News



Heavily armed police guard the streets as part of a state of exception in downtown San Salvador, El Salvador, March 27, 2022. El Salvador’s congress granted President Nayib Bukele late Tuesday, July 20, 2022 another 30-day extension of the state of exception that has suspended fundamental rights since a surge in gang killings in late March. (AP Photo/Salvador Melendez, File)

by Associated Press

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The Roman Catholic archbishop of San Salvador said July 31 that most people support a months-long state of emergency that has rounded of tens of thousands of suspects in a crackdown on violent street gangs.

While critics say the campaign has violated human rights and swept up apparently innocent people, Archbishop José Luis Escobar Alas said Salvadorans support the measure.

“People are afraid of returning to the way it was before, now that they have begun to live without this scourge,” Escobar Alas said.

El Salvador’s gangs, which have been estimated to count some 70,000 members in their ranks, have long controlled swaths of territory and extorted and killed with impunity.

Since March, the country’s congress has granted extension after extension to the original 30-day emergency decree that suspends some constitutional rights.

“People don't want the violence to return,” the archbishop said at a news conference. "They not only want these things maintained, they want them to advance, to end the violence.

His comments came on the same day that relatives of young men caught in raids tried to march to the presidential palace to demand their release, saying they were innocent. Police stopped the march before it reached its goal by putting up barricades.

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Rights activists say young men are frequently arrested just based on their age, on their appearance or whether they live in a gang-dominated slum.

Escobar Alas said he had heard the families' complaints, and he urged the government of President Nayib Bukele to avoid “these margins of error” and guarantee quick and expeditious hearings to release those who might be innocent.

After gangs were blamed for 62 killings on March 26, Bukele sought extraordinary powers.

Under the state of exception, the right of association, the right to be informed of the reason for an arrest and access to a lawyer are suspended. The government also can intervene in the calls and mail of anyone they consider a suspect. The time someone can be held without charges is extended from three days to 15 days.

Authorities have made waves of arrests often with very little evidence. Generally, those arrested are accused of belonging or associating with one of the country’s powerful street gangs.

Civil and human rights groups say that arbitrary arrests are common and that when detainees finally see a judge they are almost automatically jailed for six months pending trial. Some people have died while incarcerated.