

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Aim:

This report provides an overview of two key humanitarian crises in the Colombia-Ecuador border area that are expected to persist in the next 6–12 months. It aims to inform humanitarian decision-making and programming by anticipating humanitarian needs and constraints in humanitarian operations. Specifically, the report presents an overview and an outlook of the humanitarian impact of armed violence and migration flows on the civilian population in the region.

Limitations and information gaps

The future is inherently complex and uncertain. The outlook sections present potential developments of the crises, considering their specific scope and the information available as at November 2023. The emergence of new information and the influence of factors not accounted for may invalidate these outlooks. There are also information gaps related to protection incidents in Ecuador, especially surrounding gender-based violence (GBV).

Methodology

The report is based on the secondary data review of public sources and four key informant interviews collected between October–November 2023. Three of the interviews were conducted with humanitarian organisations and one with a civil society organisation.

Crises were selected based on the recent increase in the humanitarian impacts of armed violence and significant migration flows in the Colombia-Ecuador border. For each crisis, the ACAPS team collected existing information, mapped out relevant crisis drivers, highlighted recent developments and humanitarian impacts, and anticipated their probable evolution over the coming months.

Map 1. The Colombia-Ecuador border region



Source: ACAPS (19/12/2023)

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GENERAL CONTEXT AND HUMANITARIAN SITUATION OVERVIEW

The Colombia-Ecuador border faces a complex humanitarian situation. The region comprises the Colombian departments of Nariño and Putumayo and the Ecuadorian provinces of Carchi, Esmeraldas, and Sucumbíos, as presented in Map 1.

Armed conflict in Colombia and gang violence in Ecuador, fueled by fighting over the control of illegal economies (such as drug trafficking and illegal mining), expose the civilian population to severe protection incidents. These include displacements, confinements, forced disappearances, child recruitment, selective homicide against social leaders, explosive artefacts, and GBV (GIFMM/Protection Cluster 08/07/2022; ACAPS 07/12/2023, 26/07/2023, 11/04/2023, and 13/01/2023).

In 2016, the Colombian Government and the Colombian Armed Revolutionary Forces (FARC-EP) signed a peace agreement. This agreement temporarily reduced the levels of violence before it reconfigured and increased in recent years (HRW accessed 19/12/2023 a). Displacements, confinements, widespread antipersonnel mine (APM) contamination, massacres (defined in Colombia as the killing of three or more civilians in the same incident), and assassinations and threats against political candidates have since continued to affect Colombia (HRW accessed 19/12/2023 b; UNSC 26/09/2023).

New armed groups, most notably FARC-EP dissident groups, have been occupying and fighting over the control of the areas that FARC-EP left after the peace agreement. As at 2018, FARC-EP was present in 242 of 1,100 municipalities, mostly in the Colombian southwest (Pares 25/06/2018). More recently, confrontations among new and older armed groups, such as the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC), and the Colombian armed forces have been driving violence against the civilian population and increasing the humanitarian impact of the conflict. Clashes among these armed groups are the main causes of displacement and confinement (OCHA 01/11/2023).

In Nariño and Putumayo, the impacts on the civilian population have been particularly severe. From January–September 2023, mass displacement (defined in Colombia as displacement events involving over 50 people at a time) affected Nariño the most, with 53% of all displacement events in the country taking place in the department, affecting 24,500 people. In Putumayo, armed conflict-related humanitarian emergencies increased in 2023 compared to previous years (OCHA 01/11/2023). For instance, the number of forcibly displaced people increased sevenfold from over 430 between January–October 2022 to 3,200 between January–November 2023 (OCHA 21/11/2022; OCHA accessed 12/12/2023 a).

The border area has a significant presence of indigenous communities, who are among the most affected by violent incidents. There is also a significant Afro-Colombian ethnic population, mostly in Nariño and Putumayo departments. 15.5% of the population in Nariño and 17.9% in Putumayo self-identify as indigenous, while 17.5% of the population in Nariño and 3.6% in Putumayo self-identify as Afro-Colombian (DANE 16/09/2019 and 28/02/2021).

The Awa indigenous community is among the populations most at risk of armed violence, as they live in some of the most conflict-affected municipalities in Nariño and Putumayo and in northern Ecuador (ONIC accessed 05/12/2023; DP 07/03/2023; CNTI 16/07/2022).

Besides the armed conflict, Colombia has been experiencing a significant increase in mixed migration movements, with people coming mostly from neighbouring Venezuela but also from other countries, such as China, Ecuador, and Haiti, with Nariño department serving as a main corridor. Most of the migrants and asylum seekers in transit through Colombia move towards North America. As at October 2023, 238,000 people had entered Colombia, 88,000 regularly and 150,000 irregularly (PGN 22/10/2023).

Political instability and security challenges in northern Ecuador also have an important effect on how the humanitarian crisis unfolds. Ecuador has been experiencing an insecurity crisis since 2020 caused by fighting among criminal gangs over the control of illegal economies, with serious effects on the country's security indicators. The homicide rate reached 25.9 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2022, one of the highest in South America and only surpassed by Venezuela (40.4) and Colombia (26.1) (InSight Crime 08/02/2023). Ecuador's insecurity crisis affects the regular influx of migrants and asylum seekers crossing from Ecuador towards Colombia and incentivises the additional migration of Ecuadorian nationals, either within Ecuador or to other countries, including Colombia (KII 25/10/2023).

Increasing insecurity and migration in both countries creates a challenging humanitarian environment in the border region, for which comparative statistics for the Colombian departments of Nariño and Putumayo and the Ecuadorian provinces of Carchi, Esmeraldas, and Sucumbíos are presented in Annex I.

Crisis to watch 1: armed violence in the Colombia-Ecuador border

CONTEXT OVERVIEW

Colombia

The intensification of the Colombian armed conflict has had significant humanitarian impacts in the country's southern departments. The most visible impact is the increased incidence of displacement and confinement.

Displacements

Nationwide displacement in 2023 increased from 28,700 in the first semester (January–June) to 36,200 in the second semester (July–November). Displacement affected Nariño the most, concentrating 46% of people displaced nationwide as at November (OCHA 01/11/2023). From January–November, 29,000 people were displaced in Nariño and 3,200 in Putumayo (OCHA accessed 12/12/2023 a).

Almost 700 of the people displaced in Nariño were part of mass displacements crossing into Ecuador (OCHA accessed 12/12/2023 a). Displacement figures are likely underreported, meaning impacts might be more intense. The armed conflict in southern Colombia typically leads to people fleeing the violence towards Ecuador. Some Colombian families tend to move south of the border at the height of armed confrontations among armed groups and return when the intensity decreases. Other Colombian families move with the intention of leaving Colombia permanently, mostly because of threats from armed groups, particularly to social leaders and activists, and to prevent the recruitment of their youngest members (children and adolescents) (KII 25/10/2023). As at September 2023, over 75,800 refugees and 9,500 asylum seekers were registered in Ecuador, 95% of whom came from Colombia (UNHCR 26/10/2023).

Confinements

Nationwide confinement events in 2023 increased from 25,700 in the first semester (January–June) to 55,400 in the second semester (July–November). As at November, confinement affected 8,300 people in Nariño and 3,000 in Putumayo. During confinement, armed groups impose humanitarian access and movement restrictions. Humanitarian organisations face threats against their personnel or facilities if they move in the areas controlled by armed groups, and the population is prevented from accessing aid (OCHA accessed 12/12/2023 a).

Most affected areas

Telembí Triangle. One of the most affected areas in Nariño is the Telembí Triangle (Triángulo de Telembí in Spanish), comprising Barbacoas, Magüí Payán, and Roberto Payán municipalities and bordering Ecuador. Between January–September 2023, mass displacements affected over 5,900 people, while confinements affected 3,400. Between January 2022 and September 2023, there were over 11 accidents involving APMs and 24 reported incidents of sexual violence. Oil spills from armed groups' illicit drilling of oil pipes also affected over 12,600 people. The spill showed how local communities were doubly affected by both armed conflict and disasters. The Telembí Triangle also receives displaced communities from other Nariño municipalities. In June, August, and September 2023, over 3,900 Afro-Colombian and indigenous people displaced from Tumaco and Ricaurte municipalities arrived in Barbacoas (OCHA 22/11/2023).

Ricaurte, which also borders Ecuador, is the most affected **municipality** of Nariño department in terms of displacements, with 5,300 displaced people as at September 2023 (OCHA 01/11/2023). Armed conflict affected the October 2023 municipal elections in this municipality. Between April–June 2023, armed groups attacked three candidates running for Ricaurte's mayor, and two of them were pressured to unify their campaigns. Armed group threats to one candidate sparked demonstrations by supporters, which, alongside the presence of ELN and La Segunda Marquetalia, led authorities to suspend municipal elections in Ricaurte (DP 23/08/2023; EE 29/10/2023). Other voting stations in Nariño had to be relocated because of mass displacement and other violent actions (EE 29/10/2023; Infobae 29/10/2023).

In Putumayo department, the border area is the most affected by armed violence. This area concentrates most of the coca farming families, prompting armed groups to fight over its control (Pares 14/10/2022). **Puerto Asís** is by far the most affected municipality of Putumayo in 2023, with over 90% of the people affected by displacement and confinement in the department as at September 2023 (OCHA 01/11/2023). Armed groups in Putumayo have been implementing social control activities, such as establishing dressing norms and threatening social leaders (KII 01/11/2023). The most affected groups are indigenous and Afrodescendant communities, who face threats by armed groups to use their lands for growing illegal crops (coca leaf), affecting the communities' autonomy and self-governance (DP 29/08/2022).

Humanitarian and environmental impacts

Besides displacement and confinement, the humanitarian impacts of violence are mostly related to the recruitment of children and adolescents; school dropouts; humanitarian needs related to food and nutrition, mental and physical health access, shelter provision for displaced people, and local water supply systems; and information provision related

to emergencies and risk management and for hygiene practices (OCHA 22/11/2023). The recruitment of children by armed groups is one of the main protection threats on both sides of the border. It particularly affects the Awa indigenous community. Armed groups are present where this community lives, exposing children and adolescents to recruitment, especially those whose families are not able to accompany them all the time. Armed groups extend their control over the local population through recruitment, threats and homicide against social and ethnic traditional leaders, and land contamination with APMs, improvised explosive devices, and explosive remnants of war (DP 07/03/2023).

The violent actions of armed groups also have environmental consequences. On 10 October, an explosion caused an oil spill that contaminated the Mocoa and Caquetá rivers, threatening the water sources and livelihoods of local communities (RNC 13/10/2023; AAS 10/10/2023).

In Putumayo, Venezuelan women and girls are at risk of labour and sexual exploitation and face significant barriers to accessing health and education services because of their irregular migration status. Many women's partners are fighters of armed groups, making them afraid of denouncing domestic violence incidents to the authorities because of possible retaliation (KII 05/12/2023). Both the Estado Mayor Central (EMC) and La Segunda Marquetalia have imposed measures of social control over the civilian population, including the requirement of non-official ID documents issued by these groups (Pares 14/10/2022; KII 08/11/2023).

Ecuador

Across the border, the security situation in Ecuador also severely affects the civilian population. Clashes among criminal gangs over the control of drug trafficking and other illegal economies, have resulted in sustained increases in the country's homicide rate. For January–July of each year compared with the preceding year, Esmeraldas had the fourth-highest homicide rate in Ecuador in 2022 and the second-highest after Guayaquil's in 2023. Over 90% of casualties were men under 30 (Primicias 11/07/2023). Esmeraldas has become a transit centre for drugs coming from Colombia (InSight Crime 08/02/2023). Armed groups use the border area as shelter and to store weapons, drugs, and raw materials for drug production (DP 07/03/2023).

The population also deals with threats, extortion, and a general environment of fear resulting from the tactics of criminal gangs, such as the public exhibition of hanged corpses and other similar acts of intimidation (InSight Crime 17/02/2023). These violent acts have contributed to increasing the propensity of the local population to migrate outside Ecuador (KII 25/10/2023).

KEY DRIVERS OF THE CRISIS

Armed groups mentioned in the report

FARC-EP was the biggest armed group in Colombia until they signed a peace agreement with the Colombian Government in 2016. Some of its middle-rank members did not comply with the agreement and formed other armed groups (InSight Crime 23/11/2023).

The EMC is an alliance of various groups that belonged to the demobilised FARC-EP (El País 16/04/2023). Although these groups claim to be part of a unified organisation, their cohesion level and command structure remain in question (CORE 26/07/2021; EE 05/06/2023; Razon Publica 26/03/2023). Together with current leader alias 'Ivan Mordisco', alias 'Gentil Duarte' led this group until his death (InSight Crime 16/02/2023). This report refers to FARC-EP dissident groups that had publicly admitted to joining the EMC as at 13 July 2023 as the EMC. Groups that do or do not belong to the EMC may change over time.

La Segunda Marquetalia (Second Marquetalia), together with the EMC, is the second of the two alliances of armed groups that belonged to FARC-EP (CORE 26/07/2021). This armed group was born in 2019, when some former FARC-EP commanders, such as aliases '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 had publicly admitted to belonging to La Segunda Marquetalia as at 13 July 2023 as La Segunda Marquetalia. The groups that do or do not belong to La Segunda Marquetalia may change over time.

The AGC were born after the demobilisation of the paramilitary group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia. 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 ELN was born in the 1960s with a presence in more than 200 municipalities in Colombia (DP 09/12/2022).

Los Choneros are among the most prominent criminal gangs in Ecuador that originated in the city of Chone in western Ecuador in the 1990s. They are present in six Ecuadorian provinces, including Esmeraldas (InSight Crime 04/10/2021).

Los Lobos are a criminal gang that originated from and constantly fight with Los Choneros. Their activities include cocaine transportation from Colombia towards the US and Europe, drug distribution, and illegal mining (InSight Crime 08/11/2022).

Disputes over the control of illegal economies

Control over illegal economies drives the clashes between different armed groups. The main income source for these groups is cocaine trafficking, the production of which is based on coca leaf farming, which rural communities carry out in Colombia and other countries. Colombia remains the biggest producer of cocaine worldwide, experiencing a 13% increase in the area dedicated to coca crops and 24% in cocaine production from 2021–2022. 77% of the increase in areas dedicated to coca crops was concentrated in Putumayo department. Tumaco in Nariño and Puerto Asís in Putumayo in the border region are two of the municipalities with more area dedicated to coca crops (UNODC/Govt. Colombia 12/09/2023).

Illegal mining also makes up part of armed groups' income sources. Colombia and Brazil are some of the biggest producers of illegally mined gold. Colombian authorities estimate that armed groups make between two to three billion dollars annually from illegal gold mining in the country (The Economist 09/11/2023). Most of the exploitation of alluvial gold (i.e. gold taken from soil sediments left behind by water flows) in Nariño (over 70%) and Putumayo (over 90%) is illegal. The areas where illegal exploitation of alluvial gold takes place coincide largely with coca farmland, 95% for Putumayo and 66% for Nariño (UNODC 09/06/2022). Since armed groups control the areas with coca crops, this coincidence suggests a similar control over illegal mining. Illegal forestry also adds to armed groups' income sources (KII 01/11/2023).

Rivalries among armed groups in Colombia

Armed groups vie for control of illegal economies, mainly linked to drug trafficking, mining, forestry, and trafficking in persons. The Colombian Government is engaged in peace conversations with the ELN and the EMC. As part of this process, ceasefires between the Colombian armed forces and these groups are in effect (Govt. Colombia 16/10/2023 and 06/07/2023; AP 03/08/2023; RNC 16/10/2023). The ceasefires, however, do not prevent the armed groups from clashing with each other, resulting in continued humanitarian impacts. For example, the ceasefire between the Colombian Government and the ELN has not stopped the recruitment of children older than 15 (STC 02/08/2023). There is currently no ceasefire between the Colombian Government and La Segunda Marquetalia.

In Nariño, the EMC and La Segunda Marquetalia fight over the control of the department's Pacific Coast, a key corridor for the transport of illegal drugs to Ecuador. It is estimated that a third of Colombia's cocaine production exits the country towards Ecuador (InSight Crime 28/08/2023). Clashes among these armed groups occur in the Telembí Triangle and the road from Tumaco municipality in the west to Pasto, Nariño's capital located in the east (Pares 31/08/2023).

The EMC and the ELN also fight over territorial and social control of Los Andes, La Llanada, Linares, Samaniego, and Santacruz municipalities, which are located in central eastern Nariño near the Ecuadorian border. Los Andes and La Llanada municipalities are in a strategic position given their access to several roads, making them important for armed groups (DP 06/07/2023). Confrontation between the two groups can prompt the ELN to use APMs as a measure of protection against the EMC's advances (DP 06/09/2023). The ELN imposes strong social control measures on populations to prevent them from interacting with members of the EMC. Threats, mobility restrictions, and stigmatisation have been reported. These limit education access, since teachers and students are afraid to attend schools (DP 06/07/2023).

In Putumayo, clashes between the EMC and La Segunda Marquetalia over the control of coca-producing areas have been reported. These include homicides and threats to social and ethnic leaders, mainly in the border area where coca crops are concentrated (Pares 14/10/2022).

Gang rivalries and political instability in Ecuador

Another key driver of violence on both sides of the border involves fighting among criminal gangs in Ecuador over the control of the drug trade coming from Colombia. The demobilisation of FARC-EP, which had a monopoly on the drug trade in the border area, opened a vacuum for other groups that started to fight over its control. Among these groups are local Ecuadorian gangs and the Mexican (including the Sinaloa and Jalisco Nueva Generación Cartels) and Albanian mafias, which have recruited local proxies to ship cocaine to Europe (CFR 14/06/2023).

The key factors behind Ecuador's security crisis are the increase in cocaine production coming from Colombia, the fragmentation of criminal gangs, the involvement of foreign criminal organisations (mostly from Colombia and Mexico), and the institutional weakness of the Ecuadorian State in terms of security (Insight Crime 10/08/2023).

The most important gangs are Los Choneros and Los Lobos, two rival federations that clash with each other throughout the country (InSight Crime 08/02/2023). The growing role of these gangs resulted in a security crisis that became visible with the assassination of a presidential candidate who voiced his opposition to gangs in August 2023 (HRW 10/08/2023; BBC 10/08/2023). Armed violence by these gangs affects the local population, as well as the migrants and asylum seekers moving through the country, by exposing them to threats and extortion. Some families who have migrated from Colombia to Ecuador to flee armed conflict in their country in previous years are considering returning given the current violence levels in Ecuador (KII 25/10/2023). The security crisis has also increased the interest of Ecuadorian locals to migrate outside the country (see Crisis to Watch 2).

The Ecuadorian Government has declared states of emergency and increased the capacity of the country's jails. On 3 August 2023, it declared a state of emergency for 60 days throughout the country (President of Ecuador 10/08/2023; France 24 08/10/2023). On 8 October, it extended the state of emergency for 30 more days (Primicias 09/10/2023). This has not been sufficient to decrease the gangs' power or the level of violence in the country. Threats to attorneys, justices, and law enforcement officials are common (InSight Crime 10/08/2023).

The economic situation has also contributed to the insecurity crisis. Low prices of oil (Ecuador's main export product) and the pandemic have affected the population's income and employment, putting young people at risk of recruitment to gangs (CFR 14/06/2023). In December 2018, the average price of Ecuador's oil tanked at USD 48.7/barrel, much lower than 70.3 USD/barrel in October 2018. In October 2023, the price was USD 81.2/barrel (CEIC accessed 19/12/2023; Statista accessed 19/12/2023). Political instability has worsened the situation. In May 2023, the President of Ecuador dissolved the National Congress (Asamblea Nacional) to call for anticipated presidential and legislative elections and avoid being removed from office by a political trial. It is the first time in the country's history that this mechanism has been used (BBC 17/05/2023). A new President was elected in October 2023 and will hold the office until May 2025, half the usual presidential term (DW 17/10/2023; NYT 15/10/2023).

OUTLOOK

Violent clashes among armed groups in Colombia and criminal gangs in Ecuador are likely to continue. The increase in coca crops and cocaine production would provide more incentives for these groups to fight over the control of the drug trade. Simultaneously, the international demand for gold would continue to spur illegal mining.

If ceasefires are disrupted or not renewed because of complications in peace negotiations between the Government and armed groups, there is a potential for an escalation in armed actions by the Colombian armed forces, further amplifying the current humanitarian impact of the conflict. For example, in Los Andes and La Llanada municipalities in Nariño, the civilian population may experience intensified social control measures by armed groups, such as stigmatisation and behavioural rules (DP 06/07/2023).

The persistence of illegal economies and the potential breakdown of ceasefires indicate that the intensity of the Colombian armed conflict might not decrease in the next 6–12 months at least. The conflict is likely to escalate in Putumayo with armed groups currently reinforcing, possibly triggering further humanitarian crises (KII 08/11/2023).

The insecurity situation in Ecuador is also expected to maintain its current levels, as the underlying drivers would not change significantly in the short term. The formulation and implementation of a new security agenda by the new Ecuadorian Government would take time, with its potential effectiveness remaining uncertain.

The critical humanitarian situation in the border area is poised to have significant long-term effects. Child recruitment into armed groups would lead them to discontinue their studies, affecting their future economic prospects. This issue would disproportionately affect indigenous, Afrodescendant, and rural communities, as well as the increasing number of migrants and asylum seekers crossing through the region.

Armed conflict would continue to hinder the humanitarian response, since the presence of armed groups endangers the lives of humanitarian workers. Above-average rainfall anticipated from January–February in the region, particularly in coastal areas of northern Ecuador, may reduce physical access and pose additional constraints to humanitarian operations (C3S accessed 07/12/2023; ECMWF accessed 07/12/23; WMO accessed 07/12/2023).

During the first half of 2024, El Niño may aggravate the humanitarian conditions of communities exposed to armed violence in the region. The anticipated above-average rainfall between January–February may trigger flooding and displacements (C3S accessed 07/12/2023; ECMWF accessed 07/12/23; WMO accessed 07/12/2023; PL 01/12/2023). Heavy rains, in combination with above-average temperatures, may also increase the incidence of dengue (IRI accessed 08/12/2023; Sippy et al. 06/05/2019).

Crisis to watch 2: migration in the Colombia-Ecuador border

Map 2. Location of the Darien Gap



Source: CFR (22/06/2022)

Context overview

The Americas region is experiencing an unprecedented increase in mixed migration movements¹ in several Central and South American countries, with many migrants and asylum seekers trying to reach the US (PI 16/09/2023). Colombia is a key place of transit for migrants and asylum seekers travelling across South America, since the only land crossing between South and Central America is in Colombia's border with Panama through the Darien Gap, as presented in Map 2.

There are information gaps regarding the number and nationalities of migrants and asylum seekers crossing the Colombia-Ecuador border. Although there are official migration checkpoints in the area, many migrants and asylum seekers cross through illegal passes, leaving no official trace in Colombia's government records.

459,000 people crossed the Darien Gap between January–November 2023. The main nationalities of these migrants and asylum seekers are Venezuelan (317,100), Ecuadorian (54,100), Haitian (44,100), and Colombian (17,600) (SNM accessed 19/12/2023). Those coming from countries south of Colombia, such as Chile, Ecuador, and Venezuela, are the most likely to cross the Colombia-Ecuador border.

The border is the main entry point to Colombia for an estimated 39% of migrants and asylum seekers with irregular status. Ipiales municipality in Nariño is one of the main entry points. The main nationalities of migrants and asylum seekers with irregular status entering Colombia (through all borders) were Venezuelan (204,900), Haitian (40,580), and Ecuadorian (42,900) as at August 2023 (Migración Colombia 12/09/2023). Among these are Venezuelan migrants returning from the south of the continent towards Colombia, Venezuela, and the US; families from Haiti; and extracontinental migration from countries such as China, Vietnam, and several African countries (PGN 22/10/2023).

Armed groups on both sides of the border benefit from the migration situation by offering smuggling services, often through irregular crossings. People on the move are exposed to insecurity and climate-related risks, including homicides, threats, extortion, GBV, and diseases such as dengue. Some migrants and asylum seekers fall victim to sexual exploitation to secure food and other basic livelihoods (KII 25/10/2023). They are also exposed to human trafficking networks in the area, with especially high risks for children. Between 2022–2023, the number of children and adolescents crossing through the Darien Gap increased four times, from 21,700 to 88,600, making this population group one of the most affected. Children and adolescents account for 25% of migrants and asylum seekers in Latin America and the Caribbean (MMC 02/05/2023).

¹ Mixed migration refers to the cross-border movement of people, generally in an irregular manner, involving individuals and groups travelling alongside each other using similar routes and means of transport or facilitators but for different reasons. People travelling as part of mixed movements have different needs and profiles and may include asylum seekers, refugees, victims of trafficking, unaccompanied and separated children, stateless people, and migrants (including those with irregular status or in vulnerable situations, as those mentioned in this report) (UNHCR accessed 19/12/2023).

Migrant and asylum seekers are exposed to protection threats, such as forced disappearances, massacres, and homicides, forced displacements, loan sharks, recruitment for drug-trafficking activities, human trafficking, and exploitation. Between 2014 and May 2022, 6,400 people on the move were reported as disappeared in Latin America and the Caribbean (Protection Cluster/R4V 16/02/2023).

Humanitarian organisations in Colombia have been providing assistance to migrants and asylum seekers on the Colombia-Ecuador border, including food assistance, hygiene kits, transportation, shelter, health, orientation related to migration services, GBV-related support, and access to economic alternatives (GTRM 06/12/2023). In the first semester of 2023, 111,200 people received assistance from El Grupo Interagencial sobre Flujos Migratorios Mixtos in Nariño, including shelter and food (GIFMM/R4V 26/09/2023). From January–August 2023, humanitarian organisations in Colombia assisted over 66,800 people on matters related to GBV, including training on how to prevent and mitigate GBV, provide support for victims, and prevent GBV among migrants and asylum seekers. 71% of the people who received this assistance were women, and 11% were girls (3iSolution et al. 07/11/2023). In Ecuador, as at September 2023, humanitarian organisations had reached 155,600 migrants and refugees, 21,800 of whom were in transit. The assistance provided involved shelter, protection (including child and GBV protection), food security, WASH, transportation, and cash assistance (GTRM 24/10/2023).

KEY DRIVERS AND OUTLOOKS OF THE CRISIS

Ecuador and Colombia are transit countries for migrants and asylum seekers, which, coupled with the security crisis on both sides of the border, exposes this population group to protection risks such as threats, extortion, and GBV. Violence on both sides of the border also contributes to increasing migration flows.

It is crucial to comprehend how crises develop in the main countries of origin to understand the drivers of migration and analyse their potential humanitarian impacts. The current humanitarian crisis at the border between Colombia and Ecuador is likely to continue if migration flows persist. The social and economic dynamics driving migration from South to North America are not expected to change considerably in the next 6–12 months.

US: legal changes and visa requirements

Legal changes in the US migration system have contributed to increased migration movements. The expiration of Title 42, which allowed expedited deportation from the US, and the creation of new legal pathways for migration might have contributed to increased migration (NYT 29/10/2023). Mexico and several Central American countries also imposed visa requirements on Venezuelan citizens in 2022, spurring many migrant and asylum seekers unable to enter any of these countries legally to cross through the Darien Gap (HRW 10/10/2023).

Colombia: armed conflicts

Colombia's armed conflict has led to Colombian citizens and migrants or refugees hosted in Colombia moving towards Ecuador. From January–September 2023, 509 Colombian citizens were forcefully displaced to the Ecuadorian province of Esmeraldas, with the Ecuadorian authorities recognising 299 of them as refugees. In the same period, 452 Venezuelan citizens were forcefully displaced to the same province, 21 of whom were recognised as refugees (UNHCR 02/11/2023). These figures correspond to registered refugees and probably underestimate the actual number of Colombian citizens and migrants hosted in Colombia who have moved to Ecuador.

The persistence of clashes among armed groups, including fighting over the control of illegal economies, would continue to spur the movement of migrants and asylum seekers from Colombia into Ecuador.

Ecuador: insecurity and economic crisis

Besides the security crisis in Ecuador, its socioeconomic situation has also been an important driver of migration outside the country (UNCHR 20/06/2023). The COVID-19 pandemic heavily affected Ecuador's economy, with its GDP contracting by 7.8% in 2020. It grew by 4.2% in 2021, but this was not sufficient to return to pre-pandemic levels (CEPAL 2022). Ecuador's GDP is expected to grow by 2.3% in 2023, higher than the Latin American average but still at a modest pace (CEPAL 09/2023). Ecuador's poverty rate reached 27% in the first semester of 2023, 2% more than in 2022. The extreme poverty rate reached 10.8% (Bloomberg 26/07/2023). Increasing violence and political instability have also contributed to increased migration from Ecuador. Over 29,000 Ecuadorian migrants and asylum seekers crossed the Darien Gap in 2022, and another 54,100 did so until November 2023 (UNHCR 20/06/2023; Migración Panama 2023). The most likely route for these migrants and asylum seekers is through the Colombia-Ecuador border.

In Ecuador, the security and economic situation will likely remain in its current state. The new President took office in November 2023, the results of whose security and economic agenda would likely not materialise enough in the short term to either considerably reduce the violence in the border area with Colombia or reduce migration outside the country. If the current situation remains stable, it would, at most, maintain the flow of migrant and asylum seekers coming out of Ecuador and into Colombia at current levels, keeping them exposed to protection, health, GBV, and other risks.

Venezuela: economic instability, political turbulence, and humanitarian struggles

The crisis in Venezuela can be characterised as a multifaceted humanitarian, economic, and political crisis, leading to a significant number of Venezuelan migrants and asylum seekers in other countries, mostly in South America, including Colombia, Ecuador, and their border area (CSIS 27/11/2023). By August 2023, more than seven million people had left Venezuela so far because of the crisis, with Colombia receiving the most Venezuelan migrants and asylum seekers (2.9 million in total) (R4V 07/09/2023). The crisis has put significant strain on host countries, leading to challenges such as limited access to legal documentation, basic services, and economic opportunities, as well as rising xenophobia. Over half of the population in Venezuela lives in poverty, with rural areas suffering disproportionately and lacking access to electricity (ACAPS 19/04/2023). The crisis has also exposed Venezuelans to increased risks, including human trafficking, exploitation, and precarious living conditions (UNHCR accessed 13/12/2023).

The crisis in Venezuela has led to a complex situation in which some Venezuelan migrants and asylum seekers exit the country while others return, oftentimes momentarily. From July–September 2023, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru witnessed significantly more exits of Venezuelan citizens in their northern borders than in their southern ones, indicating a movement of Venezuelan migrants and asylum seekers from the south to the north of the continent, with many of them likely crossing the Colombia-Ecuador border. Many Venezuelans exiting Ecuador reported that they intended to stop first in Venezuela to visit family and friends, obtain documentation, and, in some cases, leave children with relatives before initiating their transit towards Mexico and the US (R4V 25/10/2023).

In Venezuela, the multifaceted crisis continues with little prospect of change. In September 2023, the Venezuelan Government signed an agreement with the opposition to hold free and fair elections in 2024, with an opposition candidate to run against Venezuela's current President. Following this agreement, the Venezuelan opposition organised primary elections, the results of which were not recognised by the Venezuelan Government, putting in question its position regarding the signed agreement (NYT 31/10/2023). The Venezuelan Government has also escalated a conflict with neighbouring Guyana for the control of the disputed Esequibo region. The Venezuelan Government has even appointed an authority in this disputed region and mobilised troops in an area close to the border with Guyana (El País 06/12/2023). With the future of democratic transition in question and a possible escalation of international conflict, it is unlikely that the crisis in Venezuela will ease in the short term, keeping the flows of Venezuelan migrants and asylum seekers steady. As a result, the humanitarian impacts on Venezuelan migrants would continue.

Haiti and Chile: Haitian crisis and recent migration route from Chile northwards

Haiti is currently experiencing a complex political, economic, and social crisis. Gang violence has increased, leading to a rise in cases of homicide, kidnapping, and rape (ACAPS 02/06/2023). The country is also facing its third consecutive year of economic recession, coupled with soaring inflation, which has resulted in food inflation and reduced incomes (OCHA 17/03/2023). As at September 2023, 4.9 million people were estimated to be experiencing food insecurity (WFP accessed 14/12/2023). Natural hazards, such as earthquakes and droughts, aggravate the situation (ACAPS 02/08/2023; WFP 31/03/2023). Political and economic instability in Haiti has also triggered mass migration, with many Haitians moving to South American countries such as Chile. As at October 2021, around 180,000 Haitians were living in Chile (AP 14/10/2021).

While some Haitians have moved to South American countries, changes in economic opportunities and an increase in xenophobia in Chile have resulted in these migrants and

asylum seekers choosing to move north instead (HRW accessed 19/12/2023; NYT 28/09/2021). In the first few months of 2023, more than 23,000 Haitian migrants out of approximately 100,000 people crossed the Darien Gap, including 2,500 children of Haitians born in Chile (UN 14/04/2023). The most likely route for these Haitian migrants and asylum seekers from Chile to the Darien Gap includes the Colombia-Ecuador border.

In Haiti, the crisis, characterised to be structural, worsened with the assassination of its President in 2021 (BBC 01/02/2023). Haiti remains the poorest country in Latin America and the Caribbean and is among the poorest in the world. It is highly vulnerable to climate hazards, which will further increase with climate change. Since August 2023, Haiti has been experiencing a new cholera outbreak, which adds to high maternal and infant mortality rates (WB accessed 19/10/2023). There are no indications that either this crisis or the situation of Haitians living in Chile and other South American countries will change, maintaining the flow of migrants and asylum seekers through the region and the humanitarian impacts affecting them.

REGIONAL OUTLOOK

At the regional level, several Latin American Governments have declared changes in their migratory policies and a willingness to move away from coercive measures to stop migration. In October 2023, the representatives of 12 Latin American countries met in Mexico to discuss the region's stance on migration. The declaration produced by this meeting calls for respecting the right to migrate, protecting the lives and dignity of migrants and asylum seekers, and including the creation of options for permanent regularisation (EFE 22/10/2023). While the impact of this political declaration remains uncertain, some countries, such as Costa Rica and Panama, have already implemented measures to transport migrants and asylum seekers northwards within their borders, potentially improving their conditions (NYT 08/11/2023).

HUMANITARIAN IMPACT OUTLOOK

The maintenance of current migration flows will continue to expose migrants and asylum seekers to armed conflict and gang violence in the border region, compounded by the limited capacity of local authorities and humanitarian organisations to address consecutive needs. There is a growing number of migrants and asylum seekers with insufficient economic resources, which leads them to extend their stays in certain cities instead of continuing their journey, posing challenges for humanitarian assistance, particularly in sectors such as food, shelter, water, and health, including mental health (MMC 02/05/2023).

The humanitarian needs of migrants and asylum seekers travelling across the border are mostly related to assistance with migratory legal processes, shelter, food, education, WASH, and GBV (KII 25/10/2023). The biggest barriers that migrants and asylum seekers in Nariño have been facing are related to health access, enrollment to social programmes, education, and access to financial and justice services. 38% of a sample of Venezuelan migrants and asylum seekers in Nariño, 60% of whom were women, shared that they did not have access to the health system, 63% experienced food insecurity, and 55% of children ages 12–17 were not attending school. 98% experienced discrimination because of their nationality (GIFMM/R4V 13/12/2023). The presence of armed groups and gangs entails protection risks for migrants and asylum seekers, who are particularly at risk of being used for labour and sexual exploitation, fraud, and theft (KII 25/10/2023).

Among migrants and asylum seekers, children are exposed to risks such as GBV (e.g. teenage pregnancy, rape, sexual exploitation), the risks associated with minors travelling alone, lack of documentation, discrimination, child labour, armed group recruitment, and human trafficking (GIFMM et al. 11/12/2023).

El Niño would also affect the conditions of migrants and asylum seekers. OCHA has declared prioritising the bordering zones of Nariño and Putumayo, which are prone to droughts, deficient water management, and recurrent heatwaves during the dry season. These conditions can cause diseases such as dengue and Zika, particularly affecting mothers and infants and aggravating chronic diseases (OCHA 24/10/2023).



ANNEX I. COMPARATIVE STATISTICS ON THE COLOMBIA-ECUADOR BORDER AREA

Table 1. Colombia's southern border statistics: Nariño and Putumayo departments

	NARIÑO	PUTUMAYO	COLOMBIA (TOTAL)
Population (2023 projection)	1,699,570	383,042	52,215,503
% of the population living in rural areas (2023 projection)	56.00%	48.20%	23.80%
Rural electricity coverage (2018)	83.39%	51.89%	81.39%
% of rural households with access to improved water sources (2022)	59.90%	36.00%	62.70%
% of rural households with access to improved sanitation facilities (2022)	82.10%	86.70%	79.80%
Ethnicity (2018)	Indigenous = 16.34% Afro-Colombian = 14.13%	Indigenous = 23.95% Afro-Colombian = 3.22%	Indigenous = 4.28% Afro-Colombian = 6.77%
% of the population in poverty according to the Multidimensional Poverty Index (2022)	17.60%	20.80%	12.90%
% of the population in poverty according to the Monetary Poverty Line (2022)	40.80%	No data	36.60%
Share of the population experiencing food insecurity (2022)	37.10%	24.40%	28.10%
Homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants (2023)	20.35	44.11	26.85
Unemployment rate in the capital city	10.00% (July–September 2023 average)	No data	9.30% (July–September 2023 average)

Sources: DANE (accessed 22/11/2023 a); DANE (accessed 22/11/2023 b); DANE (accessed 22/11/2023 c); DANE (22/11/2023, 04/07/2023, 23/05/2023, 05/04/2023, 22/03/2023); MinJusticia (accessed 22/11/2023); ART et al. (12/2021)



Table 2. Ecuador's northern border statistics: Esmeraldas, Carchi, and Sucumbíos provinces

INDICATOR	CARCHI	ESMERALDAS	SUCUMBÍOS	ECUADOR (TOTAL)
Population (2022)	172,828	553,900	199,014	16,938,986
% of the population living in rural areas (2022)	49.1%	55.1%	59.3%	36.9%
Rural electricity coverage (2022)	96.5%	91%	89.4%	94.9%
Rural drinking water coverage (2022)	87.8%	40%	42.2%	66.9%
Rural sewerage coverage (2023)	60.1%	10.8%	20.1%	35.8%
Ethnicity (2022)	Indigenous = 4.2% Afro-Ecuadorian = 5.2%	Indigenous = 3.4% Afro-Ecuadorian = 53.8%	Indigenous = 16.3% Afro-Ecuadorian = 4.6%	Indigenous = 7.7% Afro Ecuadorian = 4.8%
Population in poverty according to the Multidimensional Poverty Index (2022)	32.8%	57.1%	51.5%	38.1%
Population in poverty according to the Monetary Poverty Line (2022)	38.1%	48%	45.7%	25.2%
Share of the population experiencing food insecurity (2022)	No data	No data	No data	15.4%
Homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants (2023)	2.14	37.60	17.35	35 (2023 projection)
Unemployment rate (2022)	5.9%	9.1%	4.5%	4.4%

Sources: INEC (accessed 22/11/2023 a); INEC (accessed 22/11/2023 b); INEC (12/2022; 28/02/2023); InfoMIES (accessed 22/11/2023); Primicias (06/10/2022); OECO (09/2023)