



KEY FIGURES

6,500

AFFECTED
PEOPLE

8

INCIDENTS
OF FORCED MASS
DISPLACEMENT

5

CONFINEMENT
INCIDENTS

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

The situation in Argelia municipality, in southwestern Cauca department of Colombia, has been critical since August 2023 because of clashes between the Estado Mayor Central (EMC) and the Colombian army (OCHA 04/10/2023). The EMC is an alliance of various dissident armed groups from the demobilised Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) (CORE 26/07/2021). In August, the Colombian Government initiated the military operation Trueno to regain full control of the municipality (Pares 04/09/2023). Since the beginning of the operation, the EMC has persistently enacted violent actions against the civilian population (El País 31/08/2023).

After the final peace agreement with the FARC-EP in 2016, Argelia became disputed territory between different groups of the EMC and La Segunda Marquetalia (Pares 14/02/2023). FARC-EP dissent groups include different armed groups; the EMC and La Segunda Marquetalia are the most important and organised ones (ACAPS 26/07/2023). Argelia is a strategic territory because of the presence of approximately 6,000 hectares of coca crops in the municipality, and the EMC has established a cocaine collection centre for the region's production (UNODC 22/10/2022; Cambio 02/09/2023). Clashes for territorial control have not only been between the Colombian army and armed groups but also among the armed groups themselves, leading to greater harm to the civilian population.

As at October 2023, armed violence has affected over 6,500 people in Argelia (iMMAP/OCHA accessed 10/10/2023). Five instances of confinement and eight cases of mass displacement had been recorded, making Argelia the municipality with the highest number of forced mass displacements in Cauca (iMMAP/OCHA accessed 03/10/2023; RCN 15/09/2023; Caracol Radio 29/08/2023; OCHA accessed 03/10/2023). The EMC further affects the civilian population by resorting to violence, imposing restrictions on basic services, planting numerous landmines, attacking power plants, issuing threats, carrying out targeted killings, and forcibly recruiting children (RCN 24/08/2023; Noticias Caracol 09/06/2023; W Radio 22/09/2023; EE 13/09/2023).

Location of Argelia in Cauca



Source: ACAPS using data from OCHA (15/05/2014)

DEVELOPMENTS TO WATCH

The presence of non-state armed groups, disputes related to drug trafficking and territorial control, and the limited state capacity for immediate response suggest that violence could persist and escalate. On 20 September, the Government announced a ten-month ceasefire with the EMC (France 24 20/09/2023). This is the second attempt at a ceasefire with the dissident faction, as they had previously violated the ceasefire in May by killing four indigenous children in Caquetá (EE 25/09/2023). As the EMC is not a homogeneous group, only a few factions announced their intention to adhere to the ceasefire agreements. This limitation raises concerns about the sustainability of a potential de-escalation of violence. The most recent ceasefire between the Colombian Government and the EMC began on 8 October, but confrontations and harm to the civilian population have not ceased (DW 08/10/2023; EE 04/10/2023).

As Argelia continues to be a significant corridor for coca trade in the region, it is important to highlight that, like the previous one, this ceasefire does not include an end to armed actions between the EMC and other non-state armed groups (Semana 05/07/2023). These groups strive to dominate the production chain and trafficking routes and even exert control over the social and political dynamics of the area (TDP accessed 04/10/2023). The rapid expansion of cultivated hectares and increased specialisation in production processes have established Argelia as the second-largest coca-producing hub in Colombia (UNODC 22/10/2022). Besides drug trafficking, extortion and illegal mining, which have expanded in recent years, also generate substantial income for dissident groups (El Tiempo 22/09/2023).

Territorial control and activities associated with illegal economies pose a serious risk of forced recruitment and the involvement of children and adolescents in armed violence. There have also been reports of occupation and damage to education infrastructure, as well as the placement of antipersonnel mines (APMs) and the presence of unexploded ordnance (UXO) and explosive traps (ETs) in proximity to these areas, posing a severe threat to students and educational staff (EE 13/09/2023). The lack of educational and economic opportunities, as well as life prospects, for the population can become an incentive for the recruitment and involvement of young people in armed groups (WOLA 29/08/2023).

AGGRAVATING FACTOR

Upcoming elections

On 29 October, Colombia will hold its regional elections for mayors, members of municipal councils, governors, and members of departmental assemblies. The upcoming local elections aggravate tensions in Argelia, as armed groups seek to influence election outcomes to gain power and control over local resources, such as drug trafficking routes and mining operations. This can increase violence and intimidation levels. The National Civil Registry and the Ombudsman's Office have categorised this municipality as a high-risk area in the electoral process (RNEC 16/08/2023; DPC 23/08/2023). Both the mayor and local community leaders, as well as electoral candidates, have faced threats (W Radio 14/09/2023; Caracol Radio 31/08/2023). There is an information gap regarding the specific groups behind the threats.

CRISIS IMPACTS

Protection

Civilians in Argelia face significant protection risks. By October, there had been eight mass displacement and five confinement events involving the civilian population, affecting more than 900 families and over 6,500 people (iMMAP/OCHA accessed 03/10/2023). Social and community leaders in the region remain under constant threat (EE 04/05/2023). Despite the ceasefire announcements, fighting continues, with homes and schools being used as shields in the confrontations (El Tiempo 02/10/2023).

The presence of APMs, UXO, and ETs represents a high risk for civilians in Argelia. While the exact number of mines in the municipality is unknown, in August, the military deactivated more than 60 APMs in one week (El Tiempo 30/08/2023). From January to October, the municipality experienced 22 APM-related accidents, making it the highest number of accidents in Cauca (AICMA accessed 10/10/2023; OCHA 15/09/2023).

Children face high protection risks in Argelia as they are especially vulnerable to forced recruitment, sexual violence, and economic exploitation (OCHA 15/09/2023). There is a significant information gap regarding armed group recruitment, and no exact figures are available. In August, over 140 children were reported missing in Cauca (STC 31/08/2023). Threats to young people by armed groups have been reported, forcing the youth to leave the municipality (BLU Radio 13/05/2023; RCN 05/09/2023).

Food security and livelihoods

Between 2021–2023, the price of coca leaf decreased by over 32% (El País 22/07/2023). This sharp decline in coca prices reduced family incomes in Argelia, affecting their food security. Approximately 90% of families in Argelia depend on the coca market (OpenDemocracy 29/09/2023). With displacement and confinement, people in urban areas lack the income to cover their basic needs. Also in rural areas, there is a risk of losing their crops given the presence of landmines and explosive devices (MIRE 06/10/2023).

The conflict has restricted people's mobility and the movement of food and basic services. During confinements, FARC-EP dissidents compel civilians to close their businesses and prohibit the entry of food, the passage of vehicles, and the delivery of fuel (RCN 24/08/2023). Clashes have affected power plants, and dissident groups have restricted civilian access to electricity and telecommunications (MIRE 06/10/2023; RCN 22/09/2023; W Radio 24/08/2023).

The municipality has repurposed the urban area's coliseum to accommodate displaced families, but climate hazards can easily create structural damage to the temporary shelter (MIRE 06/10/2023; OCHA 04/10/2023).

Health

In mid-September, the Ombudsman's Office reported an insufficient supply of hygiene and medical kits in the municipality. There were also barriers to accessing medical care and medication (DPC 14/09/2023). Among the actions that the EMC has carried out against the civilian population are threats directed at healthcare personnel in El Plateado village who have chosen to resign from their medical duties (OCHA 04/10/2023).

Refugees and migrants in Cauca face high health risks, including dehydration, leg injuries from lacerations, malnutrition, skin rashes, stomach ailments, genitourinary issues for women, and vehicular and pedestrian accidents (MIRE 06/10/2023; OCHA 15/09/2023).

The displaced and confined population requires psychosocial support, with a particular focus on children encountering greater mental health risks from post-traumatic stress (MIRE 06/10/2023; OCHA 04/10/2023).

Education

Violence escalation has led to the suspension of classes in Argelia's schools (Semana 27/07/2023). At the beginning of August, the Department of Education issued a directive to suspend classes in schools when necessary in anticipation of confrontations between

armed groups and the Colombian army. When the clashes ceased and attempts were made to have children return to school, the armed groups prevented them. Community members have reported instances of armed groups exerting control over the specific hours and days when children can attend school (EE 13/09/2023).

The municipality faces three types of threats regarding education access: threats to educational staff, landmines and confrontations occurring near educational centres, and direct threats against children attempting to attend classes (OCHA 15/09/2023). There is an information gap regarding the number of children affected by the suspension of classes. While the decision to suspend classes is intended to safeguard children at home, it may inadvertently expose them to an increased risk of forced recruitment by armed groups. Schools, aside from being places of learning, also provide a secure environment where children can spend a portion of their day (EE 13/09/2023). This duality underscores the vulnerability of children in both situations – attending school presents threats, but not having them engaged in educational activities also poses risks.

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Humanitarian access constraints

The presence of armed groups in the region results in significant security restrictions, impeding the access of responders to the affected areas. This is particularly acute in small rural settlements, where access is severely limited, leading to critical information gaps.

Supply restrictions imposed by the EMC limit people's access to aid. The EMC exerts control over and imposes limitations on the entry of essential supplies, such as food and fuel, in several townships within the municipality (W Radio 24/08/2023).

Argelia's geographic location extends from the mountains to the Pacific Ocean, traversed by the San Juan de Micay River. This makes it a strategic point for cocaine and weapon trafficking (TDP accessed 04/10/2023). These geographic features also pose access challenges to the area.

RESPONSE CAPACITY

The recurrence of displacements and confinements events throughout the year has diminished the budgetary capacity of the municipal administration of Argelia to respond to the issue (MIRE 06/10/2023). The departmental administration of Cauca has also encountered difficulties in logistical management, leading to a slow response to emergencies (OCHA 04/10/2023).

Humanitarian organisations and INGOs are operating and monitoring the situation in the territory. Their interventions include the distribution of non-perishable food, perishable food for community kitchens, individual hygiene kits, and mental health support by Tierra de Paz and other organisations. The Unit for Comprehensive Care and Reparation for Victims and the Ombudsman's Office also provide food and hygiene kits for a significant number of individuals (OCHA 04/10/2023; El Tiempo 24/09/2023; Unidad para las Víctimas 10/04/2023).

The Norwegian Refugee Council has delivered school and dignity kits to the department, while the UNHCR has supplied hygiene kits. Alianza Por la Solidaridad-Actionaid and the MIRE Consortium have distributed hygiene and dignity kits, respectively. The International Committee of the Red Cross has contributed food, medical kits, and mental health support, and Heartland Alliance International has provided food vouchers, kitchen kits, and shelter (OCHA 04/10/2023).

Despite these collective efforts, budgetary constraints and logistical challenges constrain the response capacity, underscoring the need for support and coordination to address humanitarian needs in Argelia. Displacements continue to deepen the population's needs (W Radio 02/10/2023; MIRE 06/10/2023).