

COLOMBIA

Violence against civilians

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

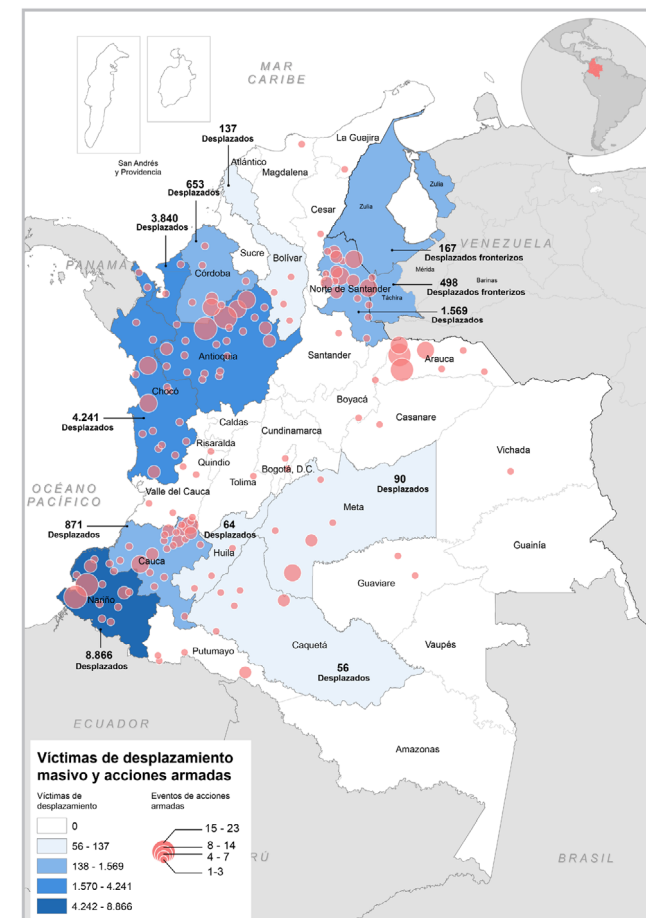
Reports of violence against civilians in Colombia have increased in 2020. As projected by ACAPS, armed groups and criminal organisations have taken advantage of COVID-19 containment measures to expand their territorial and social control, often by exploiting and inflicting violence on local communities (ACAPS 09/09/2020). This violence is mainly concentrated in remote, rural areas where armed groups compete for control of illicit economies and state presence is weak. The departments of Cauca, Meta, Putumayo, Chocó, Nariño and Antioquia are especially affected (UN News 15/07/2020). Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, who often live in these conflict-affected areas, are especially vulnerable to this violence and are targeted by armed groups for opposing their activities (IACHR 14/10/2020). Venezuelan refugee and migrant households are also at risk due to economic vulnerabilities and lack of access to support services (FAO-WFP 10/2020). Women and girls are also at an increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the context of increased conflict. COVID-19 containment measures leave many of them isolated and cut off from protection services.

KEY FINDINGS

- Armed groups have taken advantage of the pandemic to consolidate or expand control over territories and communities, which has resulted in **increased levels of conflict between groups and violence against civilians**.
- COVID-19-related school closures and economic shocks have **exposed children to increased protection risks**, including recruitment by armed groups.
- **Levels of food insecurity have significantly increased** as a result of income losses linked to official COVID-19 containment measures and restrictions imposed by armed groups.
- **Massacres and targeted killings persist in high numbers**, particularly in areas with weak state presence, illicit economic activity, and armed group presence.

CRITICAL NEEDS

- Communities in remote, conflict-affected areas are in **urgent need of protection** from armed groups. Afro-Colombian communities, indigenous communities, children, and social leaders are especially at risk (Save the Children 02/10/2020; FIP 2020).
- People displaced by violence or affected by massacres are exposed to high levels of trauma and **require psychosocial support**.
- **Between 3.3 million and 3.5 million people are facing severe food insecurity** in Colombia. Venezuelan refugees and migrants are among the most food insecure (FAO-WFP 10/2020).



REPORT AIM AND STRUCTURE

This report examines different forms of violence inflicted against civilians in Colombia this year. It aims to demonstrate how ongoing armed group activity and the impacts of COVID-19 are exposing certain groups to severe protection risks. First, it describes the violently enforced illegal COVID-19 measures that armed groups have imposed in certain areas. Second, it assesses the dynamics of forced confinement and displacement. Third, it examines the increase in child recruitment by armed groups. Fourth, it analyses trends in massacres (killings of three or more people). Finally, it highlights the targeted killing of social leaders and activists.

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

This report is informed by a review of secondary grey literature and media sources assessing levels of violence and the impact on civilians during 2020. It is subject to the limitations and potential biases of this literature.

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VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS

Violently enforced COVID-19 measures

Armed groups have taken advantage of the pandemic to consolidate or expand control over territories and communities, committing human rights violations and targeting opponents (FIP 2020; *Semana* 13/05/2020; *Insight Crime* 03/09/2020). Under the pretext of containing the spread of the virus, they have imposed highly restrictive, illegal COVID-19 prevention measures such as business closures, roadblocks, checkpoints, curfews, and quarantines in at least 11 of Colombia's 32 departments (ACAPS 09/09/2020; HRW 15/07/2020; UNVMC 26/06/2020). They have violently enforced such measures in at least five of these departments, attacking and killing those who are seen to be non-compliant (HRW 15/07/2020). While the official containment measures implemented by the government in March were lifted on 1 September, it is unclear whether armed groups continue to enforce their own restrictions.

Armed groups circulate pamphlets and messages on social media platforms outlining measures and threatening violence to those who do not obey them (FIP 2020; *Insight Crime* 03/09/2020). At least 30 civilians have been killed for breaking these unofficial rules, including children, medical professionals, and social leaders who oppose the measures (HRW 15/07/2020; *Save the Children* 02/10/2020). 25 of these killings occurred in the southwestern departments of Nariño and Cauca (UniAndes 20/08/2020).

In some areas, medical professionals have also been threatened and forbidden from leaving their homes, and attacks have been reported against medical missions (HRW 15/07/2020). In Tumaco, Nariño, armed actors shot at a medical vehicle, killing the patient and driver (HRW 15/07/2020; UniAndes 20/08/2020). The stigmatisation of people identified as possibly having COVID-19 has led to forced displacements—justified as necessary social distancing measures. These actions have often targeted vulnerable groups, including Venezuelan migrants and indigenous communities (*Verdad Abierta* 1/05/2020). Armed groups in Putumayo and Nariño have sent death threats to people who tested positive to COVID-19, forcing them to leave the area (*Insight Crime* 03/09/2020; OCHA 17/06/2020).

These rules have further constrained communities' access to livelihoods and food, which had already been limited by the government's nationwide lockdown measures. At least 5.1 million Colombians depend on informal work to meet their basic needs and have suffered significant or complete income loss (OCHA 17/06/2020). In August 2020, 3.3 million people were facing severe food insecurity in Colombia (FAO-WFP 10/2020). By September, WFP had received requests for food assistance for at least 1.3 million people as a result of the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 (OCHA 24/09/2020; 27/08/2020). Venezuelan refugees and

migrants are among the most food insecure, with 70% of households already presenting severe or moderate levels of food insecurity prior to the pandemic (WFP 02/2020). This is because of their reliance on informal jobs, barriers to accessing social safety nets, and lack of support networks (FAO-WFP 10/2020). People cannot pursue their livelihoods as armed groups order businesses to close, impose movement restrictions, and enforce extensive curfews (HRW 15/07/2020). Road and river blocks have prevented isolated and indigenous rural communities from accessing essential food products and medicine (Semana 13/05/2020; Verdad Abierta 08/04/2020).

Such extensive restrictions are also likely to increase the risk of SGBV as vulnerable people are left isolated and confined to often highly stressful home environments (Protection Cluster 21/04/2020). Following the government's implementation of a national quarantine in March, there was a sharp increase in reports of violence against women.

Forced confinement

Both before and during the government's nationwide lockdown, armed groups have submitted communities to forced confinement, not allowing them to move outside a specified area, or even leave their houses. They enforce these restrictions through threats and violence, including burning vehicles and killing people who disobey (Pacifista 26/02/2020). This tactic is used by armed groups to control the movement of people in areas where they are present.

Confinements aggravate humanitarian needs by cutting communities off from humanitarian assistance and constraining access to food, water, livelihoods, healthcare, and education (OCHA 26/10/2020).

This year, over 65,000 people have been victims of forced confinement in Colombia with 26,400 people still confined at the start of November (OCHA 22/11/2020). This is a significant increase from 2019, where 25,483 people were affected by forced confinement over the same time period (OCHA 22/11/2020). The practice has become more widespread during the pandemic as armed groups use the pretext of containing the spread of the virus to exert social control. However, most confinements this year took place before the implementation of any COVID-19 measures. Over half of all cases (35,244) occurred in February when the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Popular Liberation Army (EPL – also called Los Pelusos) declared 'armed strikes' in the Catatumbo region of Norte de Santander, forcing all residents to remain at home for several days (Pacifista 26/02/2020). Confinement also affected 25,870 people in Chocó (40% of total) (OCHA 22/11/2020; UN News 15/07/2020).

Forced displacement

Communities in conflict-affected areas continue to be forcibly displaced from their homes as a result of violent threats and increased clashes between armed groups, and between such groups and state forces. Between January and October 2020, over 21,000 people were displaced from their homes.

Displacements over the same period in 2019 were higher, with almost 25,000 displaced people. This reduction could be linked to COVID-19-related mobility restrictions implemented by the government and additional controls imposed by armed groups, which have led to more confinements but fewer population movements. Indeed, 25% of displacements in 2020 (5,215 people) occurred in January, before the implementation of any COVID-19 prevention measures (OCHA 22/11/2020).

Almost 75% of displacements in 2020 took place in just four departments: Nariño, Chocó, Antioquia, and Norte de Santander. 20% of those affected are indigenous and 45% are Afro-Colombian (OCHA 22/11/2020; UNSC 25/09/2020). These groups are disproportionately affected by this form of violence: 3.5% of the Colombian population is indigenous and 9.3% is Afro-Colombian (IWGIA last accessed 30/10/2020; DANE 06/11/2019). These communities often live in remote, conflict-affected parts of the country with the presence of illicit economies and non-state armed groups, which partly accounts for their overrepresentation as victims. However, armed groups also target these communities, who often oppose the use of their land for illicit economic activity such as coca crop production or illegal mining (IACHR 14/10/2020; HRW 2020). Displaced communities often require shelter, food, health, and psychosocial assistance. IDPs in Nariño in March 2020 reported a lack of institutional response and support. Access to affected populations is also restricted due to active conflict in the areas of displacement (MSF 03/03/2020).

Conflict in the contested region of Catatumbo in Norte de Santander that borders Venezuela escalated during quarantine as the ELN sought to increase control, engaging in armed clashes with rival groups and carrying out targeted attacks against social leaders and other opponents (Insight Crime 03/09/2020). Furthermore, the economic downturn linked to COVID-19 measures in Colombia has prompted many Venezuelan migrants to return home. At the same time, Venezuelans are returning to Colombia or entering for the first time as the economy reopens and the situation in Venezuela continues to deteriorate (see ACAPS 09/09/2020). With formal border crossings closed, they are forced to use trochas—unofficial crossing points on remote paths. These routes are controlled by armed groups who charge fees for passage (Insight Crime 24/07/2020; ACAPS 09/09/2020). Migrants using trochas are exposed to protection risks including human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Venezuelan women and girls are especially at risk (Protection Cluster 21/04/2020).

Child recruitment by armed groups

Children in conflict-affected areas are in urgent need of protection as school closures and economic shocks expose them to increased protection risks, including recruitment by armed groups (Save the Children 02/10/2020). In the first half of 2020, at least 190 minors were recruited into armed groups—nearly as many as for the whole of 2019 (200 cases), and five times as many (38) as the first half of that year (TNH 10/09/2020; UNICEF 28/07/2020). Actual numbers are likely to be higher as cases are hard to track and are under-reported due to fear of repercussion (TNH 10/09/2020).

Both the ELN and the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC – also called Clan del Golfo) have forcibly recruited children in Chocó, including from Emberá indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities (Insight Crime 03/09/2020; FIP 2020). Cases have also been detected in Antioquia and Córdoba (OCHA 27/08/2020). Dissident groups of the demobilised Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) have attended community meetings in Guaviare to identify potential recruits (Insight Crime 03/09/2020; Caracol 13/08/2020).

COVID-19-related economic shocks and school closures make children from poor rural communities especially vulnerable (Save the Children 02/10/2020). Lockdown measures have limited livelihood options and income sources, and many rural families are facing acute food insecurity. Although the government lifted the national lockdown in September, the contraction of the Colombian economy caused by the containment measures continues to affect people's ability to pursue livelihoods and access food. In this context, families may resort to negative coping strategies, including child recruitment and other forms of child exploitation (Protection Cluster 21/04/2020). Venezuelan refugee and migrant households are also highly vulnerable to this form of exploitation as they are among the most economically vulnerable and often lack access to support services and regular legal status, which makes them less likely to report issues to the authorities out of fear of detention.

Some minors are forcibly recruited, but many join to escape poverty and lack of opportunities, abuse at home, or due to false promises of wealth. Armed groups use a range of recruitment strategies, including hosting parties, offering gifts such as phones or clothes, and providing salaries (Insight Crime 28/08/2020). In Norte de Santander, the ELN is using social media and messaging applications to contact minors and organise parties to convince them to join their ranks (LAFM 11/07/2020; TNH 10/09/2020).

Many children have also lost access to protection services and safe spaces as schools have closed due to the pandemic. Teachers are often the first to identify the signs of involvement with armed groups and can take early action to prevent recruitment (TNH 10/09/2020). Children in remote rural areas have become more isolated due to quarantine measures, which

makes them more vulnerable to contact with and recruitment by armed groups (Insight Crime 28/08/2020; OCHA 27/08/2020). Boys are most at risk of being recruited but girls are also targeted and forced into sexual exploitation (TNH 10/09/2020).

Massacres

By 25 November, 77 massacres had occurred in Colombia since the beginning of the year, killing 309 people (Indepaz 22/11/2020). Although there is no single explanation for the killings, they are concentrated in parts of the country where state presence is limited and where several armed groups compete for control of illicit economies and trade routes (IAH-CR 14/10/2020). Massacres are used by these groups to instil fear in local populations and exercise social control (Verdad Abierta 17/08/2020). The departments where most massacres have occurred are: Antioquia (18), Cauca (12), Nariño (9), and Norte de Santander (6), which are the four departments with the highest concentration of coca production (Indepaz 14/11/2020; Verdad Abierta 23/08/2020). Many municipalities that registered multiple massacres are in coca growing areas; farmers who are participating in the government's illicit crop substitution programme (PNIS) have become targets for armed groups who profit from the coca business (Verdad Abierta 23/08/2020).



Source: Indepaz 22/11/2020

Overall homicide rates decreased notably in April following the implementation of a nationwide lockdown, although massacre rates continued to increase (FIP 2020; Indepaz 14/11/2020). Between July and September 2020, 138 people were killed in 33 massacres—more than in the previous six months combined, and almost as in the whole of 2019, when 149 people were killed (Indepaz 14/11/2020; Verdad Abierta 23/08/2020). August and September were especially violent months, with 11 and 16 recorded massacres killing 49 and 65 people respectively (Indepaz 14/11/2020).

Young people are often the victims of this violence. On 11 August, five Afro-Colombian teenagers aged 14–16 were tortured and killed in the city of Cali (IACHR 14/10/2020). In Nariño, over 20 people were killed in the span of a week in late August. The death toll included two children on their way to school, and nine people aged 17–26 who were killed during a social gathering, apparently for breaking quarantine rules imposed by an armed group in the area.

The increasing trend of massacres demonstrates a new phase of conflict following the 2016 Peace Agreement and demobilisation of the FARC-EP. Other armed groups and dissident factions of the FARC now fight for control of the territory left behind by the group, and local communities suffer the consequences (Verdad Abierta 23/08/2020). This trend is likely to continue as military interventions fail to curb insecurity in rural areas, to protect the country's most vulnerable populations, or to address the structural inequalities underpinning violence in their territories.

Targeting of social leaders and activists

Social leaders and human rights defenders are frequently killed in targeted assassinations (Insight Crime 03/09/2020). Armed groups target these leaders for opposing illicit economic activity on their land and for promoting the implementation of the Peace Agreement, which includes illicit crop substitution and land redistribution programmes (Insight Crime 18/02/2020). By 25 November, 259 social leaders and 12 family members had been murdered this year (Indepaz last accessed 25/11/2020). 279 were killed in 2019 and 298 in 2018 (Indepaz 21/08/2020). The targeting of social leaders and human rights defenders is a longstanding problem. Between the signing of the Peace Agreement in November 2016 and August 2020, 1,000 social leaders and activists had been killed (Indepaz 21/08/2020). Over 70% of killings occurred in rural areas. 38% of victims were indigenous and 10% were Afro-Colombian (Indepaz 21/08/2020).

The COVID-19 outbreak has increased the vulnerability of human rights defenders and social leaders to attacks. It has led to a diversion of state attention and resources, leaving many without their usual protection arrangements (Amnesty International 08/10/2020; Guardian 08/10/2020). Additionally, COVID-19-related movement restrictions have confined these

leaders to their homes, making it easier for armed groups to locate and target their victims (FIP 2020). Nevertheless, January and February have been the deadliest months to date this year, with 34 and 32 killings respectively. These killings occurred prior to the implementation of COVID-19 measures, indicating that assassinations are increasing independent of the COVID-19 crisis (FIP 2020; Indepaz last accessed 16/11/2020).

Although COVID-19 restrictions have increased the vulnerability of social leaders and activists, threats to their lives will not disappear as measures are lifted and movement becomes less restricted. Without significantly enhanced protection arrangements, and a commitment to protecting the rights of Colombia's vulnerable communities, these killings are likely to continue unabated.

Displacements and armed actions in Colombia, January- October, 2020

Source: OCHA 22/11/2020

