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Demonstrators hold spears as they take part in a protest against then-Ecuadorian President Lenin Moreno's austerity measures in Quito, Ecuador, Oct.1, 2019. (CNS photo/Carlos Garcia Rawlins, Reuters)

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While the murder of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio shocked Ecuador Aug. 9, the bishops' conference in the South American country expressed its solidarity with Villavicencio's family and condemned growing rates of violence.

In a statement posted on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, the bishops said that they will "join initiatives to recover security" in Ecuador, where violence waged by drug cartels has pushed up murder rates, forced thousands of people to migrate and has now jeopardized the credibility of a presidential election that will be held Aug. 20.

"We also ratify our commitment to pray and work for peace based on liberty, justice and truth," the statement read.

Villavicencio was murdered as he left a campaign rally at a school in the capital city of Quito, and entered a vehicle that was not bulletproof. Police said the car was shot at 40 times by men on motorcycles.

On the campaign trail, the candidate had spoken out about the growing influence of drug cartels in the South American country, whose ports on the Pacific Ocean have become an important transit point for cocaine shipments headed to Asia and the United States. He also campaigned against corruption.

In the week prior to his assassination, Villavicencio said he had received death threats from a mafia boss with links to Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel.

Villavicencio, a married father of five and formerly an investigative journalist, was the centrist candidate and had 7.5% support in polls, placing him fifth out of eight candidates. He still had a chance for the second-place outcome, which would have enabled him to participate in the October runoff vote.

Ecuadorian President Guillermo Lasso declared three days of national mourning as well as a state of emergency, which will enable police to search the homes of suspects without warrants. However Lasso said that the first round of the elections,

on Aug. 20, will take place as planned. Lasso asked the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation for help with the investigation with the FBI confirming it was assisting, according to Reuters.

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Located between Colombia and Peru, Ecuador had long evaded the drug-related violence that affected its neighbors, but that started to change in 2020, with the arrival of Mexican drug cartels.

Last year Ecuador's National Police said there were 4,500 homicides in the nation of 18 million people, up from 990 homicides in 2018. The homicide rate in the country quadrupled from 5.8 per 100,000 people in 2018 to 26.7 in 2022, according to data from the Igarape Institute, a public security think tank in Rio de Janeiro.

To escape the violence, as well as taxes imposed on small businesses by local gangs, many Ecuadorians have been migrating to the United States. So far this year 35,000 Ecuadorians have been encountered at the U.S. southern border after entering without permission, according to the Department for Homeland Security.

Ecuador's capital city of Quito is expected to hold the 2024 International Eucharistic Congress.

After an audience with Pope Francis in May, where preparations for the congress and a potential papal visit in 2024 were discussed, the Archbishop Alfredo José Espinoza Mateus of Quito spoke about his country's situation.

"We are worried because we are seeing that politics is simply understood as a way to go after private interests, or ideological interests, and not as a way to seek the common good," Espinoza Mateus said.

"The people are very hopeful that (the pope) will come to Quito and that he will bless us and bless the country," he added. "We know that he is praying for Ecuador."

Ecuador's president dissolved the nation's congress in May as he faced an impeachment vote, forcing the country to hold a special election for a new president and Congress in August.

In several statements the bishops' conference also has expressed its concern over the country's political crisis.

"We have been left exposed to the dealings of mafias and criminal bands," the bishops' conference said in a statement published May 10, adding that the nation's politics had become a "spectacle that is making nobody laugh."