COLOMBIA
Floods in the department of La Guajira

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

- The department of La Guajira is located in the extreme north of Colombia, on the Colombian Caribbean Coast. It has two rainy seasons during the year – one between April–May and the other between September–November (IDEAM 2010). With a landscape of majorly clay loam soil, La Guajira is a department where increased rainfall frequently leads to flooding. In fact, more than half of the natural disasters affecting the department are floods (Government of La Guajira 2012).
- According to forecasts by the Colombian Institute of Hydrology, Meteorology and Environmental Studies, rainfall in La Guajira in November 2021 will be 40–60% higher than the historical average (El Colombiano 04/10/2021). Towards the end of September 2021, flooding caused by rains in La Guajira, specifically in the municipalities of Dibulla, Maicao, Manaure, Riohacha, and Uribia, affected at least 800 families or approximately 2,800 people (El Tiempo 01/09/2021). In late October, rains caused several streams to overflow, flooding the municipalities of Distracción and Fonseca (LGH 30/10/2021). Affected people often report shelter, food, and WASH needs.
- During heavy rainy seasons between 1980–2011, the most affected municipalities were Dibulla, Hatonuevo, Maicao, and Riohacha in terms of the number of households affected (between 2,000–12,000) and Fonseca, Manaure, and Uribia in terms of the number of people affected (between 12,000–14,000) (Government of La Guajira 2012). The flood with the greatest impact in terms of the number of people affected in the last 40 years took place between 2010–2011, when rainfall levels went up to 70% above the historical average (BID and CEPAL 01/2013; IGAC, IDEAM, and DANE 04/03/2011).

ANTICIPATED SCOPE AND SCALE

- The 2010–2011 flooding affected almost 124,500 people (24,800 families) and destroyed or damaged 7,300 houses (BID and CEPAL 01/2013). With a similar amount of rainfall, subsequent floods will likely affect a similar number of people.
- In La Guajira, many people live in houses made of materials that are not very water-resistant, lack access to potable water, and experience food insecurity (ELC 30/06/2020). Flooding will likely severely damage or destroy these houses and aggravate pre-existing dire conditions.

LESSONS LEARNT

- The last rainy season with major impacts in La Guajira happened in 2010–2011. At that time, the primary damage was to livelihoods (agriculture and livestock) and housing. The provision of temporary shelters while houses were being rebuilt and economic support during the emergency proved useful for early recovery (Government of La Guajira 2012).
- Hygiene kits have helped prevent the outbreak of tropical diseases (such as dengue and chikungunya) during previous floods in the department (GIFMM and R4V 07/12/2020).

HUMANITARIAN CONSTRAINTS

- During the rainy season, the roads connecting the municipalities of Maicao, Manaure, and Uribia are often flooded, restricting access to those municipalities (El Heraldo 19/11/2020).
- During previous crises, some nonprioritised communities have blocked the passage of humanitarian aid to demand assistance for themselves (La FM 17/04/2020).

KEY PRIORITIES

2,800
PEOPLE ALREADY AFFECTED

24,000
FAMILIES LIKELY TO BE AFFECTED

Risk
OF DENGUE OUTBREAK

NATIONAL REPONSE CAPACITY
- Unidad Nacional para la Gestión del Riesgo de Desastres
- Government of La Guajira

INTERNATIONAL REPONSE CAPACITY
- Equipo Local de Coordinación
- International NGOs (Pastoral Social, Malteser, Save the Children, Norwegian Refugee Council)
- UN Institutions (UNICEF, UNHCR, FAO, UNDP)

Any questions? Please contact info@acaps.org.

SECTORAL NEEDS

Shelter and WASH

Housing in La Guajira is often severely affected by floods because the most commonly used materials (bahareque and mud) tend to dissolve when they come into contact with water (Información Tecnológica 10/2018). Approximately 17,200 houses in La Guajira are built with insufficiently water-resistant walls. In some municipalities in the north of the department, such homes represent 40–70% of the total, increasing the risk of disproportional damages to buildings in these areas in the event of flooding (DANE 04/2020). As a consequence, if flooding occurs, families from affected dwellings will likely be temporarily displaced.

56.1% of households have poor access to water for cooking, sewerage, and proper waste management (DANE 02/09/2021). Sewerage systems have already been affected by flooding between September–October 2021; flooding will likely cause further impacts and increase the need for drinking water and waste management systems in the affected areas (LGH 30/10/2021).

Food security and livelihoods

Access to food is poor in La Guajira – the department with the highest child malnutrition death rate in Colombia at about 24.1 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (UNICEF 22/04/2019). For children under five years of age, the mortality rate is 63.2 per 100,000 children (ANDI and ABACO 2019). More than 67% of households in the department are food-insecure (Ministry of Health 2015). At least 25% of these are severely food-insecure (ANDI and ABACO 2019). If the subsistence economy derived from agriculture and livestock farming is affected by floods, food insecurity will be at risk of deepening. High poverty levels and limited institutional response capacity make crop recovery more difficult (UNCaribe 11/2018).

In La Guajira, agriculture and livestock are mainly subsistence activities, as mining is the main economic activity in the area (Government of La Guajira 2012). Damage to crops and livestock directly affects the livelihoods of the population. During the recent floods, bean, pumpkin, patilla, and melon crops were destroyed (El Tiempo 01/09/2021). Only 4% of the rural population has access to drinking water, so re-irrigating crops is costly for the vast majority (Semana Rural 13/06/2019; FAO accessed 17/11/2021).

Health

In mid-October, the Government of La Guajira declared an orange alert given the increased risk of the spread of dengue. Increased rainfall had resulted in more stagnant water where mosquitoes breed, causing the rise in the number of cases in recent months (102 probable cases, 54 of which were confirmed). Given that the rainy season may extend until mid-December, cases will likely increase, unless transmission vectors are traced and cases properly identified (El Heraldo 10/10/2021). During the 2010–2011 winter season, Colombia experienced the largest dengue epidemic on record. Adequate wastewater management and the timely identification of contagion hotspots would help prevent a new epidemic (Revista Chilena de Infectología 04/2015). The department of La Guajira has very limited healthcare capacity and is one of the departments with the lowest health coverage in the country. About 12% of its population lacks access to the health system (DANE 02/09/2021). In the past, patients have had to be transferred to other cities after local healthcare facilities reached their capacity limit (Government of La Guajira 2012).

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Poverty

La Guajira is the department with the highest incidence of poverty in Colombia, with 66.3% of its population living in poverty (DANE 30/04/2021). As at April 2021, the unemployment rate in the departmental capital of Riohacha was 22.7% – the highest in the country. About two-thirds of the population work in the informal sector (El Heraldo 14/06/2021). With few formal work opportunities and general poverty, the community's coping mechanisms in the face of new natural disasters may be less effective.

Venezuelan migration

In La Guajira, there are around 150,806 Venezuelan migrants and refugees. This number represents about 8.7% of the total number of Venezuelan citizens in Colombia, even though the population of La Guajira is less than 2% of the country's total. Based on these numbers, about 17% of those living in La Guajira are Venezuelan citizens (GIFMM and R4V 05/08/2021; Guajira360° 18/11/2019). A large part of this migrant population lives in settlements that, because of the construction materials used and the areas in which they are located (many of which are marked as uninhabitable), are more susceptible to the rains (El Tiempo 06/11/2020).

Presence of vulnerable populations

La Guajira is home to about 98% of the Wayuu indigenous population of Colombia. This percentage represents around 380,460 people, making the Wayuu the largest indigenous community in Colombia. Four municipalities concentrate the majority of the Wayuu population: Maicao, Manaure, Riohacha, and Uribia (DANE 16/08/2019; Ministry of Culture accessed 17/11/2021). Given that there are droughts for a good part of the year in these departments, compounded by limited access to drinking water, the Wayuu population has high malnutrition rates. As at the end of February, approximately 31% of the children who have died from malnutrition in Colombia in 2021 are in La Guajira (Tüü Pütchika 19/03/2021). In 2020, 63 children died in the department because of malnutrition (El Heraldo 17/09/2021). Many of the houses in Wayuu territories are also made of mud and mud bricks and are vulnerable to damage in the event of natural disasters. Floods will likely affect the Wayuu population more than other groups in the department.

IMPACT OF NATURAL DISASTERS IN LA GUAJIRA 1980–2011[1]

Source: ACAPS, using data from the Government of La Guajira (2012).

[1] The map shows to which extent different departments were affected by natural disasters between 1980–2011, not only taking into account their frequency of occurrence but also weighing them according to their impact (i.e. in terms of the number of people affected and houses damaged).