

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

On 2 January 2022, confrontations began in rural areas along Arauca River on the Colombia-Venezuela border between the National Liberation Army (ELN) and dissidents of the 10th Front of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), who rejected the Peace Agreement in 2016 (ACH 05/01/2022). As at 24 January, the Colombian Government and humanitarian organisations recorded 36 people killed, around 1,530 IDPs (407 families), 21 families displaced from Venezuela, and at least five indigenous communities still affected by confinement in the municipalities of Arauquita, Fortul, Saravena, and Tame in the department of Arauca and Cubará in the department of Boyacá (GIFMM and R4V 20/01/2022; ACH 12/01/2022; El Colombiano 13/01/2022). 2,000 people were at risk of displacement (El País 04/01/2022). All these figures are preliminary, as there are restrictions on access to information because of the continued presence of armed groups.

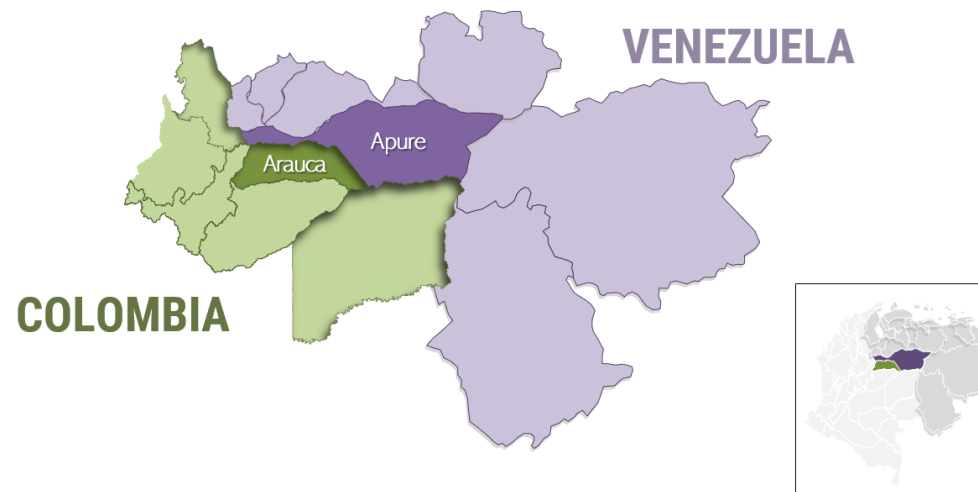
On 27 January 2022, local mayoral officials reported that the steady increase in the number of displaced people had stretched their resources for responding to needs to the limit. They reported a lack of shelter, food, and hygiene items. Some of the displaced were sleeping on the streets (GIFMM and R4V 20/01/2022; Radio Nacional 17/01/2022; Caracol Radio 27/01/2022). Although no further deaths have been reported, the ELN has patrolled the streets of some municipalities. The dispute between the armed groups remains active, with explosions and kidnappings as expressions of war (El Tiempo 17/01/2022; El Heraldo 10/01/2022; Blu Radio 18/01/2022).

As at 24 January, details on the incidents remained unclear. Some humanitarian organisations reported clashes between armed groups, but the Colombian Government stated that the deaths and displacements resulted from targeted killings during clashes in Apure, Venezuela (El Tiempo 06/01/2022; Caracol Radio 07/01/2022; ACH 12/01/2022). Among those killed were combatants and civilians of Colombian and Venezuelan nationality; at least two of whom were minors (CNN 06/01/2022).

BACKGROUND AND DRIVERS OF THE CONFLICT

The ELN has been a central armed participant in the dynamics of the armed conflict in Arauca department. Between 2005–2010, it fought with the 10th Front of FARC-EP over predominance and control. As a result, the ELN became a hegemonic actor in the Apure-Arauca border zone

Map 1: Location of Arauca (Colombia) and Apure (Venezuela)



Source: ACAPS

and most of Arauca's municipalities (Larratt-Smith 08/04/2021). About 60% of its members and a good part of its finances are based in Arauca and Apure – a strategic space for the group (InSight Crime 21/05/2018).

When the FARC-EP demobilised as a product of the Peace Agreement with the Colombian Government in 2016, the ELN quickly sought to expand its territorial presence in the east of Arauca, where the FARC-EP still had a territorial presence. Some members of the FARC-EP's 10th Front later abandoned the peace process and founded a new armed group (known as the 10th Martín Villa Front or the 10th Front) (Larratt-Smith 03/2021). On the Colombian side of the border (in Arauca), the ELN and the dissidents of the 10th Front established a system of joint control, while on the Venezuelan side (in Apure), the territory became controlled by three groups: the ELN, the dissidents of the 10th Front, and another FARC-EP dissident group known as Segunda Marquetalia.

This shared territorial control changed in 2021 when the Segunda Marquetalia clashed with the dissidents of the 10th Front in Apure. This clash left more than 5,000 people displaced

and weakened the Second Marquetalia, who for the rest of 2021 lost three of its high-level commanders in assassinations by the dissidents of the 10th Front (InSight Crime 21/12/2021 and 18/05/2021).

In Arauca, the ELN had been isolated from these disputes. This situation changed in early January 2022, when fighting erupted between the ELN and the dissidents of the 10th Front. The drivers of this new dispute are still unclear. Among the reported versions are the assassination of a high-ranking ELN commander in Apure by the dissidents of the 10th Front and their breach of the territorial distribution pacts established in Arauca (El Espectador 10/01/2022; InSight Crime 11/01/2022). There likely was a breakdown in the territorial control agreements, possibly because of the dissidents' desire to expand towards the Colombian side of the border after the defeat of the Second Marquetalia strengthened it. After the fighting, some videos and audio recordings of the dissidents of the 10th Front declaring war on the ELN have circulated (Caracol Radio 07/01/2022).

Anticipated scope and scale

FARC-EP dissidents released a video on 7 January declaring war on the ELN in Arauca. They also released audio messages threatening reprisals for the killings (Infobae 07/01/2022; El Colombiano 06/01/2022). As at 11 January, although there had been no new fighting in Arauca, there were explosions and gunfire in Saravena, indicating that there was still active dispute between the armed groups (ACH 12/01/2022; El Heraldó 10/01/2022).

The Colombian Government sent more than 600 soldiers to Arauca to respond to the emergency (Blu Radio 06/01/2022). Increasing the State's military presence could also lead to fighting between military forces and armed groups, prolonging disputes.

On the Venezuelan side of the border, there have been some clashes between the ELN and dissidents of the 10th Front. The Segunda Marquetalia may also be involved in the dispute in Apure (El Espectador 10/01/2022). Given these conditions, there are two different conflict dynamics:

In Arauca, the ELN and 10th Front are fighting over territorial control, which could be aggravated by the presence of more Colombian military troops.

In Apure, the conflict is mainly between the 10th Front and the Segunda Marquetalia. On some occasions, the Venezuelan Army has participated. An increase in military tensions in Apure could lead to new displacement towards Arauca and other departments of Colombia.

Humanitarian constraints

There are large information gaps regarding the affected population. The number of displaced people cited in media and humanitarian reports ranges from 930 (ACH 12/01/2022) to 1,500

(GIFMM and R4V 20/01/2022). The number of people killed ranges from 27–60 (El Colombiano 23/01/2022 and 13/01/2022; El Espectador 13/01/2022; ACH/12/01/2022), and the number of people confined is still unknown. Humanitarian workers in Arauca have mentioned large underreporting of the number of displaced persons (KII 24/01/2022).

As at 24 January 2022, fighting was taking place in both Arauca and Apure (El Colombiano 23/01/2022; El Espectador 10/01/2022). The situation restricted humanitarian access in Venezuela, complicating assistance for those in Apure (Crónica Uno 03/01/2022).

Although several NGOs, international organisations, and Colombian government agencies are already responding to the situation, restrictions on mobility remain as armed groups have announced 'armed strikes', understood as prohibitions on mobility on their order (ACH 12/01/2022). In some municipalities, there are forced confinements by armed groups for part of the day and restrictions on mobility by the Colombian Government at night (El Colombiano 23/01/2022).

NGOs and social leaders have become targets of attack, as they could be considered close to one of warring parties. On 20 January, a car loaded with explosives exploded in front of an NGO building housing threatened social leaders (France24 20/01/2022). A FARC-EP dissident group claimed responsibility for the attack and declared it was against the ELN's urban structures (El Colombiano 22/01/2022).

CRISIS IMPACT

Protection

A lot of people are still at risk of forced displacement because of the protection risks they face from the fighting. Most notable among these risks are targeted killings of those considered allies or supporters of an opposing group (Radio Nacional 17/01/2022; El Colombiano 06/01/2022; W Radio 03/01/2022). Faced with this risk, the inhabitants of affected municipalities have expressed the need for a humanitarian corridor to allow their safe passage towards other municipalities (Blu Radio 02/01/2022).

As at 13 January, in the absence of such a humanitarian corridor, several families were probably confined in the rural areas of Arauca, Fortul, Saravena, and Tame. As at 24 January 2021, there remained no estimate of their numbers (El Colombiano 23/01/2022; El Tiempo 04/01/2022; El Espectador 04/01/2022). Farmers in Fortul, Saravena, and Tame municipalities reported that their work activities had to end early, as armed groups had imposed curfews during the night. Civilians also reported having stopped some activities for fear of being caught in the middle of a confrontation (El Colombiano 23/01/2022). Confinement often aggravates existing food insecurity and complicates humanitarian access because it restricts

transportation and access to health services (ACH 05/01/2022). Arauquita, Saravena, and Tame are the municipalities with the most banana, rice, and maize crops in the department. Many of these crops are for farmer consumption. In times of confinement, their food security is compromised, as they are unable to reach their crops (Fedesarrollo y Cámaras de Comercio de Arauca 2018; SDGF 2017).

The Colombian Government stated that in the wake of the current clashes, armed groups were increasing the forced recruitment of Colombian and Venezuelan minors to increase their strength against the rival armed group (Caracol Radio 05/01/2022; Infobae 06/01/2022). Some parents have reported going into forced displacement to prevent the recruitment of their children (RCN Radio 05/01/2022).

Shelter and NFIs

Local authorities have stated that the increase in the number of displaced people has stretched the resources of the local governments to the limit (Radio Nacional 17/01/2022). They have reported a lack of food, shelter, and hygiene kits for the displaced population (Vatican News 18/01/2022; Caracol Radio 06/01/2022; Infobae 07/01/2022). When the number of displaced people increases further as expected, municipalities will not have enough shelters to accommodate them (ACH 05/01/2022).

During the Apure-Arauca fighting crisis in April 2021, the main needs identified were temporary shelter, hygiene kits, and food for the displaced (GIFMM and R4V 23/12/2021 and 17/08/2021). At the time, most displaced people came from Venezuela, where the fighting was taking place (BBC 06/04/2021). If clashes between armed groups and with the Venezuelan National Army are taking place in Apure as media are reporting (Runrunes 13/01/2022; El Espectador 03/01/2022), displacement from Venezuela will likely increase (El Espectador 06/01/2022; Caracol Radio 07/01/2022).

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

COVID-19

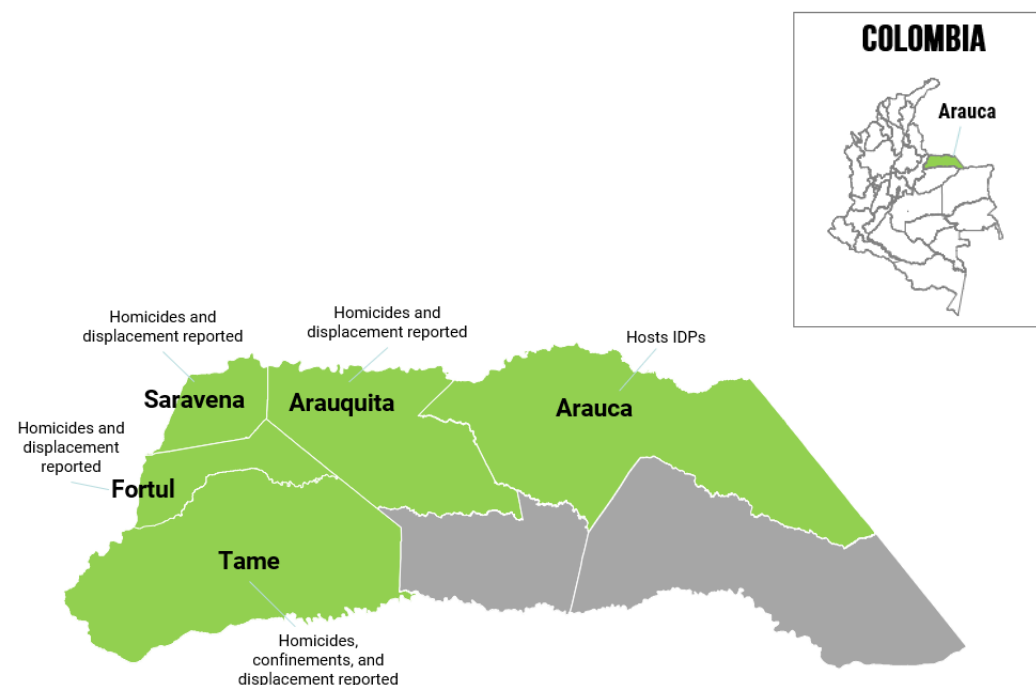
Colombia is facing an increase in COVID-19 cases because of the omicron variant (El Colombiano 06/01/2022; La Patria 01/01/2022). While this has not yet led to an increase in deaths, the number of people seeking medical care will likely rise. During previous waves of COVID-19, Arauca did not have enough beds to care for people with severe infections (Government of Arauca 06/05/2021). In 2018, there was less than one intensive care bed per 1,000 inhabitants in Arauca, implying that an increase in cases could overwhelm the departmental health system quickly (Colombian Ministry of Health 31/01/2020). So far, no increase in cases has been recorded in the department, but given the wave that the country is experiencing, it is possible to expect such an increase in the coming weeks.

Arauca is one of the departments with the lowest vaccination rate in Colombia. As at 28 January, only 38% of its population has received at least a dose of the vaccine (Government of Antioquia accessed 28/01/2022). If displacement is prolonged and there is an increase in COVID-19 cases, the access of the displaced population to healthcare services may become restricted. The overcrowding of IDP shelters during this emergency will also make physical distancing difficult, which, with the lack of hygiene kits and sanitary facilities, will increase the risk of COVID-19 spreading (Caracol Radio 06/01/2022; Infobae 07/01/2022).

Elections 2022

In March and May 2022, Colombia will hold elections for Congress and the Presidency of the Republic. In Arauca, armed groups have historically attempted to change voting patterns through violence against civilians (El Espectador 07/01/2022). This implies increased protection risks for social and community leaders (MOE 13/11/2021). With the clashes between the ELN and FARC-EP dissidents, political violence against civilians will likely increase.

Map 2: Municipalities affected by the clashes (Arauca department)



Source: ACAPS using a template from OCHA (19/09/2014) and information from ACH (05/01/2022)