enthusiasts, collectors and civil society in general to access arms. This measure was in force until 1 April 2023.
- **Prohibit artisanal arms manufacture:** In February 2012, the artisanal manufacturing of firearms became illegal throughout the entire country and all authorizations that had been issued to such manufacturers were suspended.

These regulations, among other measures adopted by the government, constituted a regulatory framework that ostensibly reduced the legal arms market and armed violence. Nonetheless, in 2022, the government of Guillermo Lasso relaxed some of the existing regulations, which infused a new dynamism in the legal and illegal arms markets in Ecuador.

## Political context

Since 2007 Ecuador was governed for 10 years by the Movimiento Alianza País (country alliance movement) led by Rafael Correa. By the end of that decade, in 2017, Alianza País was represented by another candidate, Lenin Moreno, who won a simple victory over Guillermo Lasso, representing a right-leaning party. Shortly thereafter, Moreno broke the agreement of continuity with Correa's programme and aligned his politics with the neoliberal element of the ideological spectrum.

In 2021, Lasso won the elections in his third electoral bid. However, he did not complete his presidential term owing to accusations reported by the media of alleged corruption during his government<sup>14</sup> that involved his family and close circle.<sup>15</sup> Faced with this situation, the national assembly proposed holding a political trial against the president; in response, Lasso made the constitutional decision to depose the assembly and convene early elections. During the second half of 2023, presidential and legislative elections were convened. On that occasion, the winner was a candidate new to politics, Daniel Noboa, who was aligned with elements on the right of the ideological spectrum. The son of a multimillionaire Ecuadorian, Noboa assumed office in November 2023. ■

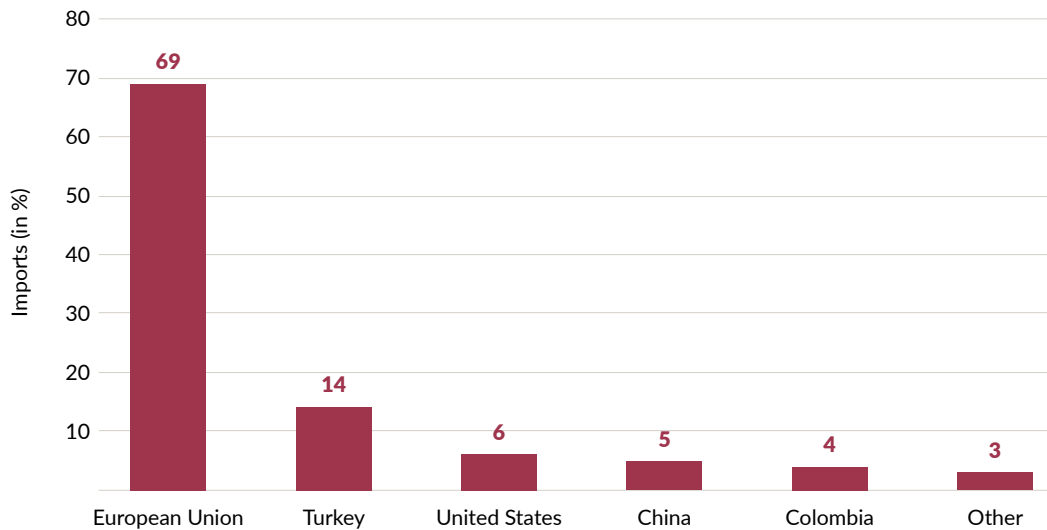


Daniel Noboa, current president of Ecuador (left) on his way to the government headquarters in Quito, October 2023. © Andres Yopez/Bloomberg via Getty Images

In 2022, Lasso permitted the extension of the quota for the import of firearms for private security companies and law enforcement. According to the press, between 2017 and 2021, purchases made from other countries were valued at US\$470 000 annually; in 2022, this figure doubled, reaching more than US\$957 000. This increase was driven by the needs of the police, military and private security companies, which during previous years made minimal investments due to the existing restrictions.<sup>16</sup> The provenance of these imported weapons was the European Union (69%), Turkey (14%), United States (6%) and China (5%).

On a related note, in January 2023 Lasso reduced taxes on special purchases, levied on several products, with the goal of strengthening citizen security and the fight against contraband and informal employment.<sup>17</sup> With this decision, the tax levied on the purchase and sale of arms dropped from 300% to 30%. It was the most significant tax reduction for the products benefited by this provision. Despite the efforts of a number of civil society organizations to avoid the tax reduction, the tax levied on the purchase and sale of arms was maintained at 30%.<sup>18</sup>





**FIGURE 3** Imports of weaponry into Ecuador by country, 2022.

SOURCE: Central Bank of Ecuador and Primicias, <https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/economia/ecuador-importacion-armas-empresas-ice/>

Then, on 1 April 2023, the Lasso government’s Executive Decree 707 eliminated the ban against importing arms and carrying firearms, even though it maintained the ban against the artisanal manufacture of weapons.<sup>19</sup> Since then, any user who wishes to possess a weapon for the purpose of self-protection may do so by satisfying the following requirements:

- Being at least 25 years old
- Obtaining a certificate from a psychological test issued by the ministry of public health
- Obtaining a certificate proving the ability to manage and use a weapon issued by the ministry of national defence
- Not having received a guilty sentence for committing a crime
- Not having any recorded incidents of having committed violence against women or members of his/her own close family
- Passing the toxicology test, which determines that the person has not ingested controlled substances and is not an alcoholic, issued by the ministry of public health
- Meeting all other requirements established by the ministry of national defence and joint command

For the purposes of this report, we performed a simulation to obtain a permit to bear arms. As a result, we found that the permits cost US\$20, last for five years and the process for obtaining each permit can take approximately 60 days. Furthermore, the training in the use and management of weapons is provided by specialized companies, some of which also provide training to security guards. The value of these certificates fluctuates between US\$200 and US\$300, as well as the costs of the psychological, psychiatric and toxicological certificates that are required by the regulation. However, according to the information compiled as of 22 February 2024, the country’s arms control computer system does not yet have a list of professional forensic psychiatrists and psychologists who are authorized to perform the tests and issue the corresponding certificates, nor does it have a list of health establishments equipped to perform the toxicological analysis.

After corroborating that the necessary professionals have not been designated to enable arms users to comply with the requirements, we called the DCA and were told that due to this regulatory gap, no permits to bear arms have been issued in the country since 1 April 2023. We contacted the national defence ministry to officially consult them about this matter and were told that that information ‘is not freely accessible’.<sup>20</sup> Other sources we consulted maintain that there is no updated form containing the results of the decisions adopted through Decree 707. ‘These decrees seek to head off situational issues, though afterward there is no detailed follow-up performed in light of the achievements made. Nor do technological and technical tools exist for adequately monitoring them,’ noted a journalist specialized in organized crime.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the challenges noted above is the access to arms. Despite the end of the ban on permits to bear arms, there are no armouries or shops that sell weapons, parts or ammunition.<sup>22</sup> Despite the withdrawal of the ban, the procedures permitting citizens to take advantage of the authorization have not been adjusted, which paradoxically makes inapplicable the provision that enables citizens to legally bear arms in Ecuador.

In early 2023, the government launched the programme ‘Eyes, ears and voice of the national police’, whose goal was to use the contingent of private security guards in the country (some 65 000) as an auxiliary force of the police by intervening, in the event they were witness to a crime.<sup>23</sup> According to Pablo Coello, former director of the office of regulation and control of private security services of Ecuador’s interior ministry, the idea was to take advantage of these guards’ training in, among other things, managing weapons.<sup>24</sup> Underlying this initiative is the rationale of taking advantage of and strengthening the private capacity that might be useful for security (human resources, weaponry and training in arms management) as a way to buttress public security initiatives.

In January 2024, the Organic Law on Surveillance and Private Security entered into force, legalizing the incorporation of private security companies as a part of the public state security system. In addition, it regulated the activities of this type of company, and training and capacity-building centres where security guards learn to shoot. Given the fact that these centres use huge amounts of ammunition, it is necessary to evaluate the usefulness of this regulation in the short term.



## FIREARMS MARKETS

**T**o understand illegal arms trafficking in Ecuador, one must refer to the border conflict with Peru, the peace agreement between both countries, and the Colombian armed conflict. Throughout the 20th century, Ecuador and Peru fought three wars due to disagreements regarding their borders. As a result of these conflicts, both countries amassed military materiel. In 1998, they signed a peace agreement that ceased hostilities and inaugurated a new period of relations as neighbours. As a part of this new stage, Peru initiated a programme of destroying its surplus weaponry; however, Ecuador never did so.<sup>25</sup>

In parallel, during the 1990s, armed groups in Colombia – primarily the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia – began a process of strengthening their weaponry so as to improve their combat capacity.<sup>26</sup> To that end, they trafficked and diverted arms from several countries, among them Ecuador. For example, toward the end of the 1990s, some of the Ecuadorian arms acquired for the conflict with Peru were found in the possession of the FARC. This situation led to several statements by the Colombian government accusing members of the Ecuadorian military of diverting these weapons.<sup>27</sup>

With this background, and given the high rate of violence recorded in 2007,<sup>28</sup> the Ecuadorian government initiated a process to restrict the firearms market within its territory. The measures adopted (described in the section above) significantly reduced armed violence, though they did not eliminate the illegal arms trade nor the diversion of arms, even though both their legal and illegal sale became more difficult.

Notwithstanding these measures, in recent years the illegal arms trade has gained new dynamism, fuelled by criminal networks and institutional complicity in Ecuador and Colombia. Local criminal organizations have also begun earning new income from the cocaine trade and recent alliances with international organizations, such as the Sinaloa Cartel and Jalisco Nueva Generación Cartel, as well as mafias from the Western Balkans.<sup>29</sup> This income, together with renewed international connections, has enabled them to purchase armament by taking advantage of their logistical networks to start a new trafficking cycle.

### Legal markets

According to Ecuador's arms control department, in 2021 there were 146 401 firearms legally registered in the country, a number much lower than the figures recognized by the authorities in other

countries in the Andean region.<sup>30</sup> The armed forces (police and military) held 58% of those weapons. The rest (42%) remained in the hands of civilians, whether in the possession of private security firms or common citizens.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, it is important to note that in this latter category, in 2021 barely 26% of the permits issued for bearing arms were valid, while 73% had expired.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, according to the 2021 record of civil society users, the majority of the weapons are in the hands of private security companies, which hold 65% of all valid permits in the country.<sup>33</sup>

This data shows that Ecuador does not have the institutional capacity (or political will) to exercise adequate control over the users who are required to renew their permits, or over the end-use of their weapons. It is also possible that the percentage of weapons in the hands of civilians has increased, due to the temporary import authorizations in 2022, reduction of taxes in 2023, relaxation of the ability to bear arms in 2023 and the security crisis engulfing the country.

Starting in 2022, several governmental initiatives were aimed at promoting the active participation of the citizenry and private security firms in public security tasks, opening several focal points of concern on the part of civil society. On one hand, they appeared to tacitly reveal a recognition of state limits to ensuring public security with its own forces. On the other, they evidenced the growth of the private security sector without adequate governmental control over its activities and arsenals.

The arms-control policy in Ecuador has evinced serious weaknesses and inconsistencies, raising doubts about the government's capacity to exercise control. Despite the number of legal arms in circulation recognized by the Ecuadorian government, the research performed for this report suggests that those that are outside the law significantly exceed their legal counterparts. This is in part due to the fact that some of the regulations that have been recently issued (described in the previous section) might have generated adverse effects.

These measures, in addition to having been criticized by broad sectors in Ecuador, have never received the institutional backing that would enable them to adjust the procedures to enable citizens, and in particular private security firms, to access their provisions in a transparent and regulated manner. Paradoxically, citizens are allowed access to arms, though it is impossible for them to obtain a permit that would allow them to legally carry them. This contradiction has led to an increase in the illegal circulation of arms in the country.

## **Access to arms under the argument of self-protection**

The increase in those wishing to acquire arms is a response to the deregulation, and levels of violence and insecurity primarily found in the areas impacted by drug trafficking, located on the Pacific coast. While in Quito, the capital, it is not common to see armed citizens in public spaces or social events, the situation differs in coastal cities such as Esmeraldas, as noted by one of the interviewees there:

If there is a party, it is normal to see people carrying weapons. Even women carry arms, especially those who have the financial ability to do so or are related to the mafias. But in light of the fear I feel due to widespread insecurity, even I bought a traumatic weapon [with rubber bullets] and pepper spray. I bought them from Amazon for US\$100 and they arrived in one month.<sup>34</sup>

This statement exemplifies the new dynamics surrounding the bearing of arms, whether lethal or less lethal, in the country. Firstly, the magnitude of the violence increases the likelihood that a person will acquire a weapon as a means of self-protection, even though this does not necessarily mean that these weapons are related to illegal activities. Secondly, due to their moderate cost, accessibility and

the lack of any prohibitions surrounding them, in some Ecuadorian regions less lethal arms<sup>35</sup> have become treasured items for the middle class, which purchases them for their defence and protection.<sup>36</sup>

Lastly, the use of electronic commerce platforms and social media appears to have made incursions into the global and local arms markets, both lethal and less lethal. According to the interviewees, the sale of less lethal weapons manufactured in Turkey is on the rise, with catalogues even circulating to enable users to select the device they prefer.<sup>37</sup> Thus, purchases over the Internet facilitate access for any user to a broad array of devices, ensuring ease of payment. Likewise, sellers and traffickers offer arms on request (any type, model, calibre and price), while many of them employ social media to do so, including WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram.<sup>38</sup>

The legal firearms market in Ecuador has been transformed as a result of deregulation, although the authorities have not instituted the necessary measures to enable citizens and private security firms to purchase firearms under supervision. There is additionally a profound contradiction and lack of institutional continuity in the changes in the rules, resulting in a lack of clarity regarding the regulations.

This has made it so that citizens seeking self-protection can more easily acquire a firearm illegally than obtaining official authorization. It is thus to be assumed that this situation has grown the list of users who, not necessarily pursuing illegal objectives, find themselves outside the law, while certain users appear to seek alternatives such as the purchase of less lethal weapons, behind which exists a thriving physical and virtual business that is maintained in the shadow of state control. In addition to possibly favouring the non-regulated purchase of firearms, the current context makes it impossible to have detailed knowledge of the armament markets and statistics related to the arms trade in Ecuador, at a time of insecurity in which maximum transparency is needed.

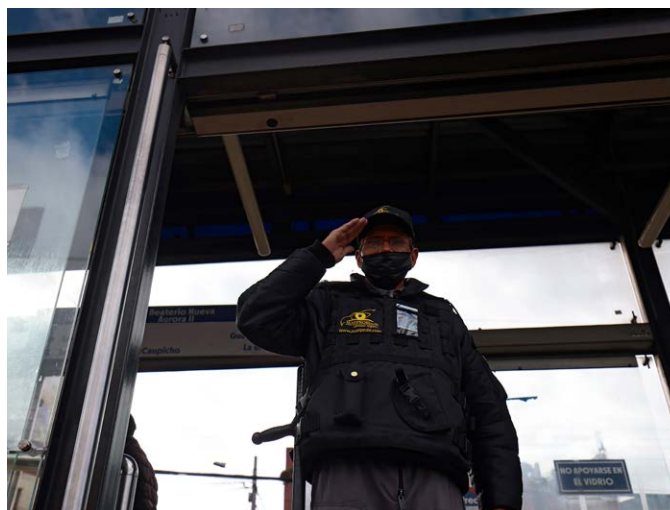
## Grey markets

Grey markets are those in which exchanges of goods or services transpire that have not been authorized by the original manufacturers or suppliers.<sup>39</sup> They can entail the diversion and resale of used products, or the sale of products obtained from official sources. These types of exchanges can compromise the guarantee, quality of the product, and legality of the end use. With regard to firearms, grey markets and diversions are located between the legal market and illegal trafficking.

There is little documentation on how these markets operate in Ecuador. According to the interviews we conducted for this report, the grey transactions involve private security companies to some degree, especially those who cease their activities.<sup>40</sup>

According to the police, in November 2023 there were 1 195 private security companies with nearly 65 000 guards (nearly 15% more than the police officers who operate at the national level, whose numbers total some 57 000)<sup>41</sup> and more than 55 000 firearms.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, the private protection sector is unstable. The companies frequently go bankrupt, while others appear on the market. The problem lies in the fact that this occurs without the authorities monitoring the end use of the arms belonging to the companies who shutter their operations. Consequently, businesses that have ceased operations and should report the end use of their armament fail to do so due to the lack of clear procedures, or because they sell their devices to other companies or individuals interested in purchasing them.<sup>43</sup> According to OECD, in 2023 there were approximately 300 security companies in the country in the process of shuttering their operations, which constitutes an enormous risk of diversion to the illegal market,<sup>44</sup> a phenomenon that is not exclusive to Ecuador.

A private security guard in Quito. In 2023, there were some 300 private security companies in Ecuador in the process of closing down operations, constituting a risk of arms diversion to the illegal market. © Franklin Jacome/ Agencia Press South via Getty Images



In Peru, the regulation of the private security sector and arms purchases by civilians also lack sufficient controls to prevent the diversion of arms, both at the national as well as international levels.<sup>45</sup> In early 2024, the existence of a Peruvian criminal network that processed firearms permits for low-income individuals was revealed. In exchange for some pay, these individuals served as frontmen for the purchase of firearms, before reporting to the police the 'loss' or 'theft' of the arms. Once the report had been filed, the criminal organization would recover the weapons and put them on the black market. These networks have exported arms to Ecuador: one of these weapons was used in the attack against Fernando Villavicencio, an Ecuadorian presidential candidate who was assassinated on 9 August 2023.<sup>46</sup>

## Black markets

Firearms fulfil a strategic role in criminal markets. By acquiring them, criminal groups increase their power as well as their capacity to control territories and markets, confront a country's armed forces and extend their influence over communities.

The black market for arms operates nationally and internationally, and involves various actors, including individuals and criminal organizations, non-state armed groups and corrupt public servants. In Ecuador, the illegal arms trade is primarily associated with two criminal activities, drug trafficking and illegal mining, as well as being linked to prison-related violence. Although weapons are also used to commit crimes such as robbery, extortion and kidnapping, there is a marked difference between the weapons used by organized crime and those used by common criminals. The former employs costly large-calibre devices that are manufactured on an industrial scale, whereas the latter use artisanal weapons, because even though they are of a smaller calibre and precision, they are less expensive.<sup>47</sup>

Between 1 January and 8 March 2024, 1 500 cases of kidnapping and extortion had been registered throughout the country, a record despite the state of emergency decree issued in January of this year.<sup>48</sup> The most impacted provinces during this period were Guayas (which experienced a 500% increase in these crimes), Esmeraldas and Pichincha.<sup>49</sup> Many of these crimes are committed with firearms and have a profound impact on the rates of armed violence.

The use of firearms in the above-mentioned criminal markets and prisons, which account for a significant proportion of the violence in the country, is detailed below.

## Drug trafficking

Within the context of national criminal organizations, weapons are acquired to guarantee the security of the product and logistical protection (storage, transport and placement of the merchandise in ports) from possible theft or confiscation. The link between drug trafficking and arms acquisition was illustrated on 21 January 2024, with the record seizure of more than 20 tonnes of cocaine stored on a rural property located in Vinces, on the Ecuadorian coast. Also found were 10 assault rifles, 10 war rifles, four long guns, three 9-mm pistols, 7 000 munitions and optical sights for military use.<sup>50</sup> Firearms are also used to face off against rival organizations or state forces, which tends to feed an arms race. Reportedly, the state's use of war strategies exacerbates the violent reaction of criminal groups, which among other things can translate into buttressing their armament, thereby creating a weapons circle.<sup>51</sup>

## Illegal mining

Illegal mining is another of the criminal markets that has grown the most in Ecuador since 2021.<sup>52</sup> Although the tendency is not to relate mineral extraction with the arms market, this activity is very dependent on weapons. Local and foreign criminal groups that provide protection services for the miners acquire firearms to use against communities that resist the extraction. According to information gleaned from the interviews, the miners and armed groups operate in the following manner in the province of Napo, though their modus operandi appears to be similar in other provinces:

The mining operators approach the communities as if they were going to rescue them from central government abandonment, and come with a lot of money, because the first thing they want is for the communities to accept their presence there. Once they've created bonds of trust, they generate contracts for renting and purchasing lands for mining. When the mining operators discover that there is gold on the rented land, they immediately begin bringing in huge quantities of machinery. When the owners of the land complain about the machinery, the miners impose their presence and their conditions. This often leads to a break with the community, because the miners use community members to generate violence. So the community leader begins to harass the families, trying to get them to agree [to cede their lands for illegal mining]. And if this doesn't work, the armed groups come in.<sup>53</sup>

The criminal groups linked to illegal mining are varied. While there are Ecuadorian groups such as Los Lobos and Los Choneros that profit from mining,<sup>54</sup> there are also Colombian armed groups present in the country (Los Comandos de la Frontera) as well as Brazilian (Primeiro Comando da Capital).<sup>55</sup> In the case of Napo, armed groups and miners also launder money they obtain through drug trafficking and illegal weapons sales.<sup>56</sup>

With respect to arms trafficking, the press has reported on a dynamic market in the country's Amazonian regions, in areas adjoining the mining settlements. In December 2023, a bus was detained while traveling in Napo toward Quito with 288 firearms and nearly 12 000 rounds of ammunition. This represents one of the largest seizures of arms and ammunition ever carried out in Ecuador.<sup>57</sup> It is presumed that the weapons arrive in the Ecuadorian Amazon from Colombia via the Aguarico and Napo Rivers (see below for arms trafficking routes).

In addition, illegal mining and the presence of armed groups in the extraction areas has led to an unprecedented increase in violence. According to our interviews, this violence is a product of the clashes between opposing groups, as well as territorial disputes.<sup>58</sup>

## Prisons

In February 2021, Ecuador lived through the first significant prison massacre in its history,<sup>59</sup> and from then through 2023, some 600 people were killed in various violent incidents in Ecuadorian prisons.<sup>60</sup>

This has made Ecuador the country with the highest levels of prison violence in Latin America, and has opened a Pandora's box regarding the existence of massive arsenals in the hands of various criminal groups, both inside as well as outside the prisons.<sup>61</sup>

The inmates have handguns and long guns, grenades, and explosives such as dynamite and C4. On several occasions, it was discovered that arms trafficking in prisons had been facilitated by corrupt law enforcement, without this crime having launched any judicial investigations or convictions.<sup>62</sup>

Interventions to search for weapons inside prisons intensified after the Ecuadorian government declared a state of emergency on 8 January 2024.<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, according to the interviews we conducted with relatives of inmates and criminal sources, weapons continue to enter these facilities aided by the complicity of the authorities.<sup>64</sup> As one of the interviewees stated, 'weapons are brought into the prison even in the ambulances that come to remove the dead bodies.'<sup>65</sup>

**Ecuador ranks at the top of Latin American countries with the highest levels of violence in prisons, indicating that weapons are circulating in the country's penitentiaries.** © Gerardo Menoscal/ Agencia Press South via Getty Images







# THE FIREARMS ENTERING ECUADOR

**T**he wars between rival gangs have now spread beyond prison walls and violence is spilling out onto Ecuador's streets. This violent trend is exacerbated by the high availability of firearms in various cities in the country, particularly those located on the routes used to export Colombian cocaine. In the next sections, we offer an analysis of the types of arms that are traded, their prices and the trafficking routes employed.

## Types

The information gathered in our interviews with criminal actors, along with the findings obtained by OECO, indicate that the weapons illegally entering Ecuador, according to brand and origin, are as follows:

Brand	Place of manufacture
M60 machine gun	USA
Barret M82 rifle	USA
Galil rifle	Colombia (with an Israeli licence)
Fal rifle	Argentina (with a Belgian licence)
AK-47 rifle	Russia
AR15 rifle	USA
M-16 rifle	USA
M4-A1 rifle	USA
Smith & Wesson handgun	USA
Taurus handgun	Brazil
Glock handgun	USA (with an Austrian licence)
Jericho handgun	Israel
M12 submachine gun	Italia
Mini Uzi	Israel
M19 mortar	USA
Minimi submachine gun	Belgium
Pineapple or lemon GL-type multiple grenades	Colombia (lemon grenades)

**FIGURE 4** Arms that enter Ecuador according to brand and place of manufacture.

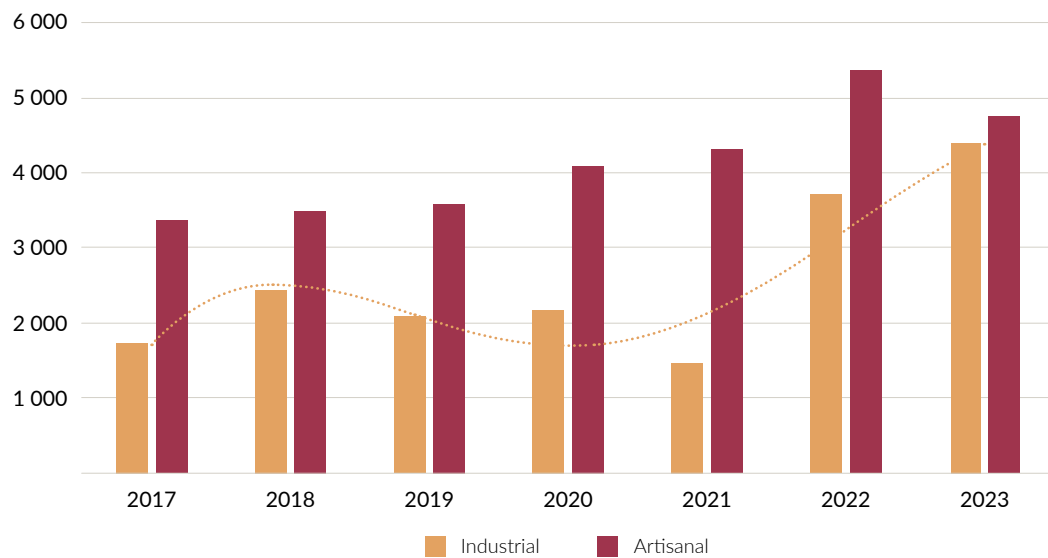
SOURCE: OECO, *Caracterización del crimen organizado. Informe Ecuador*, September 2023, <https://oeco.pdf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Caracterizacion-Crimen-Organizado-Version-corta-V2.pdf>

This information coincides with data in the forensic reports produced by the police between 2022 and 2024, which show that the illicit arms present in the country have primarily been manufactured in the United States.<sup>66</sup>

Ecuador has also experienced progressive changes in the composition of its illegal arms market, with greater growth in industrial weapons compared to artisanal weapons. The latter are of two types: handmade or improvised, and replicas of industrial weapons manufactured on an artisanal basis. The handmade or improvised arms can be constructed with a pair of pipes and minimal knowledge of metallurgy. They are generally used by common criminals. The replicas of industrial weapons require greater knowledge, skill and equipment.

Ecuador has had a long history of armorers with workshops in the country's region of Sierra Central (in the provinces of Bolívar and Chimborazo). These workshops produced weapons whose sale was registered by the armed forces.<sup>67</sup> When the manufacture of arms was banned in 2012, those workshops ceased their activities. However, the weapons introduced into the market in previous years remained in circulation: in fact, between 2017 and 2023, artisanal weapons accounted for the largest number of seizures compared to industrially manufactured weapons (see Figure 5).

This composition of the illegal market, wherein the seizure of artisanal weapons is dominant, is related to the fact that Ecuador is not a country that manufactures industrial weapons. Consequently, the illegal artisanal weapons market (legally manufactured prior to being banned in 2012, and illegally thereafter) was much more dynamic than the industrial arms market, at least until 2022, year in which the import of arms was temporarily authorized.



**FIGURE 5** Seizures of arms by type of manufacture, 2017–2023.

Note: 2023 data only includes information until November.

Sources: Carla Álvarez, *El tráfico de armas de fuego en la región andina, Report for UNLIREC*, 2021; National Police of Ecuador, Bulletin No. 11, November 2023

According to the sources consulted, there is an enormous difference between the quality of the industrial and artisanal weapons, especially in that the latter are difficult to manipulate and can experience failures in the discharge mechanism.<sup>68</sup> Even so, artisanal arms, especially short-barrel weapons, continue to be clandestinely produced in the country. Reportedly, small manufacturers have resumed their former work, thanks to the profitability of the business and lack of state controls.<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, 3D-printed weapons also circulate in the Ecuadorian market. In April 2023, agents from Ecuador and the United States carried out a joint operation that dismantled a syndicate dedicated to assembling pieces of MP15 rifles replicated with a 3D printer.<sup>70</sup> According to information obtained in our interviews, these types of weapons are lighter and more trustworthy than artisanal arms and constitute an intermediate link between industrial and artisanal arms due to their price and quality.<sup>71</sup>

In addition, these arms present the advantage of enabling the user to not be identifiable. In the words of a gang member interviewed for this report, 'It's more difficult to find the owner, because these weapons do not have any numbering whatsoever. They are used because the person who discharges them can't be found. That's why nowadays there are contract killings where no one knows who pulled the trigger. They are efficient weapons, as automatic as any other imported weapon.'<sup>72</sup>

The way in which the weapons are manufactured to some degree helps characterize the type of users. In Ecuador, it is possible to find very modern high-powered, heavy-calibre industrial arms in the hands of big criminal actors involved in drug trafficking or illegal mining. Artisanal weapons, however, remain relegated to assailants and common criminals.

## Prices

Arms prices vary significantly, depending on the type of device in question and how much it has been used (new or second-hand). New long guns or rifles can cost between US\$8 000 and US\$15 000, depending on the model and calibre.<sup>73</sup> These weapons are in demand by large criminal organizations.<sup>74</sup>

The price of a 3D-printed long gun might be more inexpensive. An article in the press indicated that the price of a 3D-printed rifle can run from US\$3 500 to US\$4 000 in the local market.<sup>75</sup>

Short-barrel guns, such as handguns and revolvers, are more accessible. Although there was less agreement regarding prices, the interviewees stated that a (used) Glock handgun could cost between US\$100 and US\$250, while a new device might cost as much as US\$2 000.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, modified less lethal weapons are also available in the market. Converting a weapon into a lethal weapon costs US\$1 000.<sup>77</sup>

Type of arm	State	Cost (in US\$)
Handgun	New	8 000–15 000
Glock	New	2 000
Glock	Used	100–250
3D	New	3 500–4 000
Modified weapons	New	1 000

**FIGURE 6** Prices of arms in the illegal Ecuadorian market.

Lastly, renting arms to commit crimes is a common service in the criminal world. At this time, there is no agreement regarding the degree to which this business is active. There are those who maintain that the facility of accessing arms reduces the need for renting them.<sup>78</sup> Other sources declare that

storing large numbers of weapons can pose a significant risk for criminal groups and therefore they prefer their arms to be in circulation. For this reason, they encourage their rental.<sup>79</sup> The cost of renting a weapon to commit robbery or a contract killing could verge on US\$500, though it can also be paid off in the form of drugs.<sup>80</sup> Lastly, the context of each region (geographic location, population size and its insertion into criminal logistics) leads to differences in the arms-rental market. In urban areas where many crimes are committed – such as robbery, extortion and contract killings – renting weapons can constitute a viable alternative to purchasing them, while in rural areas that are less densely populated and further from state control, it is possible that it is a less disseminated modality.

## Ammunition

In recent years, the illegal ammunition trade has experienced significant changes. According to information from DCA, between 2017 and 2021 there was a decrease in the quantity of insured ammunition.<sup>81</sup> Even so, since 2021 the ammunition trade has grown in parallel to the expansion of the arms market.

Several operations were carried out in Ecuador in 2023, resulting in the seizure of thousands of rounds of ammunition of various calibres. The largest seizure occurred in December 2023, in an operation that impounded nearly 300 firearms and almost 12 000 pieces of 9 mm OZK brand ammunition of Turkish origin.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, the ammunition market is much more diverse than the arms market. According to police data, a report on the ammunition seized shows it was manufactured in the United States (Aguila), Brazil (Companhia Brasileira de Cartuchos), Peru (Fábrica de Municiones del Ejército de Perú), Korea (Poongsan), and the Czech Republic (Sellier & Bellot and STV), among other countries.<sup>83</sup> However, it is impossible to know the origin of the majority of the ammunition analyzed, due to flaws in the markings that would enable easy identification.<sup>84</sup>



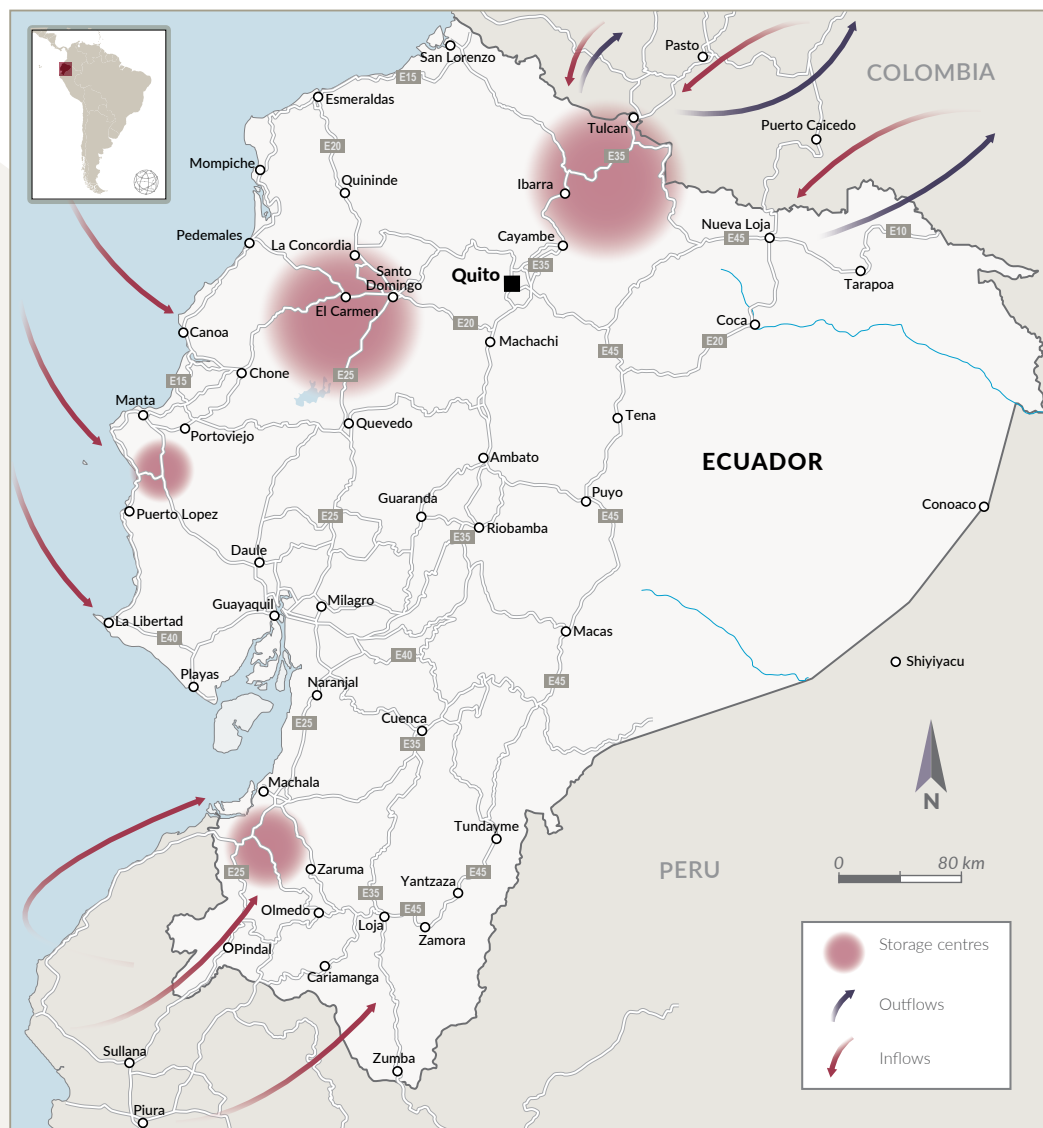
**FIGURE 7** Origin of the ammunition seized in Ecuador, 2022–2024.

SOURCE: National Police of Ecuador, *Reporte de inteligencia forense*, 2024

The huge quantities of ammunition that enter the country supply illegal users as well as legal ones (including shooting clubs, sports enthusiasts, hunters and law enforcement). With regard to legal users, shooting training centres as well as sports shooting clubs (given the high number of users who attend, as well as the lack of regulations of or limits on the ammunition they can use) are prone to diversions of ammunition, because even though they are obligated to use a specific calibre, local laws do not establish specific controls over their activities.<sup>85</sup>

## Illegal trafficking: origins and routes

Arms enter Ecuador illegally through a number of modalities, routes and origins. They are manufactured in various countries and enter Ecuador by land from Colombia and Peru, via the Pacific Ocean, and on small planes that enter the county to load up on drugs and leave behind money or weapons.



**FIGURE 8** Flows of weapons entering and leaving Ecuador, and storage centres.

SOURCE: OECO, *Caracterización del crimen organizado. Informe Ecuador*, September 2023, <https://oeco.pdf.org/caracterizacion-delcrimen-organizado-en-ecuador/>

The arms entering from Colombia do so via two bordering provinces, Esmeraldas and Sucumbíos. There are unpatrolled border crossings in Esmeraldas, located on the Pacific coast. In Sucumbíos, located in the Ecuadorian Amazon, the border with Colombia 'is an artery of weapons for the Amazonian region, though also for the rest of the country,' noted an activist who works in environmental conservation in that area.<sup>86</sup> The arms enter through rivers, which, in contrast to aerial routes, have fewer controls.

Arms trafficking on the border with Colombia has historically been the most intense and problematic for Ecuador. However, the illegal entry of weaponry from Peru began to draw the Ecuadorian and Colombian authorities' attention in January 2022, when 10 000 pieces of ammunition and nearly 800 boxes of explosives bearing the markings of the Peruvian factory of arms, munitions, and explosives were seized in Huaquillas (southern border) and Tulcán (northern border).<sup>87</sup>



**FIGURE 9** Peruvian arms trafficking routes to Ecuador and Colombia.

SOURCE: Ojo Público, *Del Ejército peruano a las mafias del Ecuador: las rutas del tráfico de armamento en la frontera*, February 2024, <https://ojo-publico.com/4916/rutas-del-trafico-armamento-peruano-detras-del-terror-ecuador>

A Peruvian police report noted that in 2023, there were seizures in Tumbes (located near the southern border with Ecuador) of 391 239 pieces of ammunition, a figure 138 times higher than what was recorded in 2022, representing 92% of all the ammunition seized in Peru that year. Another police report revealed that 375 weapons were confiscated in 2023 on the northern border with Ecuador, representing more than 80% of the arms trafficked between the two countries.<sup>88</sup>

Arms trafficking into Ecuador commences, then, in Tumbes and follows various routes for supplying the Ecuadorian regions on the coast, in the mountains and in the Amazon.<sup>89</sup> Most arms are trafficked by using the 'ant trafficking' method, whereby many people transport weapons in small quantities, thus reducing the risk of detection by law enforcement agencies.<sup>90</sup>

Less evidence exists of the maritime trafficking routes. Nonetheless, in November 2023 one of the largest seizures in Ecuador was made on the Galápagos Islands: 122 assault rifles, 48 handguns and 124 ammunition clips.<sup>91</sup> While there is little information regarding the origin and destination of this armament, it constitutes evidence of the significant quantity of devices that can be trafficked through this territory.

With regard to where the weapons that circulate in Ecuador were manufactured, it is worth noting the annual entry of more than 500 000 weapons from the United States into Mexico.<sup>92</sup> Some of the devices that enter Mexico are destined for that country's drug cartels. However, another portion of those arms is for criminal groups located in other countries, such as Ecuador, and they are transferred via air and later sold in exchange for drugs, money, technology and advisory services. Several investigative, journalistic and academic sources maintain that a form of barter exists between the Mexican drug cartels and Ecuadorian criminal organizations.<sup>93</sup> The exchanges of arms for drugs or money are not new, and follow a logic of economy of scale and yield; nonetheless, a new trend is that the barter system now includes advisory services for evading customs, fiscal and legal controls; on how to launder money; and how to use technology, such as artificial intelligence, to design new and safer routes for transiting and exchanging illegal products.<sup>94</sup>



## CONCLUSIONS

**T**he unprecedented crisis of violence in Ecuador is being fuelled and transformed by the availability of firearms in the country. Arms trafficking to local criminal groups helps consolidate their territorial control, both in terms of drug trafficking activities and the cartels' domination, as well as illegal mining, among other illicit markets.

This report details the close relationship between the legal, grey and black arms markets in Ecuador, and reveals how these markets have become closely related to the deregulation of the national legal framework and lack of effective institutional controls. It also describes the central role of firearms in the commission of other types of crimes and their impact on the violence ravaging the country.

With regard to the legal arms market, the Ecuadorian government has promoted a policy aimed at the privatization of security, without instituting complementary measures and actions necessary for ensuring it is appropriately regulated. For example, temporarily permitting the import of weapons in 2022 to foster the work of private security companies has had the effect of deligitimizing the official institutions' role as guarantors of public security, while not having sufficient controls to prevent the diversion of weapons when a firm's activities are shuttered. Similarly, the relaxation of the right to bear arms, decreed in 2023, did not include the necessary control procedures, leading to the acquisition of weapons for self-protection, whose owners still do not have access to official permits and therefore do so illegally.

Likewise, the grey and black markets have demonstrated incredible versatility and agility. They are supplied by a large number of weapons that enter Ecuador through Colombia and Peru, the Pacific Ocean, as well as by air and via the river. Another interesting finding is that illegal actors have transformed weapons, drugs, technology and advisory services into exchange currencies and use social media and messenger services such as WhatsApp as agile commercial platforms for supplying the market.

With regard to the relationship between arms trafficking and other forms of criminality, the expansion of illicit markets in a country that suffers from institutional weakness has increased the interest of criminal groups in acquiring industrial arms, due to their precision and effectiveness, as well as ease of access.

The research for this report thus shows the changing dynamics of violence in Ecuador and its direct links to the illegal firearms market. Nevertheless, greater efforts are needed to better document, analyze and help prevent the flow of illicit firearms in the country. Firstly, there is an urgent need to analyze the flows and actors at the centre of the trade, both in Ecuador as well as neighbouring



countries. This applies not only to criminal organizations, but also the public authorities and law enforcement (police and armed forces) involved in firearms trafficking and diversion.

Secondly, the relaxation of access to firearms in Ecuador and the promotion of private security firms as auxiliaries to the public security forces require, at a minimum, strict control measures that are currently non-existent. The same applies to the mechanisms that enable citizens to acquire firearms.

Lastly, given the dynamics of violence in the country and the determination of criminal groups to influence democratic life and the economy, it is necessary to better analyze how arms enter the illegal markets, how they enable the growth of other criminal markets, and what measures should be taken by governments to better control the flow of arms within and beyond their borders. Together with these efforts of documentation and investigation, the public authorities – including the police and judiciary – must have the capacity to pursue traffickers, whether they belong to organized crime networks or are members of Ecuadorian public institutions.

## Recommendations

Given the central role of firearms in the escalation of violence in the country, it is necessary to place the fight against their trafficking and by-products at the centre of efforts to resolve the crisis. In order to be as effective as possible and implement transnational responses to arms trafficking, these efforts must be carried out, at a minimum, in coordination and dialogue with the Colombian and Peruvian authorities. At the regional and multilateral levels, the efforts of the Organization of American States, for example, can provide important support within the framework of the Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacture of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials.

Below we suggest a series of recommendations for confronting arms trafficking in Ecuador:

- Donors and civil society organizations should invest resources in performing local diagnostic studies to better understand the dynamics of arms trafficking in Ecuador, in particular in the areas of greatest risk (the Pacific and Amazon).
- At the institutional level, the government and corresponding authorities should address the lack of clarity in the registration of legal permits to carry and possess weapons, so as to prevent the majority of users from maintaining expired permits. Additionally, it is important to analyze this information periodically to identify trends in the legal market of arms and ammunition. This information should also be more transparent, so as to enable members of civil society and academia to use it in their investigations, as a way to contribute to developing a firearms control policy in the country.
- The interior ministry, through the agencies responsible for the private security sector, should strengthen controls over arms and ammunition in the hands of private security firms as well as over the training provided in managing and using firearms, so as to prevent diversions from legal to illegal markets.
- The police must devote greater efforts to investigate illegal actors' modus operandi, specifically with regard to trafficking routes, forms of payment, use of social media for selling weapons and virtual arms markets.

- The government should increase the police's forensic capacity to analyze the weapons, parts and ammunitions seized from organized crime groups, which can reveal patterns of behaviour in the criminal market.
- The judicial branch should improve its operations in sanctioning cases of arms trafficking. To that end, more must be done to strengthen the work of the office of the public prosecutor and judicial investigative processes capable of identifying the criminal individuals and structures involved in arms trafficking and diversion.
- Judicial institutions must treat cases of public officials implicated in the illicit trade, diversion and entry of arms into prisons with utmost gravity, and apply sentences that are consistent with the crimes.
- At the international level, Ecuador must adhere to the international instruments that regulate arms trading, such as the Arms Trade Treaty, and strengthen cooperation with neighbouring countries so as to improve the exchange of information on legally acquired and seized arms, as well as on active trafficking networks.
- Ecuador does not maintain records of non-lethal armed violence. The public health ministry should establish an appropriate protocol to ensure public and private hospitals record information regarding individuals who receive medical attention for bullet-related injuries. In addition, this data must be analyzed to better understand the logic of armed violence, the costs it represents to the state and its impact on development.
- Following the example of several cities in Latin America, local governments should implement plans to disarm civil society. These initiatives are generally developed with help from private enterprises, civil society, academia and institutions such as the police and the armed forces. The goal is to reduce surplus weapons in the hands of civil society, which in turn enables a reduction in social armed violence as well as sensitizing stakeholders regarding its impacts.



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