

### ABOUT THIS REPORT

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#### Aim

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This report aims to provide elements for understanding the violence escalation afflicting Cauca department in 2023 and to highlight the associated protection risks.

#### Methodology

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The analysis is based on a secondary data review of data, reports, and documents developed by international organisations and Colombian organisations and researchers. This information is complemented by six key informant interviews from UN agencies, INGOs, and Colombian civil society organisations.

This protection risk analysis follows the Protection Analytical Framework developed by the Global Protection Cluster, which enables the identification and monitoring of protection risks. This framework requires consideration of four broad areas: current factors that influence the protection context, whether positively or negatively; violations and abuse across geographic locations and population groups; the priority effects on the population (affecting their dignity, safety, and wellbeing) arising from specific violations and abuses of each population group and per geographic location; and the current combination of individual capacity, local mechanisms, national institutional capacity, and humanitarian response capacity to address violations and abuses (Global Protection Cluster accessed 29/11/2023).

Effective risk analysis depends on a deep understanding of the context, and it is crucial to emphasise that a risk does not need to have a high probability for it to be a cause for concern. Risk analysis involves the systematic identification and examination of potential future events that might affect individuals, assets, and the environment. This report introduces the identified risks, providing rationales that outline the risks and their contexts. The identified triggers represent a set of factors and events that could contribute to the risks' realisation, while the discussion of the impact outlines the probable humanitarian consequences associated with the risks.

#### Limitations

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The continued deteriorating trends in Cauca make it very difficult to establish if a risk will occur or if a situation will just gradually deteriorate. Although this analysis follows a specific methodology, protection risk analysis is not an exact science. Information gaps limit the analysis. These gaps are particularly pronounced around issues related to gender-based violence (GBV) and the forced recruitment by armed groups of children, adolescents, and youth. It is particularly challenging to identify the impact on indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and rural communities mainly because of a lack of information and updated data. Difficulty in accessing certain regions, coupled with fear of threats, also hampers information access.

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## 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). Although these dissidents claim to be articulated in a unified organisation, their level of cohesion and command structure remain in question (CORE 24/07/2021; CORE 05/06/2023; Razon Publica 26/03/2023).

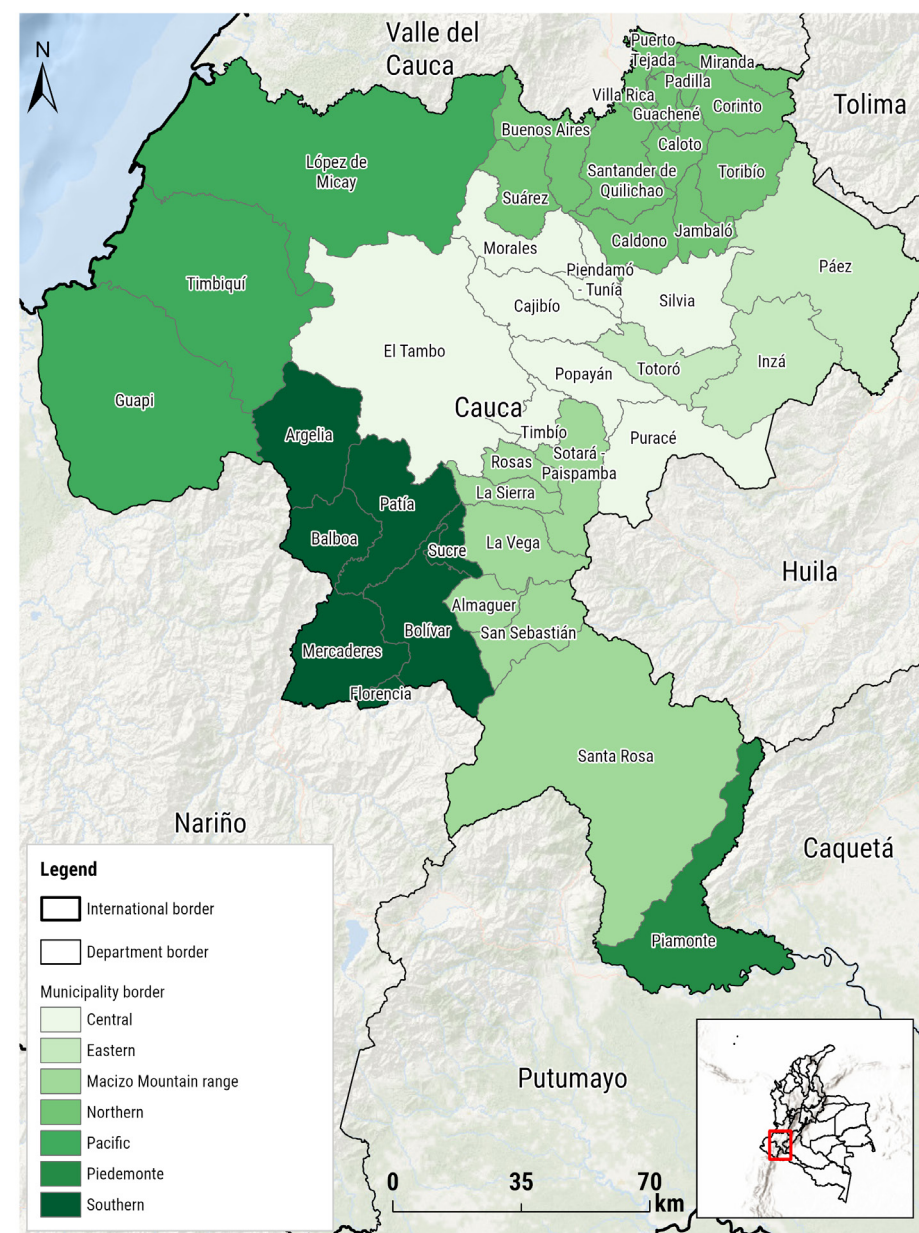
Segunda Marquetalia (Second Marquetalia), together with the EMC, is the second of the two agglutinations of FARC-EP dissident groups in Colombia (CORE 24/07/2021). This armed group was born in 2019, when some former FARC-EP commanders, such as alias 'Iván Márquez', 'Jesús Santrich', 'Romaña', and 'El Paisa' announced that they were rearming (El País 21/04/2023; EE 07/07/2023).

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 Urabeños and Clan Úsuga (Badillo and Mijares 16/01/2022).

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 (FARC) 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).

Map 1. Geographical distribution of Cauca's subregions



Source: Gobernación del Cauca accessed 6/12/2023

## BACKGROUND AND CURRENT SITUATION

Cauca department, located on the Pacific coast in southwestern Colombia, has a complex and deeply rooted history of violence and conflict. This region has consistently faced significant challenges, including the presence of various armed groups, illicit crop cultivation, and a longstanding struggle for territorial control. Its geographic location, connection with the Pacific Ocean, and proximity to the cities of Cali and Buenaventura (the main Pacific port) allow armed groups to establish transit zones, strategically locate illicit crops, and obtain resources from communities through social control (Solidarity Collective 13/06/2022).

Throughout its history and into the present, the territory has been fraught with pre-existing protection risks. Violence, threats, and homicides have profoundly affected the region, instilling fear and insecurity. Forced displacement and confinement have disrupted the lives of many, compelling communities to relocate or endure restricted movement. GBV, encompassing sexual violence and exploitation, poses severe risks, particularly for vulnerable populations. The recruitment, use, and exploitation of children and adolescents by armed groups further compound the challenges in the region. The pervasive presence of anti-personnel landmines, unexploded ordnance, and improvised explosive devices adds a layer of risk, affecting the safety and mobility of individuals (Truth Commission accessed 02/11/2023). These deeply ingrained protection risks underscore the multifaceted nature of the challenges afflicting Cauca.

The region is multiethnic and multicultural, including Afro-Colombian, indigenous, and rural communities. These communities face systematic attacks by armed groups seeking to disrupt their traditions and customs and aggravate their struggle for the right to free and dignified land ownership (KII 27/09/2023; ACAPS 06/08/2021). The communities face heightened vulnerabilities because of their historical marginalisation and unique relationships with the land, the latter of which stems from generations of cultural and ancestral ties. For these people, the land is not merely a physical space but a fundamental aspect of their identity, livelihoods, and cultural practices (Truth Commission accessed 02/11/2023). It plays a central role in their traditions, sustenance, and overall wellbeing. The violent events affecting these communities cause profound and intricate disruptions and harm to this symbiotic relationship (Truth Commission accessed 29/11/2023). While it is evident that all communities suffer, the available information does not specify which community has been more severely affected or has experienced a particular type of violent action with greater intensity.

Table 1. Baseline information

INDICATOR	CAUCA	COLOMBIA
Population	1,558,045 million	52,215,503 million
% of the rural population	64.33%	23.80%
Access to improved water sources (2022)	62.40%	62.70%
Access to proper excreta disposal (2022)	88.60%	79.80%
Ethnicity (2018)	Indigenous = 24.90% Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquera = 19.79%	Indigenous = 4.28% Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquera = 6.77%
Multidimensional Poverty Index (2022)	18.30%	12.90%
Homicide rate (2021)	54.43%	26.85%
Unemployment rate (2022)	8.70%	11.20%

Sources: DANE (22/03/2023, 22/02/2023, 23/05/2023 a, 23/05/2023 b, 08/02/2022, 23/05/2023 c, and 05/04/2023); OHCHR (26/07/2022)

Cauca has been the stage for historical disputes between social sectors and armed groups clashing over land ownership, leaving the region immersed in violence for centuries. These conflicts are linked to cocaine trafficking and illegal mining, which, in turn, are associated with the increased presence of armed groups. Multiple armed groups have been present in the territory since the 1960s (Truth Commission accessed 02/11/2023).

In 2016, the Government signed a peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), marking a significant milestone in the fight against armed conflict in Cauca. The agreement not only aimed to end decades of armed conflict but also sought to address underlying social and economic issues (Solidarity Collective 22/07/2022). The FARC-EP's withdrawal from the territory, however, did not result in a decrease in violence. The signing of the agreement brought about a period of relative peace that lasted approximately a year and a half, but in 2018, it became increasingly evident that other armed groups were reconfiguring and vying for control of the areas left by the FARC-EP, aggravating the armed conflict each year since (FIP 15/10/2023; El País 19/08/2023).

## Current situation

By October 2023, Cauca had become the department with the highest number of violent incidents in the country. As at 22 November, there had been seven massacres, 11 massive displacements, and eight instances of confinement throughout 2023. Over 4,800 people had been affected by displacement and 3,200 by confinement (OCHA accessed 07/11/2023). It is essential, however, to acknowledge potential variations in the reported numbers. One reason these numbers might be higher than previously recorded is the information gap surrounding related events resulting from the challenges that the Government and organisations face in reaching some municipalities (KII 15/11/2023; KII 08/11/2023). Gaps in reported information highlight the complexity of obtaining accurate data in certain regions of Cauca.

Among the illegal armed groups operating in the region, there are at least three dissident factions of the former FARC-EP, the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC). Although it is currently challenging to determine the exact number of armed groups in the territory, as at 2022, more than eight armed groups were vying for social and territorial control of the department (OCHA 15/09/2023; *Semana* 06/02/2022).

Despite the violence perpetrated by armed groups significantly affecting the entire department, some regions experience more pronounced challenges than others (KII 08/11/2023). In the north, indigenous communities face displacement, confinement, and forced recruitment into armed groups (KII 14/11/2023). The southern region stands out as the epicentre of intense confrontations involving multiple armed groups coercing communities to do what they say and escalating conflicts in specific municipalities. By the end of November, Algeria in southern Cauca was the 5th among the 30 municipalities receiving the most displaced populations and the sixth with the highest concentration of people affected by lockdowns and mass displacements (UNHCR 20/11/2023). Northern and southern Cauca exhibit the highest violence levels across Cauca, each with more than 100 violent events and more than 1,000 people affected from January–November 2023 (OCHA accessed 07/11/2023). Other areas of the department, such as the Macizo and the Pacific, respectively located in the east and west, also bear the impact of violent events (EE 17/04/2023). There is limited information on the violent events inflicted on Afro-Colombian communities in the Pacific (KII 08/11/2023; KII 01/11/2023).

The escalation of violence poses a significant threat, particularly to children and population groups such as indigenous, Afrodescendant, and rural communities (KII 01/11/2023). Alongside the direct impact of armed actions on these vulnerable populations, legal and illegal economic dynamics also affect these communities, further undermining their territories and cultural heritage (Truth Commission accessed 15/11/2023). For instance, megaprojects under the administration of various multinational corporations and private entities, such

as the controversial Salvajina Dam, one of Colombia's major hydroelectric plants located in northwestern Cauca, have raised concerns because of their social and environmental impacts (El País 16/05/2017).

The violent actions of armed groups, including incidents of confinement, landmine placement, and other protection risks affecting communities, not only pose direct threats to the safety and wellbeing of the population but also create formidable barriers to humanitarian access. These security risks significantly hinder the timely and effective delivery of humanitarian assistance, preventing aid workers from reaching those in need (KII 08/11/2023; KII 01/11/2023).

## Compounding crisis factors

Cauca is highly vulnerable to climate change and climate hazards, which affect livelihoods and food security (UN Women et al. 31/08/2017). Because of El Niño, Colombia is likely to experience heavy precipitation until the end of 2023 and record drier-than-normal conditions and high temperatures in the first trimester of 2024. These conditions may trigger water shortages, drought-related impacts, and an increased incidence of forest fires, posing additional threats to people's health, livelihoods, water access, and food security (MinAmbiente Colombia 04/11/2023). Local communities are likely to see their agriculture and fishing practices affected not only by illegal economies but also by extractive projects in the region (Mongabay 16/01/2023).



## RISK 1

The failure of the ceasefires can lead to an escalation of violence and an increase in violent events, aggravating social instability

### Rationale

By November 2023, there were two bilateral ceasefires in place between the Colombian Government and armed groups (El País 18/10/2023 and 04/08/2023; Colombian President 31/12/2022). The first ceasefire was with the ELN, initiated on 3 August 2023 and meant to last for six months until 29 January 2024. The second ceasefire was with the Estado Mayor Central or Central General Staff (EMC), initiated on 17 October 2023 and meant to last for three months until 15 January 2024. This was the second ceasefire that the Government had attempted to establish with the EMC. The armed group broke the first one in May following the assassination of four indigenous minors (El País 22/05/2023).

By July, Cauca was the department with the highest number of ceasefire violations (25 incidents). Cauca is currently one of the regions where the EMC has a significant presence and the only one where the de-escalation of clashes between public forces and illegal armed groups was not evident during the first ceasefire (Indepaz 01/07/2023). Until November, despite the continuation of both ceasefires, both the ELN and the EMC had persisted in carrying out violent actions and intimidating the population. Some experts argue that both armed groups may have few incentives to engage in negotiations, as they currently appear to be strengthened both militarily and economically (KII 08/11/2023; Mutante 14/07/2023).

Cauca department is a contested territory for various armed groups seeking to control illicit economies, such as drug trafficking and illegal mining (EE 12/05/2022). There has been a noticeable rise in the number of illegal groups compared to previous periods. These groups pursue not only territorial control but also social influence (KII 08/11/2023). They infiltrate community action boards, such as Las Juntas de Acción Comunal, which are vital civic and community organisations formed by residents to collaboratively address local issues. These boards play a crucial role in organising social, cultural, educational, and environmental activities, managing resources for public works or community projects, and representing the community before local authorities. The armed groups' infiltration of these action boards poses a serious threat to the democratic fabric of the community, as the boards are an integral part of Colombian society that allow residents to actively participate in the management of their communities (KII 01/11/2023; KII 27/09/2023). The actions of these armed groups not only undermine the democratic foundation of these community boards but also pose a direct threat to the wellbeing and safety of residents, as the escalation of violence is marked by a heightened level of brutality (KII 01/11/2023; Pesquisa Javeriana 15/06/2021).

The fact that the abovementioned ceasefires do not encompass other groups also jeopardises the ceasefires' stability and puts the population at risk (ACAPS 26/07/2023). The armed groups have complex and decentralised organisational structures, allowing individual factions to break the ceasefire independently without necessarily coordinating with others. This complexity affects the effectiveness and prospects of ceasefires and the potential for peaceful negotiations with these groups (KII 08/11/2023; La Silla Vacía 08/10/2023).

### Impact

The failure of the ceasefires in Cauca could trigger an escalation of violence, posing serious risks to the protection of the civilian population. From January–November 2023, there were over 400 violent events in the department (OCHA accessed 29/11/2023). The ceasefires' failure jeopardises the safety of the population, exposing them to massacres, confinement, displacement, targeted assassinations, and GBV (KII 08/11/2023).

Table 2. Violent events and people affected in Cauca in 2023

	EVENTS	PEOPLE AFFECTED
Homicides	189	224
Kidnappings	20	26
Massacres	7	23
Explosive ordnance	16	22
Confinements	8	3,295
Displacements	9	4,848

Source: ACAPS using data from OCHA (accessed 29/11/2023)

The breakdown of the ceasefires undermines trust in peace processes, eroding public support for government initiatives and disproportionately affecting indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and rural communities (KII 14/11/2023; CNTI 06/11/2023). The likely response to a failed ceasefire is increased state militarisation, which has historically resulted in an escalation of violence. Past instances of militarisation not only led to direct confrontations and crossfires but also compromised access to essential resources, such as clean water, sanitation, education, and a healthy environment (CNTI 06/11/2023). An example is Operation Trueno, a military operation launched in August in southern Cauca to regain control of the municipalities there. Confrontations in the area between armed forces and the EMC resulted in several killings, displacements, and confinements of civilians (ACAPS 24/10/2023).

## RISK 2

Protracted conflict and violence create impediments and restrictions, hindering access to resources, opportunities, services, documentation, and justice, posing a significant threat to community wellbeing, and leading to the degradation of livelihoods

### Rationale

Given Cauca's diverse array of resources, including abundant natural resources, water sources, biodiversity, and mountainous terrains, the department has become a strategic zone for armed groups. These armed groups drive coca cultivation in the area, and fluctuations in coca prices play a significant role in the local economy (KII 27/09/2023; Truth Commission accessed 02/11/2023). When prices are high, communities earn significant income from the industry, but low prices force them to seek other income sources, affecting their livelihoods. In a context of economic uncertainty, people are at high risk of instrumentalisation by armed groups, especially in extortion and robbery activities, as well as through the forced recruitment of children and adolescents (KII 01/11/2023; KII 27/09/2023).

Non-compliance with the peace agreement with the FARC-EP has led to an increase in coca cultivation in Cauca, providing significant income to communities but, at the same time, affecting the environment and human rights, diverting water sources, and deteriorating soil fertility (KII 14/11/2023). Currently, Cauca, with over 16,500 hectares under cultivation, is one of the five coca-growing enclaves experiencing the most significant growth in crop area across Colombia (UNODC 20/10/2022). Although there is no exact figure for the percentage of the population dependent on coca, expert estimates vary between 10–12% of the departmental population, and in some municipalities such as Argelia and El Tambo, this percentage is believed to be close to 90% (OpenDemocracy 29/09/2023; KII 27/09/2023).

Extractive projects and illegal mining in the region threaten the sustainability of natural resources, contaminating soil and water and affecting agriculture and livestock. These activities also contribute to violence and conflict, forcing people to flee their homes (KII 01/11/2023; KII 27/09/2023). Illegal mining has been present in Cauca department since the 1970s and was significantly intensified by armed groups in the 1990s (Truth Commission accessed 11/08/2023). The high demand for gold and fluctuations in coca prices have renewed the interest of armed groups in illegal mining (KII 08/11/2023; UNODC 06/09/2022). Cauca has the fourth-highest level of illegal gold exploitation among all departments in Colombia, with a significant portion occurring in the territories of ethnic communities (UNODC 06/09/2022).

Along with the illicit economies sustained by armed groups in the region, their presence and activities also have a negative impact on the livelihoods of communities. These activities include planting landmines, displacement, and confinement that limit access to natural resources and markets.

### Impact

The direct actions of armed groups, such as attacks on infrastructure, threats to personnel, and the use of landmines, have severe repercussions on communities. Landmines restrict mobility and access to subsistence resources while also imposing limitations on people's movement through identification cards and tolls. These actions, with coca cultivation and illegal mining, have significant environmental impacts that are not adequately monitored, severely affecting water sources, soil fertility, and biodiversity (KII 11/08/2023). Governments advocating crop substitution as an alternative to coca cultivation have also endorsed monocultures that may affect the environment and communities (Truth Commission accessed 15/11/2023).

The restrictions and barriers to freedom of movement, including situations of isolation, confinement, and forced displacement, become more prominent in an environment where resources and opportunities are limited because of armed conflict. Measures preventing access to legal identity, remedies, and justice, aggravated by adverse economic conditions, also create a context conducive to increased vulnerabilities and risks in the affected communities.

## RISK 3

The risk of healthcare system breakdown in Cauca threatens essential medical services, worsening health issues and increasing mortality risk, especially in emergencies

### Rationale

There are multiple challenges for the healthcare institutions responsible for providing medical attention and healthcare for the population in Cauca. The complexities surrounding health provider systems (formally known as Entidades Promotoras de Salud in Spanish) contribute to persistent issues, including medication shortages, precarious conditions in health facilities, and a lack of medical personnel, which have weakened healthcare delivery in the region (KII 01/11/2023). Low medical coverage, particularly in rural areas, is attributed to factors such as poverty, inequality, inadequate infrastructure, and the limited presence of the State (KII 08/11/2023; Truth Commission accessed 11/08/2023).

The armed conflict has heightened medical needs in the region, with armed groups posing threats to medical professionals (KII 14/11/2023; KII 23/10/2023). Violent events and a lack of access to basic services have led to an increased demand for medical care, including medicine, vaccination, psychosocial support, and general health (OCHA 04/10/2023).

### Impact

The potential collapse of the healthcare system in Cauca would have far-reaching consequences. Individuals, particularly pregnant women, older people, and those with chronic illnesses, such as hypertension and diabetes, are grappling with treatment interruptions because of challenges in accessing essential medication (AAH et al. 01/11/2023). The armed conflict in Cauca has had a negative impact on both primary and secondary healthcare in the region, although the impact on secondary healthcare has been more severe, as secondary healthcare services are more reliant on the infrastructure and resources that have been damaged or destroyed by the conflict. Particularly secondary healthcare providers are also often reluctant to travel to conflict-affected areas because of safety concerns (KII 11/15/2023; KII 23/19/2023). In several municipalities of the department, such as Lopez de Micay and Argelia, it has been reported that many residents lack access to the secondary healthcare services they need. This is particularly concerning for individuals with chronic diseases who may not receive the continuous care required to manage their conditions (AAH et al. 11/08/2023 and 01/11/2023). For those requiring specialised medical care, the limited capacity of medical centres and hospitals in most municipalities necessitates referrals to major cities, such as Popayán and Cali, creating logistical hurdles for timely and effective treatment (AAH et al. 11/08/2023).

Mental health concerns loom large as the community continues to grapple with the enduring impact of war and constant re-exposure to conflict. The persistent fear of recruitment, especially among the youth, adds a layer of strain (KII 14/11/2023; KII 23/10/2023). Existing health centres also lack the necessary personnel to provide crucial psychological support (AAH et al. 01/11/2023).

Instances of sexual violence, though prevalent, remain largely unaddressed because of the constant presence of armed groups. Survivors, traumatised and physically harmed, are left without essential medical and psychological support, contributing to both immediate and long-term health risks. The prevalent distrust in reporting mechanisms and institutional entities further deters survivors from seeking help. This not only complicates the identification of cases requiring urgent medical and psychosocial attention but also highlights a concerning normalisation of such situations by institutional entities (KII 15/11/2023). A pervasive fear of retaliation and societal stigma prevents survivors from coming forward, perpetuating a culture of silence. The unaddressed instances of sexual violence not only inflict direct harm on survivors but also erode trust in institutions meant to provide protection and justice. Compounding the issue, healthcare professionals often struggle to respond appropriately to these cases, unsure of how to provide support without inadvertently causing further harm or revictimizing survivors.

The cumulative effect of these factors paints a grim picture of the severe consequences of a healthcare system breakdown.

## LATEST DEVELOPMENTS TO WATCH

### Increased forced recruitment of children in the armed conflict

The high presence of armed groups in Cauca has led to a significant increase in the recruitment of children and adolescents. Over 350 cases were documented from January 2021 to August 2023, with children and adolescents from ethnic and rural communities being the most affected, highlighting a significant underreporting issue (KII 20/10/2023). That said, this data is subject to debate. From 2019–2022, the indigenous communities of Cauca carried out monitoring as systematically as possible and documented over 500 children recruited in their territories (CNTI 06/11/2023). During the first half of 2023, the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca reported 120 cases of recruitment. They emphasise, however, that this is an approximate figure, with the actual number likely much higher (CRIC 14/03/2023). The areas with the highest number of reported cases are the eastern region (with 34% of all child recruitment), the northern zone (30%), and the northeastern and western zones (14% each). Notably, 38% of the victims of recruitment are girls exposed to sexual violence (KII 20/10/2023). There is no precise breakdown by age and gender available. Reports indicate that those recruited are often relocated to distant municipalities, away from their home territory (KII 01/11/2023; KII 27/09/2023).

Young individuals facing poverty and economic hardships are especially vulnerable to forced recruitment by these groups. The reasons that children acquiesce to recruitment can vary, including seeking protection and succumbing to social influence. The situation is worsened by a lack of access to proper education during the armed conflict, as schools have become areas of conflict and threats. There are also reports indicating that both armed groups and state forces have used schools as shields, violating international humanitarian law (KII 08/11/2023). Three types of threats regarding education access have been identified: threats to educational staff, landmines and confrontations occurring near educational centres, and direct threats against children attempting to attend classes (KII 20/10/2023; OCHA 15/09/2023; EE 13/09/2023).

Recruited children face a high risk of violence when employed in military operations, which expose them to the psychological impact of the possibility of injury or death. They can also become victims of physical and sexual abuse by the armed groups, resulting in post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and other psychological issues (STC 31/08/2023). Upon liberation, they may encounter challenges in adapting to civilian life. The challenges faced by these children extend beyond the immediate physical and psychological risks. Historically, the reintegration process has been complex and it remains a significant concern for the affected communities. The psychological toll of recruited children's past experiences may hinder their ability to trust, form healthy relationships, and engage in regular social interactions. The stigma linked to their association with armed groups also

poses a considerable social challenge. Recruited minors often find themselves marginalised and stigmatised by their communities, hindering reintegration efforts. This social exclusion worsens the feelings of isolation and alienation, creating hurdles in their journey towards a stable civilian life (KII 15/11/2023; KII 20/10/2023).

The forced recruitment of young individuals strengthens armed groups by providing them with a higher number of combatants and contributes to increased school dropouts and violence in the region, including massacres, displacement, confinement, and selective assassination (KII 20/10/2023). Despite the substantial number of reported cases, the underreporting of recruitment events persists. Families do not report for fear of reprisal from armed groups. Other factors for underreporting include inadequate institutional response to prevent and address recruitment, the culture of fear imposed by armed groups, and information gaps (KII 08/11/2023; KII 01/11/2023; KII 27/09/2023).

### Gender-based violence

GBV has historically been a pervasive issue in armed conflicts in Colombia, affecting girls, boys, women, and members of the LGBTQ+ community (Truth Commission accessed 27/11/2023). Despite limited formal reports, all key informant interviews emphasised that these forms of violence continue to be a source of significant concern. In conflict settings, GBV can escalate significantly because of impunity and the normalisation of violence. The safety and wellbeing of women, men, girls, and boys in Cauca remain unaddressed, underreported, and often overlooked within the framework of the armed conflict (Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres 05/2017). As at November, Cauca had the sixth-highest homicide rate per 100,000 women and the fourth-highest number of homicides nationwide (3iSolution et al. 10/11/2023).

Various organisations acknowledge the underreporting of cases of violence against women, particularly within indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities (KII 14/11/2023; KII 23/10/2023). Because of a lack of comprehensive data on the subject, it is challenging to specify the exact forms of GBV enacted and the profiles of both survivors and perpetrators.

As at November 2023, the department had recorded 15 cases of femicide, with the actual number likely much higher (3iSolution et al. 10/11/2023). According to key informant interviews, organisations have made efforts to declare a femicide alert in some municipalities, such as Santander de Quilichao in northern Cauca. Fear of reprisal further complicates the situation, as women are hesitant to report incidents because of potential backlash. Despite the existence of support channels, these reports often add another layer of trauma for women. Healthcare professionals may also lack the necessary training to effectively handle or respond to these situations, representing an additional layer of complexity to the challenges that women face in accessing appropriate and sensitive support. Lack of awareness about various forms of GBV within institutions, coupled with cultural factors, deters women from reporting such incidents (KII 14/11/2023).