

Key crises to watch: the unintended impact of the Total Peace policy on armed violence

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Aim: this report provides an overview of key humanitarian crises resulting from armed conflict within 3 of the 32 departments in Colombia. The aim is to identify departments where the humanitarian consequences of conflict could increase in the face of uneven progress in the Colombian Government’s negotiations with various armed groups. It aims to inform humanitarian decision-making and programming by anticipating humanitarian needs in the departments of Antioquia, Caquetá, and Chocó.

Methodology: this report is based on the secondary data review of public sources. For each department selected, the ACAPS team collected existing information, mapped out relevant drivers of the crises, highlighted recent developments, and anticipated their probable evolution and potential impact on humanitarian needs over the next months.

The three departments were identified based on two criteria.

- The total number of people affected by armed conflict events between January–June 2023: the ACAPS team used OCHA’s *Humanitarian Situation Monitor* for this criterion to identify departments with the highest number of conflict-affected people.
- The presence of various armed groups within departments: as explained in detail below, when one of the armed groups present in the department is not engaged in negotiations with the State, the probability of increased violence increases. This happens because the ceasefire between the Government and other armed groups leaves room for the group to attempt to gain greater territorial control. For this criterion, the ACAPS team relied on triangulated information from an alert system of the Colombian Ombudsman’s Office (*Delegada para Prevención de riesgos y Sistema de Alertas Tempranas*) and analyses by *La Liga Contra el Silencio* (*El mapa de las guerras que desangran a Colombia*) and *Verdad Abierta* (*Las otras guerras del Eln no tienen cese al fuego*).

Scope: this report aims to highlight current and anticipated crises whose humanitarian impacts are already visible and will likely be of highest importance during the second half of 2023. It does not aim to provide an exhaustive list of all current and anticipated crises derived from armed conflict affecting Colombia. The crises were selected based on a review of publicly available information, the close monitoring of the situation, and contextual knowledge. The crises in the report are listed alphabetically and not by order of importance or probability.

Limitations: the context of violence in Colombia is constantly changing – even more so when the Government is in the process of negotiating with multiple armed groups simultaneously. A sudden change in any variables considered could produce outcomes very different from those presented here. This report aims to understand future possibilities for the deterioration of armed conflict if current conditions do not change significantly. New conditions would alter assumptions and potentially imply a different analysis. At the same time, because of the high levels of violence against civilians in the Colombian armed conflict, they tend to withhold or hide a significant amount of information to avoid reprisals from armed groups. The limited information publicly available restricts the analysis, and there may be more localised dynamics not taken into consideration in the report.

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GENERAL CONTEXT AND HUMANITARIAN SITUATION OVERVIEW

Armed groups involved and ceasefires

Since coming into power in August 2022, the current Colombian Government has undertaken a series of negotiations with several of the armed groups active in the country. The aim is to reach an agreement that would lead to the demobilisation of these armed groups. The Government has dubbed this policy “Total Peace” (FP 08/11/2022).

These negotiations are progressing at different paces. As at 13 July 2023, there were two negotiating tables: one with the National Liberation Army (ELN) and another (announced but not yet started) with the Estado Mayor Central (EMC).

With the other armed groups, the Government plans to implement subjugation processes. This means that instead of negotiating with them, the Government will set conditions for them to surrender their weapons in return for certain incentives and benefits (El Tiempo 10/05/2023).

Following several attacks by the ELN against security forces, negotiations with the ELN concluded with a ceasefire agreement that will come into effect 3 August (BBC 09/06/2023; Infobae 06/07/2023). This ceasefire does not include an end to armed actions against other non-state armed groups (Semana 05/07/2023).

The Government signed a ceasefire with the EMC at the beginning of 2023 but suspended it on 22 May after the group committed a massacre against four minors who tried to escape forced recruitment (Cambio 22/05/2023).

Armed groups mentioned in the report

The **Estado Mayor Central (Central General Staff)** is an agglutination of various groups of dissidents from the demobilised Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) guerrillas (El País 16/04/2023 and 12/06/2023). Although these dissidents claim to be articulated in a unified organisation, their level of cohesion and command structure remain in question (CORE 2021; Johnson 05/06/2023; Razon Publica 26/03/2023). Together with current leader ‘Ivan Mordisco’, alias ‘Gentil Duarte’ led this dissidence until his death (InSight Crime 16/02/2023). This report refers to FARC-EP dissident groups that have publicly admitted to belonging to the EMC as at 13 July 2023 with their name or directly as the EMC. However, the groups that do or do not belong to the EMC may change over time.

Segunda Marquetalia (Second Marquetalia), together with the EMC, is the second of the two agglutinations of FARC-EP dissident groups in Colombia (CORE 2021). This armed group was born in 2019, when some former FARC-EP commanders, such as alias ‘Iván Márquez’, ‘Jesús Santrich’, ‘Romaña’, and ‘El Paisa’ announced that they were rearming (El País 21/04/2023; EE 07/07/2023). This report refers to FARC-EP dissident groups that have publicly admitted to belonging to Segunda Marquetalia as at 13 July 2023 with their name or directly as Segunda Marquetalia. However, the groups that do or do not belong to the Segunda Marquetalia may change over time.

The **Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (Gaitanist Self-Defence Forces of Colombia or AGC)** were born after the demobilisation of the paramilitary group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC). The Colombian Government calls them Clan del Golfo because of their origin and strong presence in the Gulf of Urabá. Previously, the Colombian Government called them Los Urabefios and Clan Úsuga (Badillo and Mijares 16/01/2022).

Bloque Virgilio Peralta Arenas (BVPA) is also known as Los del Bajo, Los Caparros and previously as Los Caparrapos. This armed group is a dissident faction of the AGC. Although this group operated as an independent structure for some years, in 2009, they became part of the AGC and became the BVPA. At the beginning of 2017, they split from the AGC and started fighting them in the departments of Antioquia and Córdoba (InSight Crime 02/06/2021; El Colombiano accessed 14/07/2023). Recently, they have been using the name Los del Bajo in reference to the Bajo Cauca subregion in Antioquia (Caracol Radio 06/09/2022).

Comandos de la Frontera – Ejército Bolivariano are also known as La Mafia, the name they had before their rebranding between 2019–2020. This group was born as an alliance between dissidents from the 48th and 32nd Fronts of the FARC-EP and another group known as La Constru, which emerged after the demobilisation of the paramilitary group AUC (InSight Crime 11/06/2022; EE 12/09/2020). In 2021, they announced joining the Segunda Marquetalia (Ombudsman’s Office of Colombia 04/01/2019; Ombudsman’s Office of Colombia 03/07/2020; Análisis Urbano 15/03/2021). This report refers to them as Comandos de la Frontera or Segunda Marquetalia in the section on Caquetá.

Frente Carolina Ramírez is part of the EMC (Cerosetenta 02/05/2023). They were formerly known as Frente Armando Ríos or Frente Primero. Their main areas of influence are the departments of Guainía, Guaviare, and Putumayo. This front declared itself in dissidence in 2016, before the signing of the agreement between the Colombian Government and former FARC-EP guerrillas (InSight Crime 13/07/2019; Semana 23/05/2023). This report refers to the group as Frente Carolina Ramírez or the EMC in the section on Caquetá.

The Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army) is an armed group born during the 1960s. The ELN is present in more than 200 municipalities in Colombia (Ombudsman’s Office of Colombia 09/12/2022).

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia was an armed group born during the 1960s. It was the biggest insurgent group in the country. It demobilised in 2016 as part of a peace agreement with the Colombian Government (Verdad Abierta 18/11/2012; InSight Crime 16/11/2011; France 24 25/11/2021).

The Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia) was the largest paramilitary group in Colombia. They were born around 1997 as a union of several self-defence groups. The AUC demobilised between 2003–2006 following a demobilisation agreement with the Colombian Government (InSight Crime 25/05/2011).

Disclaimer: by using these names, ACAPS is not accepting the legitimacy of any armed group or its status as an armed group with political or non-political objectives. It uses the names that the groups have given themselves as a way of standardising their names.

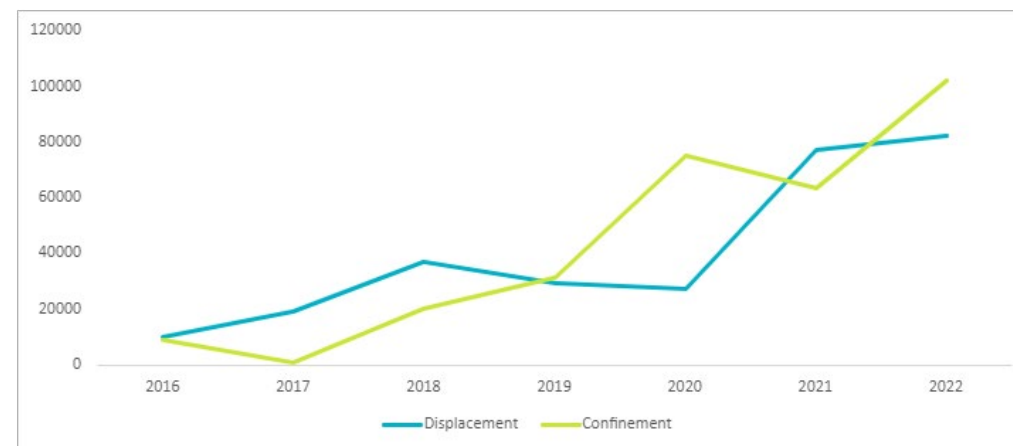
Upcoming elections

In October 2023, Colombia will hold its regional elections for mayors, members of municipal councils, governors, and members of departmental assemblies. Several governmental and non-governmental entities have warned of armed groups infiltrating the candidate registration process in areas where these groups have a permanent presence (MOE 27/06/2023; Asuntos Legales 17/04/2023). Armed groups can disrupt elections through violence against political and social leaders (MOE/NIMD 24/03/2021). This report places emphasis on subregions where this risk could materialise over July–December, 2023.

Humanitarian overview

As negotiations continue, so do the humanitarian consequences of armed conflict. 2022 had the highest number of displacements and confinements¹ since the signing of the Peace Agreement with the FARC-EP in 2016 (OCHA 23/01/2023). During the first six months of 2023, more than 26,000 people were forcibly displaced and 27,000 people confined across the country (OCHA accessed 17/07/2023). Although these numbers are lower than during the same months in 2021 and 2022, they are higher than the trend recorded between 2019–2020 (OCHA accessed 17/07/2023).

Figure 1. People displaced and confined by armed conflict events in Colombia (2016–2023)



Source: ACAPS using data from OCHA (accessed 05/07/2023); OCHA (accessed 05/07/2023)

Other conflict events have continued at similarly high levels as in previous years. As at 30 June 2023, kidnappings had increased by more than 5% and cases of forced recruitment had increased by more than 153% compared to the same months in 2022. Also, around 139 people had been held hostage compared to just three in 2022. In contrast, other events have considerably decreased. During the first six months of 2023, the number of people killed in massacres decreased by 14%, those affected by restrictions on humanitarian access by 79%, the number of displaced people by 34%, and the number of people in confinement by 57% (OCHA accessed 15/06/2023; OCHA accessed 05/07/2023). This report seeks to account for these variations at the subregional level, given that these events do not occur with the same frequency in each department.

¹ Confinements are defined as limiting the mobility of a community and the population's access to at least three basic services or goods (such as food, education, health, water and sanitation, and livelihoods) for at least one week. Similar situations with a duration of less than a week are simply considered mobility restrictions (OCHA 04/2015). This ACAPS report explains the differences in the definitions of confinement and the humanitarian impact of confinement in Colombia.

Table 1. Impact of the armed conflict in Colombia (between January–June from 2016–2023)

	PEOPLE KIDNAPPED	PEOPLE FORCIBLY RECRUITED	PEOPLE KILLED IN MASSACRES	PEOPLE HELD HOSTAGE	PEOPLE AFFECTED BY RESTRICTIONS ON HUMANITARIAN ACCESS	PEOPLE DISPLACED	PEOPLE CONFINED	EVENTS RESTRICTING HUMANITARIAN ACCESS
2016	95	25	41	1	2,518,675	7,058	8,546	82
2017	72	46	10	7	29,176	10,145	306	90
2018	58	80	43	17	905,338	22,592	14,028	193
2019	95	25	41	5	315,412	12,785	13,710	95
2020	52	45	115	14	345,813	16,138	47,641	64
2021	101	66	119	0	53,172	41,255	32,558	73
2022	112	89	90	3	2,752,985	41,133	71,742	251
2023	118	226	77	139	568,927	26,838	27,117	144

Source: ACAPS using data from OCHA (accessed 15/06/2023); OCHA (accessed 17/07/2023)

Based on the two selection criteria mentioned above, the report identified three departments: Antioquia, Caquetá, and Chocó. These have all had high numbers of people affected by armed conflict events and a heightened presence of various armed groups. Other departments, such as Bolívar, Nariño, and Norte de Santander, face similar situations. The report chose the three departments with the highest number of people affected during January–June 2023 and with the most armed groups fighting over territorial control.

Map 1: key crises to watch



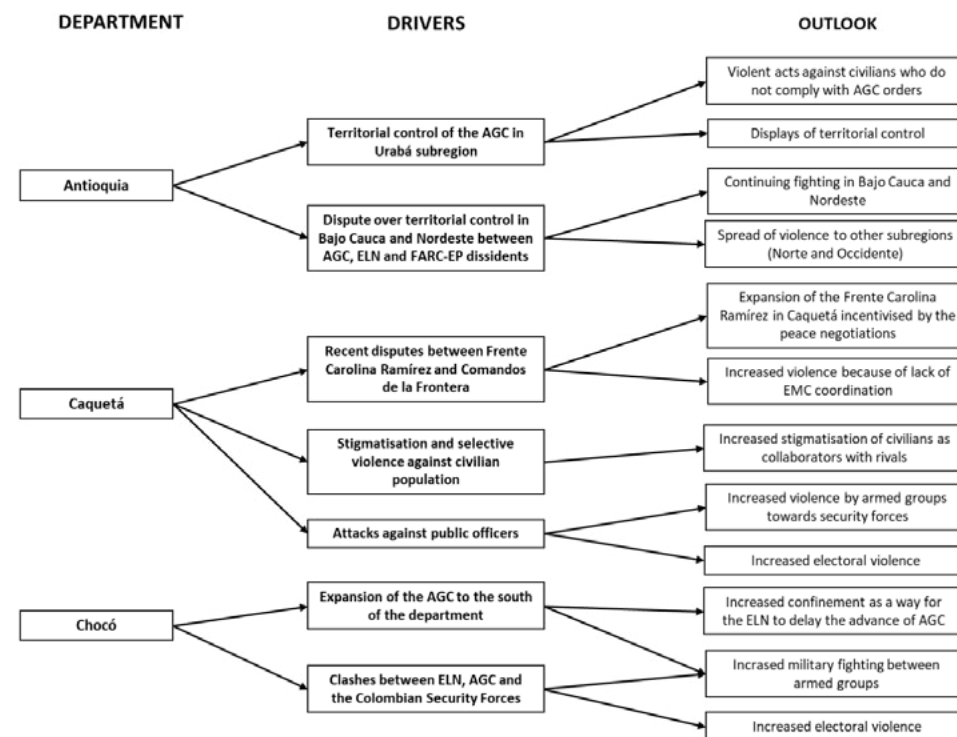
Source: ACAPS using data from OCHA 04/04/2023

Table 2. Number of armed conflict events, people affected, and armed groups present in the crises analysed (as at June 2023)

DEPARTMENT	MAIN SUBREGIONS AFFECTED	PEOPLE AFFECTED	EVENTS	ARMED GROUPS
Antioquia	Urabá Antioqueño and Bajo Cauca	487,435	127	AGC, ELN, FARC-EP dissidents (Fronts 18 and 36), and Los Caparros
Caquetá	Caquetá	30,604	74	Front Carolina Ramírez and Comandos de la Frontera
Chocó	Alto Atrato and Medio Atrato	24,242	117	AGC and ELN
Nariño	Pacífico Sur, Sanquianga, and Telembí	23,053	110	FARC-EP dissidents (Frente Oliver Sinisterra, ascribed to Segunda Marquetalia, and Comando Coordinador de Occidente, ascribed to the EMC)
Norte de Santander	Catatumbo	13,648	165	ELN, EPL, FARC-EP dissidents, and AGC
Bolívar	Sur de Bolívar and Montes de María	7,476	41	ELN, AGC, and FARC-EP dissidents
Cauca	Pacífico, Norte, Sur, and Macizo	4,714	232	FARC-EP dissidents (Columna Móvil Dagoberto Ramos, Frente Jaime Martínez, and some dissident groups ascribed to the Comando Coordinador de Occidente), ELN, and AGC

Sources: ACAPS using data from OCHA (accessed 15/06/2023); OCHA (accessed 17/07/2023); Cerosestenta (14/12/2022); Verdad Abierta (11/06/2023)

Figure 2. Key drivers and outlook of the crises in Antioquia, Caquetá and Chocó.



See full chart on page 19.

CRISIS TO WATCH 1: ANTIOQUIA

Key findings

Antioquia has historically had the most victims of armed conflict among Colombian departments. It connects the south of Bolívar and Córdoba, which have historically been coca-growing areas, with the Gulf of Urabá, an exit point to the Atlantic Ocean. Besides years of land appropriation and the presence of various armed groups, this location explains the proportion of armed conflict victims in the department.

Following the demobilisation of the FARC-EP in 2016, the AGC has become the most important armed group in Urabá. In other subregions (such as Bajo Cauca and Nordeste), several armed groups, including the AGC, Los Caparros, the ELN, and FARC-EP dissidents, fight for territorial control. In the face of Total Peace negotiations, the fact that only the ELN has a ceasefire and the AGC are being excluded from negotiations produces different risks for each subregion.

In Urabá, the main risk is for the AGC to increase their activities, such as armed strikes and selective violence against civilians, to pressure the Government into negotiating with them. This could disrupt civilian livelihoods and increase humanitarian access restrictions.

In Bajo Cauca and Nordeste, the risk is for the AGC to take advantage of the ELN ceasefire to continue its territorial expansion. In relation, the ELN and the EMC have built an alliance to confront the AGC, meaning there are no pretensions to reducing violence. Persistent fighting could continue to cause confinement and displacement and encourage forced recruitment, which is already on the rise.

Finally, fighting could spread to subregions such as Norte and Occidente, increasing displacement and confinement, given that the AGC seem to have plans to expand throughout northern Antioquia to connect Urabá and Nordeste.

Table 3. Baseline information

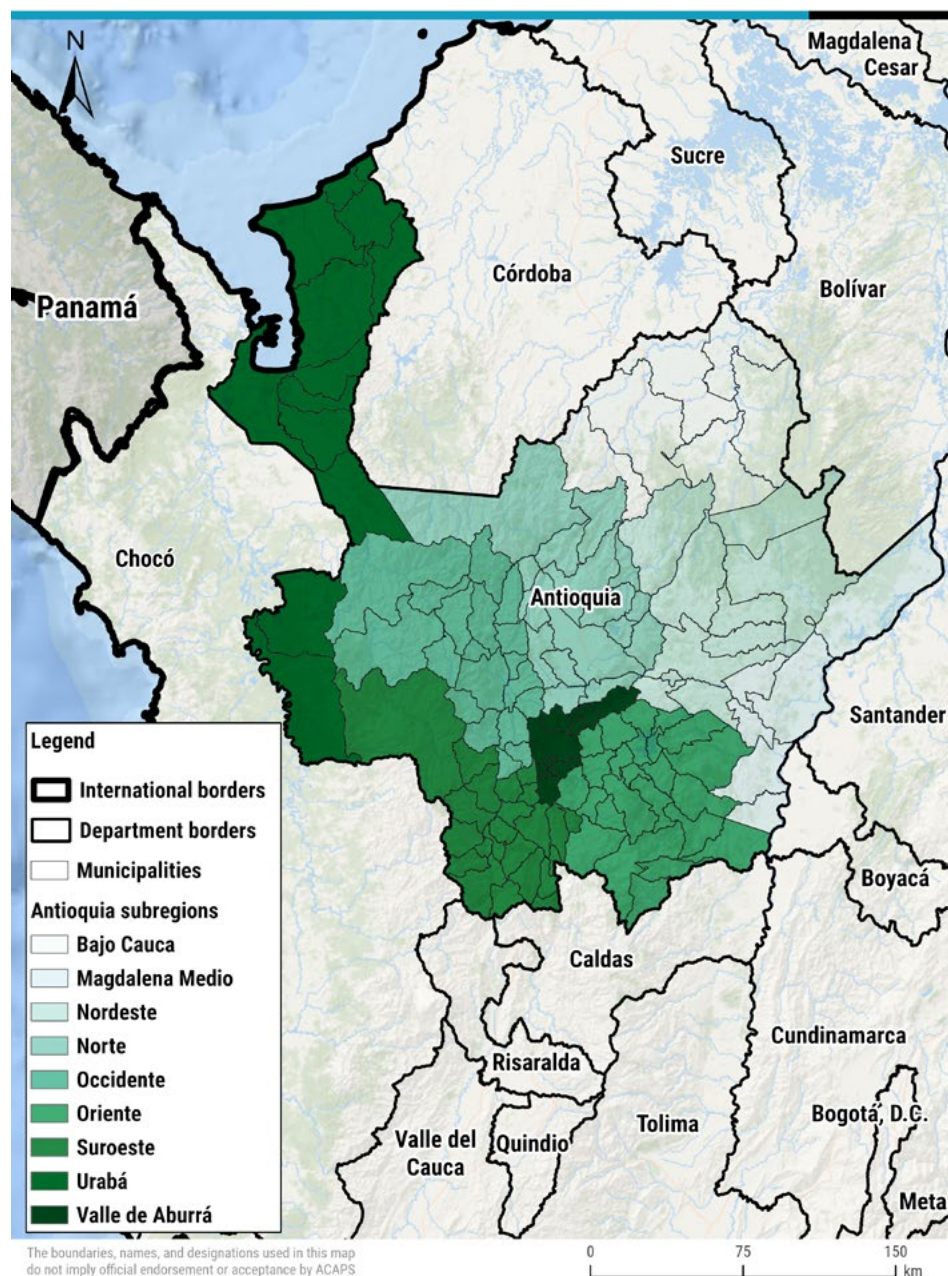
INDICATOR	ANTIOQUIA	COLOMBIA
Population	6.9 million	51.52 million
% of the population living in rural areas	19.67%	23%
Rural electricity coverage	95.92%	86%
Rural drinking water coverage	52.53%	37%
Rural sewerage coverage	38.63%	16%
Under-five infant mortality rate per 1,000 live births	11	15.02
Extortion rate per 100,000 inhabitants	17.36	9.5
Homicide rate in rural areas per 100,000 inhabitants	76.19	36
Ethnicity	Indigenous: 37,628 (0,6%) Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquera: 360,000 (5.22%)	Indigenous: 1,905,617 (4,4%) Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquera: 2,937,224 (6.76%)
Poverty in rural areas	36.8%	39.9%
% of people living from agriculture, livestock, hunting, forestry, and fishing	12.85%	21.92%
% of the population facing food insecurity	24.6%	30%
Unemployment rate	10.1%	10.5%

Sources: DANE (12/07/2019, 12/2020, 05/04/2023, and 05/2023); TerriData (accessed 10/07/2023); CTPA et al. (accessed 10/07/2023); WFP (15/02/2023); LR (10/03/2023); Government of Colombia (12/2021); Dejusticia (28/02/2023); Medicina Legal (2022); Contraloría General de la República (accessed 19/07/2023); Así Vamos en Salud (accessed 17/07/2023).

Antioquia is Colombia's most populated department. 20% of the population lives in rural areas, where most events related to armed conflict are concentrated (TerriData accessed 10/07/2023). 12% makes a living from agriculture, livestock, hunting, forestry, or fishing (DANE 12/2020). Many of these activities are carried out in rural areas, putting them at risk of disruption in case of increased violence from armed conflict (NRC 26/06/2023).

In Antioquia, more than 37,000 people identify as indigenous, and around 27% of the indigenous population have been victims of the armed conflict. Around 360,000 people consider themselves Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, or Palenquero. Most of these populations are located in Urabá and Bajo Cauca, subregions particularly affected by the armed conflict and with higher levels of poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity (CTPA et al. accessed 10/07/2023).

Map 2: Antioquia subregions



Source: ACAPS using data from OCHA 04/04/2023; FOLU accessed 26/07/2023

Context overview

Historically, Antioquia, in northwestern Colombia, has had the most victims of armed conflict among Colombian departments. Between 1958–2019, 20% of conflict-affected victims across Colombia were in Antioquia (Comisión de la Verdad accessed 12/07/2023). The reasons behind conflict in Antioquia vary, ranging from illegal land appropriation to drug trafficking and illegal mining (Giraldo et al. 01/03/2011; Bonilla-Calle et al. 2022).

Armed conflict affects the entire department but especially has an impact on three subregions:

- **Urabá** includes 11 municipalities located in the extreme north and borders the Caribbean Sea and Panama. This subregion has access to both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, making it useful for transporting narcotics (Ballvé 08/11/2018; CNMH 20/09/2022).
- **Bajo Cauca** comprises six municipalities in the northeast and borders the departments of Bolívar, Córdoba, and Sucre and the Ayapel Mountain Range.
- **Nordeste** comprises ten municipalities in the northeast, bordering the department of Bolívar and the Serranía de San Lucas, one of the places in Colombia with the most gold mining. Aside from having municipalities where coca is grown, Bajo Cauca and Nordeste are useful for their connections with other cocaine hydrochloride cultivation and processing zones, as well as territories with significant illegal mining (Comisión de la Verdad 19/11/2020).

Other activities, such as land appropriation, are also common in Antioquia (Castilla and Gomez 01/05/2006; CTPA accessed 16/06/2023).

Key drivers of the crisis and recent developments

Urabá

Following the demobilisation of the FARC-EP in 2016, the AGC became the dominant armed group in Urabá. In contrast, in the rest of Antioquia (mainly Bajo Cauca), several armed organisations, including the AGC, Los Caparros, the ELN, and dissidents of the FARC-EP's 18th and 36th Fronts, continue to compete for territorial control.

Exclusion of AGC from the Total Peace negotiations

In Urabá, the main risk to peace is if the dialogue between the Colombian Government and the AGC fails. In June 2023, the Colombian Government stated that the AGC would be part of a submission process instead of being at the negotiating table. This means that they will not be able to negotiate any benefits that the Government will impose on them in exchange for demobilisation (El Colombiano 13/03/2023). The AGC have stated that they are unwilling to accept submission and demand the opportunity to negotiate (DW 04/04/2023).

Failed ceasefire with AGC

In late December 2022, the Colombian Government announced a ceasefire with the AGC. On 20 March 2023, the President ended this ceasefire in response to allegations of the AGC inciting mining protests in Antioquia (EE 23/03/2023; LA Times 20/03/2023). What followed were fighting between the Colombian security forces and the AGC and the kidnapping and assassination of social leaders in Urabá (Caracol Radio 16/06/2023; El Colombiano 11/06/2023 and 12/06/2023).

Bajo Cauca and Nordeste

The main risk in these subregions is the war between the ELN, the EMC, and the AGC for territorial control. The AGC is trying to control these municipalities as they connect the department of Antioquia with the Serranía de San Lucas.

Ceasefire only limited to clashes with the Colombian State

The ELN has agreed to a ceasefire with the Colombian Government, but this does not limit the group from fighting against its rivals. As a result, the ceasefire will likely reduce fighting only against the Colombian army or police.

Dissidents of the FARC-EP's 18th and 36th Fronts claim to be attached to the EMC. This means that the Government currently has no ceasefire agreement with them (Infobae 30/05/2023; EE 15/06/2023). They have an agreement with the ELN, meaning they fight together against the AGC in Bajo Cauca subregion (Caracol Radio 13/02/2023). The overall implication is that, despite a ceasefire between the ELN and the Colombian Government, there is little chance for violence between armed groups to stop in Bajo Cauca.

Increased clashes between armed groups, and between armed groups and the state

The high number of armed groups present in Antioquia has led to tensions with security forces. On 18 April 2023, the ELN used explosives against police officers in Yondó, injuring 13 policemen (El Tiempo 18/04/2023; El Colombiano 18/04/2023). In February 2023, dissidents of the 36th Front took over a school in Yarumal (El Colombiano 02/02/2023). In early June, FARC-EP dissidents clashed with the AGC in Ituango (Semana 05/06/2023). The ELN and AGC have also clashed in several municipalities (El Tiempo 18/05/2023; Infobae 22/03/2023). Between the start of 2023 and 15 June, 14 clashes between armed groups or between military forces and armed groups were recorded (OCHA accessed 16/06/2023).

Humanitarian impacts

In Antioquia, violence poses several risks to the civilian population.

Violent acts against civilians

There were at least 128 events of violence in the department between January and June 2023. More than 67% of these were attacks against the civilian population. Among these, the most common was the targeted killing of civilians (43), followed by kidnapping (9) and massacres (4) (OCHA accessed 16/06/2023).

The reasons behind the killing or abduction of civilians by armed groups range from seeking extortion payments to punishment for breaking the rules that the armed groups have established within the communities where they are present (EE 12/06/2023; API 14/06/2023). Other civilians who become targets of violence are those perceived as allies of rival groups (Steele 2017).

Displacement

Between 2016–2022, armed groups forcibly displaced more than 21,900 people (OCHA accessed 14/07/2023). Displacement in this department mainly results from fighting between armed groups or threats against communities or individuals (El Tiempo 20/04/2023; El Colombiano 16/03/2023). Forced displacement is sometimes not apparent when it happens to individuals (El Colombiano 09/02/2023).

Displaced people from the departments of Antioquia, Chocó, and Córdoba converge in Medellín. The Antioquia governor's office has stated that it is attending to the displaced, but the situation has overwhelmed its capacity to respond because of the rapid increase in IDPs seeking refuge. The priority needs of the displaced population include temporary shelter, food, and healthcare. Some shelters also do not have satisfactory sanitary facilities (OCHA 20/06/2023). In February 2023, around 100 members of indigenous communities protested in front of the mayor's office in Medellín after failing to receive sufficient assistance following their displacement. The protesters also raised concerns about livelihood disruptions and losing access to employment (El País 22/02/2023).

Another driver of displacement is the sexual violence committed by armed groups, who sexually exploit girls, adolescents, and women, mainly in Bajo Cauca subregion. Data is scarce because of the fear of families to denounce, but there is anecdotal evidence that armed groups request sexual favours in exchange for money or goods or through threats against victims and their families. Sexual violence has particularly affected Venezuelan migrant women who fall victim to human trafficking networks, particularly in the municipality of Remedios. Members of armed groups also often forcibly marry or coerce pregnancies on girls (OCHA 20/06/2023).

Humanitarian access restrictions

Between January–June 2023, there were at least 12 cases of explosive device use in Antioquia, including antipersonnel mines, booby traps, and unexploded ordnance. These and other restrictions, such as roadblocks and illegal checkpoints, have limited humanitarian access to nearly 485,000 people in the department (OCHA accessed 16/06/2023). In March 2023, unidentified men burnt two ambulances belonging to a medical mission in Caucasia (Caracol Radio 11/03/2023).

Forced recruitment

Although estimated to be severely underreported, forced recruitment is one of the impacts expected to continue rising in the department given the increase in disputes between armed groups (El Colombiano 08/06/2023). According to the Ombudsman's Office, between the start of 2023 and May, there were at least 34 cases of forced recruitment of minors, more than all the cases reported in 2022 (El Colombiano 26/05/2023). The government of Antioquia also claims at least 45 cases of forced recruitment of minors between January–April 2023 in the department alone, meaning actual numbers countrywide are likely much higher (El Colombiano 08/06/2023). Armed groups wait for children outside schools or organise parties to offer them gifts or cash for joining their organisation (Semana 05/05/2023). Children increase armed groups' capacity to cope with their competitors and are considered more 'loyal' to their causes than older people, incentivising armed groups to recruit them (ACAPS 31/03/2022).

Outlook

Sustained violence because of non-compliance with ceasefires and excluded armed groups

Negotiations between the Government and various armed groups influence the level of violence in Antioquia. While the ceasefire with the ELN is expected to reduce their violent activities, it could also present an opportunity for armed groups not involved in negotiations (e.g. Los Caparros), or who seem unwilling to agree with the Government's proposals (e.g. the AGC), to extend their territorial control (Verdad Abierta 11/06/2023). The EMC, to which FARC-EP dissidents in Antioquia are attached, also does not have an active ceasefire with the Government (El Nuevo Siglo 15/06/2023). In the absence of ceasefires between the Government and other armed groups beyond the ELN, a significant reduction in violence and its humanitarian impacts is unlikely. It will also be difficult to verify the ELN's compliance.

Spread of violence to other subregions

The subregions of Bajo Cauca and Nordeste serve as a functional corridor for drug trafficking and illegal mining, putting them at the centre of fighting between different armed groups (Rutas del Conflicto 02/10/2020). Other subregions, such as Norte and Occidente, also belong to this circuit. According to civilian testimonies, the AGC's plan is to extend its presence from Urabá to Nordeste, passing through Norte and Occidente subregions, to connect all their zones of influence (EE 10/07/2023; Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 02/09/2022). This means violence in these subregions will likely spread over the coming months.

Continuing fighting in Bajo Cauca and Nordeste

Unless one of the armed groups manages to establish complete authority or they reach an agreement to share the territory, the fighting for territorial control will continue to increase over the coming months. This is because since 2020, different armed groups have been expanding to other municipalities in Antioquia. The AGC and FARC-EP dissidents have been expanding to municipalities such as Angostura, Campamento, San Andrés de Cuerquía, Toledo, and Yarumal (Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 24/01/2020, 11/06/2021, and 02/09/2022).

Since 29 June, in a rural area of the municipality of Segovia (Nordeste subregion), the three armed groups present in the territory (the ELN, AGC, and EMC) have been clashing after the arrival of the AGC, resulting in the displacement of at least 300 people (El Colombiano 01/07/2023). As at 5 July, fighting persisted, keeping communities confined (El Colombiano 05/07/2023). As at 10 July, there was no fighting reported, but displaced families remained in nearby municipalities (Remedios and El Bagre) or in the urban centre of Segovia. Local governments have mentioned not having enough resources to respond to the crisis (EE 10/07/2023).

Selective violence and displays of territorial control in Urabá

In areas where the AGC have dominance, the risks are different. Particularly in Urabá, the AGC can use its high level of territorial control to pressure the Government into agreeing to negotiations. In the past, the AGC have used armed strikes (paros armados) to pressure the Government. These strikes, which they enact in response to certain actions of the Colombian Government, involve movement bans on people and goods and market closures for several days in the areas under their control (LSV 30/07/2022; Badillo and Trejos 2022). Civilians who fail to comply face the risk of death. The population also faces a prolonged disruption of their livelihoods (LSV 10/05/2022; CCEEU 2022). If the Government fails to include the AGC in peace negotiations, selective violence and armed strikes will likely increase in this subregion.

CRISIS TO WATCH 2: CAQUETÁ

Key findings

Caquetá department faces **land conflicts, legal and illegal deforestation, and heavy militarisation** by the Colombian State. Currently, two armed groups are contributing to the violence in the department: Comandos de la Frontera (attached to Segunda Marquetalia) and Frente Carolina Ramirez (attached to the EMC). Disputes between these two groups have increased in Caquetá since May 2023 as a result of the expansion of the EMC into the mountainous area of the department and the banks of Caquetá River, which are the most violence-affected areas.

The main humanitarian impact of the violence is the stigmatisation (and, at times, assassination) of **farmers, public officers, and civilians**, by both security forces and the two armed groups, as collaborators of their rivals. Armed groups have also carried out social control activities, such as taking a census of the population, establishing curfews, and preventing transport between villages after certain hours.

There are severe **humanitarian access restrictions** in Caquetá, including threats to humanitarian personnel and the interruption of communications by armed groups. There is also a presumably high underreporting of events because of communities' fear of retaliation.

Over the next six months (July-December, 2023), there is a risk for fighting between the armed groups to be sustained, increasing the likelihood of forced recruitment and humanitarian access restrictions. There is also a risk of the targeting of state agents, candidates for public office, and civilians presumed to be allied with the rivals of armed groups.

Baseline information

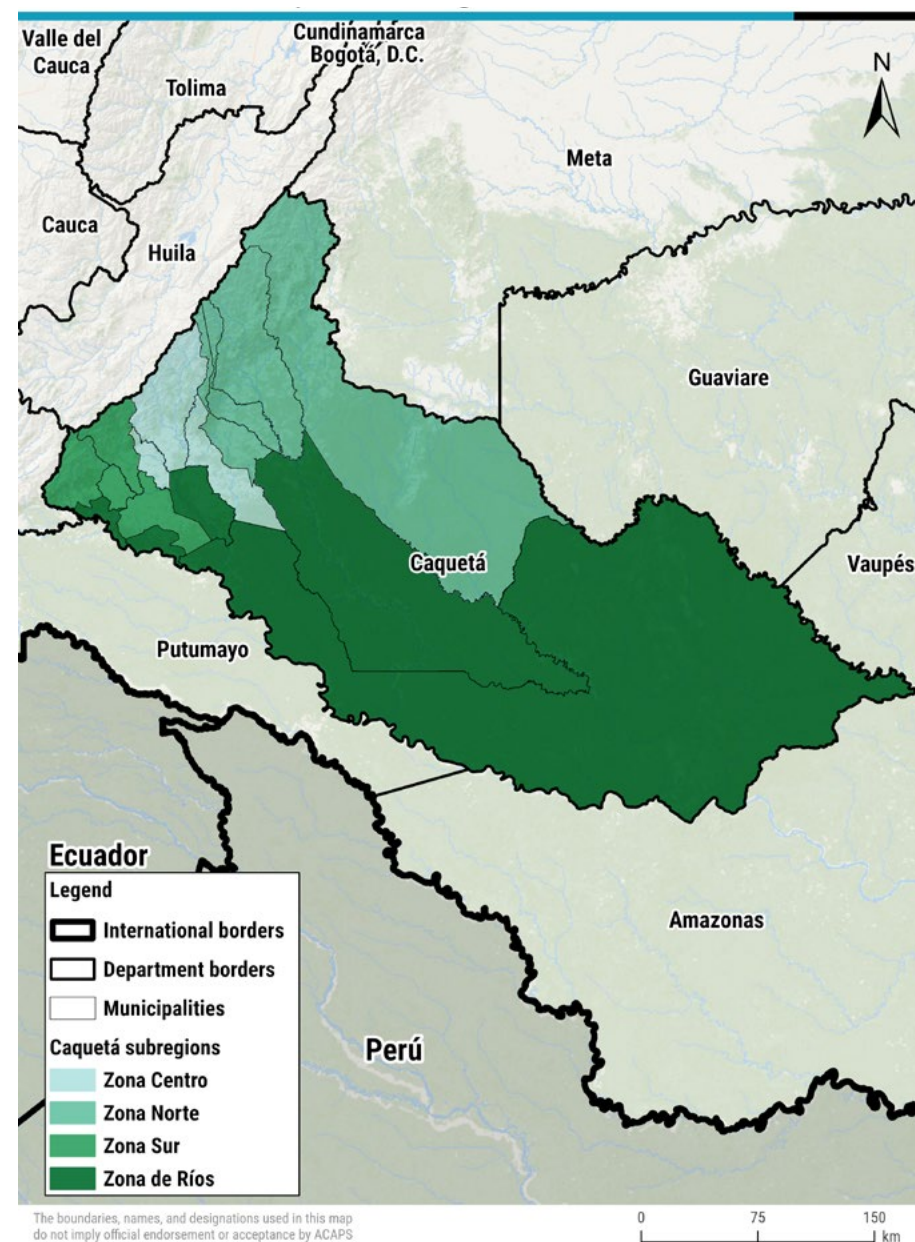
INDICATOR	CAQUETÁ	COLOMBIA
Population	423,857	51.52 million
% of the population living in rural areas	34.25%	23%
Rural electricity coverage	63.88%	86%
Rural drinking water coverage	56.34%	37%
Rural sewerage coverage	7.31%	16%
Under-five infant mortality rate per 1,000 live births	10.1	15.02
Extortion rate per 100,000 inhabitants	14.37	9.5
Homicide rate in rural areas per 100,000 inhabitants	62.02	36
Ethnicity	Black and Afro-Colombian: 11,661 (2.7%) Indigenous: 5,026 (1.18%)	Indigenous: 1,905,617 (4.4%) Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquera: 2,937,224 (6.76%)
Poverty in rural areas	25.6%	39.9%
% of people living from agriculture, livestock, hunting, forestry and fishing	32.21%	21.92%
Unemployment rate	11.2	30%
		10.5%

Sources: DANE (12/07/2019, 12/2020, 05/04/2023, 23/05/2023, and 05/2023); TerriData (accessed 10/07/2023); Fedesarrollo (12/2022); UNDP (accessed 10/07/2023); LR (10/03/2023); Government of Colombia (12/2021); Dejusticia (28/02/2023); Medicina Legal (2022); Contraloría General de la Republica (accessed 19/07/2023); Asi Vamos en Salud (accessed 12/07/2023)

In Caquetá, more than one-third of the population lives in rural areas, and about the same amount lives from agriculture, livestock, hunting, forestry, and fishing (TerriData accessed 10/07/2023; DANE 12/2020). Access to public services in rural areas is particularly low, with just over 50% of the rural population having access to potable water and less than 10% having access to sewerage (TerriData accessed 10/07/2023). Approximately 3% of Caquetá's population identifies as Black, Afro-Colombian, or indigenous (UNDP accessed 10/07/2023).

The large portion of the population dedicated to agriculture, livestock, hunting, forestry, and fishing in this department is also one of the main sources of tension in the armed conflict (CNMH accessed 17/07/2023). Between 2020–2021, Caquetá was the third department in Colombia wherein coca cultivation increased the most (78.5%) (Ministry of Justice and Law accessed 17/07/2023). At the same time, deforestation by armed groups, cattle ranchers, and large companies has been widespread in the department for several years. An estimated 75% of the forests have been destroyed (Semana accessed 15/07/2023; AA 14/04/2023). This interaction has led to the convergence of significant militarisation, whether pressured by the fight against armed groups or deforestation, putting the rural and farmer population at the centre of disputes (Rodríguez 2020).

Map 3: Caquetá subregions



Source: ACAPS using data from OCHA 04/04/2023; La Nación 01/11/2016

Context overview

Caquetá, the third largest department in Colombia, is located in the south of the country, where the mountainous system of the Andes and the Amazonian Rainforest coincide. It serves as a transit corridor between the Andean region, the Amazon, and the southeastern plains and borders the departments of Cauca, Guaviare, Huila, Meta, and Putumayo. It is both a transit zone to border departments with Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru and a safe zone for armed groups because of its mountainous and jungle areas. These conditions, coupled with a weak state presence, strong militarisation, and precarious economic conditions, have led to armed conflict affecting the department for several decades (CNMH et al. 2013; CNMH 08/2017; Diario de Paz 25/03/2023).

After the demobilisation of the FARC-EP in 2016, Caquetá was one of the first departments in the country that hosted FARC-EP dissident groups. Most of these groups come from the FARC-EP's Columna Móvil Teófilo Forero, which had a historical presence in the department's mountainous areas (Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 04/01/2019; Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 03/07/2020). As at July 2023, there were two main armed groups in the department: Comandos de la Frontera (ascribed to Segunda Marquetalia) and Frente Carolina Ramírez (ascribed to the EMC).

Between 2019–2020, the Colombian Ombudsman's Office stated that the FARC-EP dissident groups present in Caquetá distributed territory among themselves, preventing confrontations (Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 04/01/2019; Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 03/07/2020). This changed by the end of 2020, when Frente Carolina Ramírez entered the dispute over territorial control of the municipalities of Cartagena del Chairá, Curillo, El Paujil, La Montañita, San José del Fragua, Solano, and Solita (Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 07/01/2021; Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 02/05/2022).

Key drivers of the crisis and recent developments

Recent disputes between both armed groups

Comandos de Frontera holds territorial control over most of Caquetá, but in May 2023, the Ombudsman's Office warned about Frente Carolina Ramírez entering San Vicente del Caguán. This group has a possibility of spreading to El Doncello, El Paujil, La Montañita, and Puerto Rico (Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 18/05/2023). Since May 2023, there have been four combats among non-state armed groups in Caquetá, all taking place in the north of the department. On 1 May, the EMC and Segunda Marquetalia clashed in Florencia (the capital of the department). On 13 May, the two groups clashed again in San Vicente del Caguán and then again in the rural area of Puerto Rico on 27 May (OCHA accessed 03/07/2023). In July there was another combat on the border with the department of Putumayo (Infobae 20/07/2023).

Stigmatisation and selective violence against the civilian population

Besides fighting, armed groups exercise selective violence against those they consider allies of their rivals to regulate community life. According to testimonies from the population, armed groups have set a curfew of 19:00 in the department. They have also banned black shirts and installed propaganda billboards in different villages. They have even forced people to participate in a census to collect their information (Cerosetenta 02/05/2023).

Attacks against public officers

The mayor of Cartagena del Chairá claims that the EMC has threatened to kill him. As a result, the EMC has banned him from the municipality he presides over, forcing him to govern from Florencia (Infobae 21/05/2023). Armed groups in the department extort candidates running for public office in exchange for permission to campaign (El País 29/05/2023). The governor of Caquetá has stated that when he mobilises, he has to establish extensive security arrangements, and there are some villages he cannot visit (EE 29/05/2023). The inhabitants of Caquetá share that they live in a climate of insecurity and fear given these levels of violence and the governance systems of the armed groups, coupled with the weak response capacity of the State (Cerosetenta 02/05/2023).

Deforestation and stigmatisation of farmers

Caquetá is one of the departments wherein deforestation started to increase after the demobilisation of the FARC-EP (ICG 04/11/2021). As a response, there is a growing military presence in the department that aims to halt the phenomenon. The presence of the army to combat deforestation has increased tensions with the local population, and state forces have stigmatised many farmers as deforesters, leading to more repressive actions (Ala Orilla del Río 03/05/2019; Mongabay 11/06/2023). These tensions, coupled with the stigmatisation of the local population as collaborators of armed groups, have led to captures, damage to private property, and the killing of civilians (Corredor-García and Vega 15/06/2023; FIP 25/08/2022). This helps explain the radical civilian responses in the department. For instance, in early March, a community in San Vicente del Caguán detained 76 police officers during a protest that injured 40 people and killed a policeman and a peasant farmer (La FM 03/03/2023; EE 06/03/2023).

Humanitarian impacts

Attacks against the civilian population were frequent in Caquetá during the first six months of 2023. Among the 75 events of violence that OCHA identified in Caquetá related to the armed conflict, 59 were attacks against the civilian population. Of these, 27 were civilian killings and 18 were individual or collective threats (OCHA accessed 03/07/2023). This is consistent with the fact that armed groups target the people they consider collaborators or members of rival

groups. Particularly affected are former FARC-EP combatants living in Caquetá, whom both groups (EMC and Segunda Marquetalia) have stigmatised. Social, indigenous, and farmer leaders also face stigmatisation. Armed groups usually instrumentalise these populations to provide them with information or goods or participate in their activities. This generates a climate of stigmatisation in which, in times of rivalry between armed groups, these people face the consequences of being considered close to or collaborators of one side (Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 18/05/2023; OCHA accessed 03/07/2023).

Forced recruitment and the use of children and adolescents in the war have also been observed in Caquetá. Similarly to Chocó, the Ombudsman's Office has warned that this population is particularly vulnerable to being used by armed groups, who offer them money in exchange for joining or take them by force (Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 18/05/2023). In fact, the Colombian Government suspended the negotiation process with the EMC after the group killed four forcibly recruited minors who tried to escape (Infobae 22/05/2023; EE 22/05/2023). It is not possible to accurately determine the number of children forcibly recruited, as a lack of trust in the authorities or fear of retaliation against minors or their families have led to widespread underreporting (Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 18/05/2023; EE 22/05/2023).

Restrictions on the freedom of movement are widespread. To demonstrate their capacity to control, armed groups develop manuals of coexistence and impose mobility restrictions on the local population (Cerosetenta 02/05/2023). During the last six months of 2022, OCHA reported several forced displacements that occurred to avoid these social control actions. Populations have also reported mobility restrictions in rural areas, limiting their ability to access their livelihoods (OCHA 19/06/2023). The EMC has even required identity cards for entering or leaving certain municipalities (Semana 22/06/2023).

Humanitarian access limitations result from parallel clashes between armed groups in certain areas and displays of social control in others, limiting the ability to provide humanitarian assistance. Between January–June 2023, there were at least two reported incidents of threats against humanitarian staff or their facilities, and one medical mission was attacked (OCHA accessed 03/07/2023).

The organisations in charge of humanitarian demining have denounced the restrictions imposed on their activities by armed groups (OCHA 19/06/2023). In the municipalities of Solano and San Vicente del Caguán, two events involving antipersonnel mines were recorded in 2022. This type of event had not been recorded in these areas since 2019. During the first six months of 2023, five explosive device accidents were recorded in Cartagena del Chairá, La Montañita, and Puerto Rico (OCHA accessed 03/07/2023).

At the same time, communities have stopped reporting events of violence, such as confinements or displacements, out of fear of punishment by the armed groups (OCHA 19/06/2023). In May 2023, the EMC disconnected at least eight communication antennae in

Cartagena del Chairá, leaving around 30,000 people without internet or telephone services for several days (RCN 03/05/2023; Caracol Radio 08/05/2023). Underreporting in several areas renders the information available on the humanitarian impacts of violence unreliable.

Outlook

The expansion of the EMC in Caquetá incentivised by the peace negotiation

Competition between the EMC (Frente Carolina Ramírez) and Segunda Marquetalia (Comandos de Frontera) in Caquetá has worsened since May 2023, during which three encounters took place in the department between the two armed groups (Verdad Abierta 25/05/2023). The Colombian Government's negotiations with the EMC may contribute to aggravating this confrontation for two reasons.

First, the EMC has incentives to expand, defeat its rival, and claim to the Government that they are the most legitimate post-FARC-EP organisation to be considered in the negotiations (Ciro 02/06/2023). Because the EMC groups together several dissidents, it has had trouble demonstrating that it is a structured and unified organisation (Razon Publica 26/03/2023; CORE 05/06/2023). The group can use expanding and demonstrating their ability to defeat a group that claims historical dominance in Caquetá to assert its capacity for territorial control and push for negotiations with the Colombian Government. This gives them incentive to continue their war with Segunda Marquetalia.

Second, the Colombian Government has determined two types of armed organisations in Colombia: political and criminal (Badillo and Trejos 28/03/2023). In practice, this has led armed groups to increase displays of social control to demonstrate that they not only pursue illegal rents but also have legitimacy within the local population (Ciro 02/06/2023). This can explain why the arrival of the EMC has been accompanied by orders to control the civilian population, meant to prove that they are a political organisation and merit a peace process instead of a mere subjugation process. This gives them incentive to increase their displays of social control.

The areas most expected to be affected by the EMC's expansion are the northern mountain range of Caquetá, where it has its main area of territorial control and which connects the department with Huila, and the banks of Caquetá River on the border with the department of Putumayo (OCHA 19/06/2023).

Increased violence because of a lack of EMC coordination

Even in the case that peace negotiations advance and a ceasefire with the EMC resumes, it is unclear whether this armed group is capable of controlling its troops to stop violent actions

(VOZ Digital Youtube 16/03/2023). Although it calls itself a continuation of the FARC-EP, many of its members are new recruits (Razon Publica 26/03/2023). At the same time, although the group presents itself as an organisation with a clear chain of command, its local operators appear to have the capacity for autonomous decision-making (CORE 05/06/2023). The killing of the four minors who tried to flee recruitment, which led to the suspension of the ceasefire, shows that not all decisions taken by the main EMC commanders are necessarily adopted at the local level (El País 25/05/2023).

Increased violence by armed groups towards the State

Besides fighting their rivals, armed groups can carry out attacks against the army to portray their operational capacity and push for negotiations (El País 25/06/2023). Increased armed group activity against the Colombian security forces could lead to increased fighting; in other areas of the country, this has led to forced displacement and the confinement of communities (El Tiempo 17/08/2022). Given the large rural population dependent on agricultural activities, fighting, confinement, and displacement can limit access to farmland and disrupt many livelihoods (NRC 26/06/2023; ACAPS 18/02/2022).

Increased stigmatisation of civilians as collaborators of rival groups

The active effort of Segunda Marquetalia and the EMC to increase their social base and force the community to collaborate with their causes increases the risk of stigmatisation of civilians, both by rival groups and the Colombian security forces, as allies of their opponents. This can lead to killings, displacement, damage to property, or threats towards civilians, as has been happening during the last months.

CRISIS TO WATCH 3: CHOCÓ

Key findings

Chocó has a large rural population dependent on agricultural activities. A large portion of its population identifies as **Afro-Colombian or indigenous**. This department also has high levels of **food insecurity and poverty**, which increase the impact of armed violence on the population. Because of its geographical location, Chocó is also a strategic target for trafficking, illegal mining, and migrant smuggling.

After the demobilisation of the FARC-EP in 2016, **the north of Chocó was mostly under the influence of the AGC and the south under the influence of the ELN**. This configuration changed in 2020 when the AGC began **expanding** towards the south of the department.

The main humanitarian impacts of the violence in Chocó are the **displacement and increased forced recruitment of civilians** as a result of fighting between the AGC and the ELN in several municipalities in the south. The ELN has also strategically increased its use of **confinements** to impede AGC advances and, more precisely, monitor civilians in its areas of influence. From 2022 until June 2023, Chocó had the most victims of confinement among all departments in Colombia. The armed conflict has a strong impact on children, mainly through forced recruitment and mental health issues, which also increase suicide rates among children.

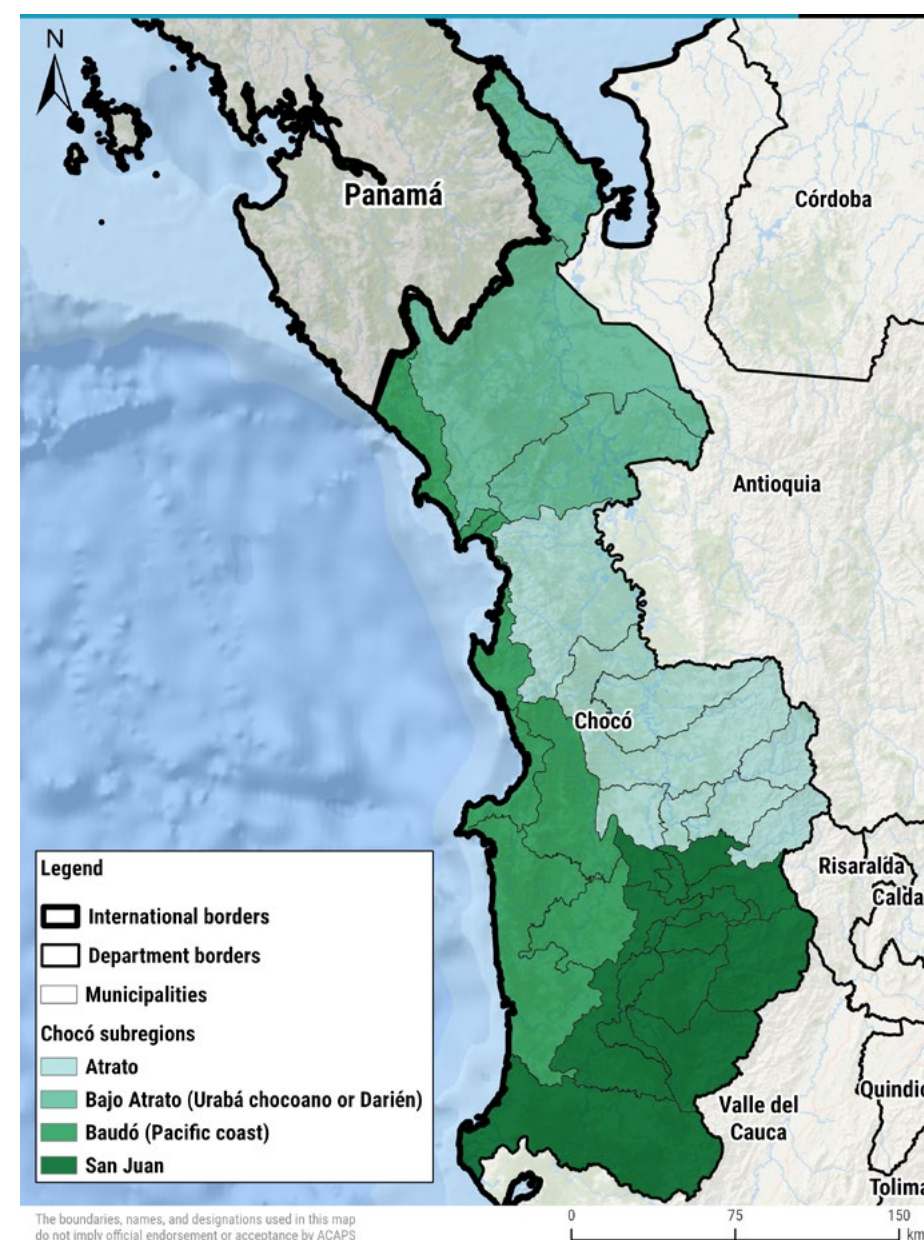
Over the next six months (July-December, 2023), there will likely be more fighting between the two armed groups and increased mobility restrictions in southern Chocó. Confinements and displacement disrupt the **livelihoods of a population already living with high levels of food insecurity and poverty**. The upcoming elections may also increase protection risks for all those who show electoral preferences that the armed groups perceive as a betrayal and potentially for the civilian population who will vote in the elections.

Baseline information

INDICATOR	CHOCÓ	COLOMBIA
Population	557,654	51.52 million
% of the population living in rural areas	56.66%	23%
Rural electricity coverage	72.25%	86%
Rural drinking water coverage	56.10%	37%
Rural sewerage coverage	52.95%	16%
Under-five infant mortality rate per 1,000 live births	38.4	15.02
Extortion rate per 100,000 inhabitants	13.03	9.5
Homicide rate in rural areas per 100,000 inhabitants	34.14	36
Ethnicity	Indigenous: 61,300 (11.4%) Black and Afro-Colombian: 407,000 (73.6%)	Indigenous: 1,905,617 (4.4%) Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquera: 2,937,224 (6.76%)
Poverty in rural areas	45.8%	39.9%
% of people living from agriculture, livestock, hunting, forestry, and fishing	29.13%	21.92%
% of the population facing food insecurity	45%	30%
Unemployment	12.5	10.5%

Sources: DANE (12/07/2019, 12/2020, 05/04/2023, and 05/2023); TerriData (accessed 10/07/2023); CTPA et al. (accessed 10/07/2023); WFP (15/02/2023); Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Colombia (accessed 10/07/2023); LR (10/03/2023); Government of Colombia (12/2021); Dejusticia (28/02/2023); Medicina Legal (2022); Contraloría General de la Republica (accessed 19/07/2023); Asi Vamos en Salud (accessed 17/07/2023).

Map 4: Chocó subregions



Source: ACAPS using data from OCHA 04/04/2023; TodaColombia accessed 26/07/2023

Chocó hosts the largest population that identifies as Black or Afro-Colombian (more than 73%) and indigenous (more than 11%) among the departments in the country (Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Colombia accessed 10/07/2023). It is also one of the departments with the largest rural population, with more than half of its population living in rural areas. Just over half of the rural population has access to drinking water and sewerage (TerriData accessed 10/07/2023). About 30% of the department's population depends on agriculture, livestock, hunting, forestry, and fishing (DANE 12/2020). It is also one of the most food-insecure departments, affecting almost 45% of the population (WFP 15/02/2023).

These conditions lead to a cycle of armed conflict impacts and pre-existing crises aggravating each other. Displacement and confinement usually affect a population already living in poverty and who majorly live on subsistence agriculture (ACAPS 22/12/2021; GPC 12/2021).

Similarly, the large presence of Black and indigenous people in the department has made them targets for armed groups, as they often inhabit territories strategically located for armed groups to carry out illegal activities. In 2022, the indigenous population represented 66% of all people affected by confinement in Chocó and the Black or Afrodescendant population 34% (GPC 12/2021). Indigenous populations are recurrently subject to confinement, as they often refuse to move since they consider it fundamental to protect their territory (UNHCR 07/2009). The Black and Afrodescendant population has historically survived on traditional and informal mining, a market that armed groups also try to control. This subjects the population in their territories to violence (FLM 18/07/2016; ICG 24/02/2023).

Context overview

The department of Chocó is located in northeastern Colombia. It borders the Caribbean Sea and Panama to the north, the Pacific Ocean and the department of Antioquia to the east, and the department of Valle del Cauca to the south. All its connections between coca cultivation and export zones, as well as mining activity and its border areas with Panama, make Chocó a strategic department for drug trafficking, illegal mining, and migrant smuggling (Ministry of Justice and Law 11/2021; InSight Crime 09/05/2019). In 2019, Chocó accounted for approximately 43% of the total illicit gold mining in all of Colombia (GFI et al. 10/02/2021).

After the demobilisation of the FARC-EP in 2016, the south of Chocó department (especially the subregions of San Juan and Alto Atrato) remained largely under ELN control (ACAPS 22/12/2021).

In the north (especially Bajo Atrato subregion, also known as Urabá Chocoano), the AGC has gained control by defeating other armed groups, such as the FVPA (also known as Los Caparros) and the ELN (ACAPS 22/12/2021).

In the centre of the department (specifically Baudó-Litoral and Medio Atrato subregions), some territories remain disputed between the ELN and the AGC (ACAPS 22/12/2021).

Key drivers of the crisis and recent developments

Expansion of the AGC to the south of the department

The distribution of the armed groups in Chocó changed in 2020 when the AGC started expanding towards the south of the department. In particular, the AGC challenged the ELN in Bajo Atrato, Baudó, Medio Atrato, and the Pacific Coast (Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 18/02/2022; ACAPS 22/12/2021). In 2022, the AGC expanded into the municipalities of Alto Baudó, Bahía Solano, Bajo Baudó, Medio Baudó, Nuquí, and Sipí (Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 15/07/2022, 01/06/2023, and 26/12/2022). In 2023, clashes between the AGC and the ELN have increased in Río Iró (Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 29/05/2023). In Istmina, Nóvita, and Sipí, there have also been clashes between the two armed groups (Semana 07/06/2023).

ELN displays of territorial control in the south of the department

In ELN-held areas in the south of Chocó, the group has been carrying out displays of territorial control. In February and May 2023, they declared two armed strikes lasting up to nine days, mainly affecting the municipalities of Nóvita and Sipí (LSV 23/02/2023; Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 04/06/2023). The main reason behind these armed strikes was to halt the AGC's advance southwards and more easily control citizens' movement (Vorágine 11/06/2023).

On 3 July, the ELN declared a new armed strike to start on 4 July in San Juan subregion. One of the reasons given in the declaration was the expansion of the AGC into the subregion (LSV 03/07/2023). The armed strike lasted ten days until 13 July (El Tiempo 13/07/2023).

Clashes between the ELN, AGC, and Colombian security forces

Other types of clashes have also been taking place, including between the AGC and the Colombian army in May and between the ELN and the army on several occasions, including several battles in March (Semana 15/05/2023). These have created tensions with the communities, who feel that the arrival of the security forces risks aggravating the fighting (Infobae 24/06/2023; Caracol Radio 24/06/2023). The ELN has accused the army of being allied with the AGC, creating tensions in areas where the ELN has territorial control when the security forces arrive (LSV 23/02/2023).

Humanitarian impacts

Confinements

Chocó had the highest number of confinements during the first six months of 2023, with 15,587 of its population confined (57% of the total in the country) (OCHA accessed 01/07/2023). These events are the result of direct orders from armed groups, as well as an indirect result of clashes between these groups.

- At the end of May, because of fighting between the ELN and AGC in the south of Chocó, around 1,500 people were displaced and an undefined number of families confined. The reason that the families reported for the confinement was a lack of economic resources to leave the territory or the fear that the armed groups would retaliate against them for fleeing (El Colombiano 28/05/2023; RNC 26/05/2023).
- Threats from armed groups who suspect them of supporting a rival result in communities suffering from confinement. In Nóvita, this has resulted in the confinement of around 3,700 people from the Tigre Montería community after an armed group accused a civilian of being an informant for a rival armed group. The community members reported their fear of being attacked as the reason behind confinement (OCHA accessed 01/07/2023).
- Communities in Chocó have also been confined after armed groups declared armed strikes. In Novita, around 5,000 people were confined for nearly ten days starting on 27 May after the ELN declared an armed strike (Asuntos Legales 05/06/2023). In Novita and in Sipi, at least 1,300 people were also confined as a result of an ELN order in February (Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 28/02/2023).

Confinements limit virtually all land and river transport, as armed groups punish all those who decide to go out, in turn imposing restrictions on humanitarian access and the ability of populations to move around to seek assistance (ACAPS 18/02/2022). During the confinements, populations have reported losing their livelihoods (as they are unable to engage in commercial activities or cultivate their land), experiencing health problems with no access to medical care, and food shortages (Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 04/06/2023; ICRC 22/03/2023; NRC 26/06/2023).

Displacement

Chocó had the third highest number of displaced people (2,071 out of a total of 26,000 displaced) among the departments in the country between January–June 2023 (OCHA accessed 01/07/2023). Displacement in 2023 has primarily resulted from fighting between armed groups. During fighting, civilians displace away from their homes in large groups to prevent facing armed group attacks (Red+ 19/06/2023).

Civilians also move because of threats or attacks against themselves or members of their communities. In these cases, people displace individually, as the violence that motivates their movement is often more selective (El Colombiano 07/04/2023; CNMH 07/10/2015).

Other civilians choose displacement to avoid confinement during armed strikes. Armed groups usually announce armed strikes a few days before they are initiated. Some civilians decide to leave the area before the announcement takes effect. For instance, starting 25 May, when the ELN announced the commencement of an armed strike on 27 May, at least 1,600 people were displaced from Sipi to Istmina (El Colombiano 28/05/2023).

Forced recruitment

Besides displacement and confinement, increased competition between armed groups also implies greater risks of forced recruitment. As armed groups extend their territorial presence (as is the case of the AGC) or fight to avoid losing control over territories (as is the case of the ELN), they must increase their troops. There is no reliable data available to account for recruitment trends. That said, government organisations and local communities have reported an increase in forced recruitment and the use of children and adolescents by armed groups (Ombudsman's Office of Colombia 29/05/2023 and 03/04/2023).

Increase in suicides

The Ombudsman's Office has reported an increase in suicides among the indigenous youth in Chocó, in part explained as a way to avoid recruitment and by the mental health consequences of the armed conflict (EE 31/07/2021). According to some estimates, between 2019–2022, around 50 children in Chocó committed suicide after armed groups threatened to forcibly recruit them (EE 08/05/2022). Between January–May 2023 alone, around 15 suicides in Chocó were related to the armed conflict (EE 11/05/2023).

Outlook

Increased military fighting as a result of the AGC expansion in the south of Chocó

The conflict between the AGC and the ELN seems to be far from over. On 3 July, a battle in Sipí between the ELN and the AGC lasted more than three hours, killing one civilian and wounding another (RNC 03/07/2023). As a result of these tensions, the ELN declared an armed strike that began on 4 July (EE 04/07/2023).

If the conflict between the AGC and ELN persists in the coming months, military fighting could increase, as this is how the AGC has historically sought to gain the upper hand over the ELN. Fighting may increase the number of displaced people (TeleMedellín 25/03/2023). Besides needing shelter, displaced people in Colombia usually report not having enough food and the prolonged loss of their livelihoods, as they are unable to return to the territory (FSC/Nutrition Cluster 17/10/2022).

Increased confinement as a way for the ELN to delay the advance of the AGC

The ELN appears to be actively avoiding fighting with the AGC and is instead enforcing confinements. These confinements help prevent the advance of rival armed groups by increasing surveillance of the areas through which they move. During the last six months of 2022, there were at least 20 combats between non-state armed groups in Chocó. During the first six months of 2023, there were only 12. In contrast, confinements increased, with 15,500 people confined in Chocó between January–June 2023 compared to approximately 13,450 between July–December 2022 (OCHA accessed 15/06/2023; OCHA accessed 19/07/2023). The ELN seems to be resorting to more armed strikes to monitor the AGC advance in the south of the department.

Increased electoral violence against social leaders, candidates, and voters perceived as betrayers by armed groups

Until 29 July, when the candidate registration process ends, armed groups may increase violence against the people they perceive as dangerous to their interests who want to register as candidates (MOE 27/06/2023; Red+ 19/06/2023). At the same time, in the past, armed groups have assassinated social leaders they considered threatening to their territorial claims during elections (Albarracín et al. 05/09/2022; Albarracín et al. 23/11/2022). In Chocó, 12 municipalities are at high risk of electoral violence, and eight are considered at extreme risk (MOE 27/06/2023; Red+ 19/06/2023). During and after elections, armed groups may also target the communities that they believe will vote for candidates not in line with their political intentions. This may involve selective killings but has also in the past involved the mass displacement of communities (Steele 2020). If the AGC attempts to expand, the ELN may have incentives to shield its territories from candidates or voters who express political preferences dissenting from its objectives. As a result, electoral violence could increase in the months leading up to the October election.

Key drivers and outlook of the crises in Antioquia, Caquetá and Chocó.

