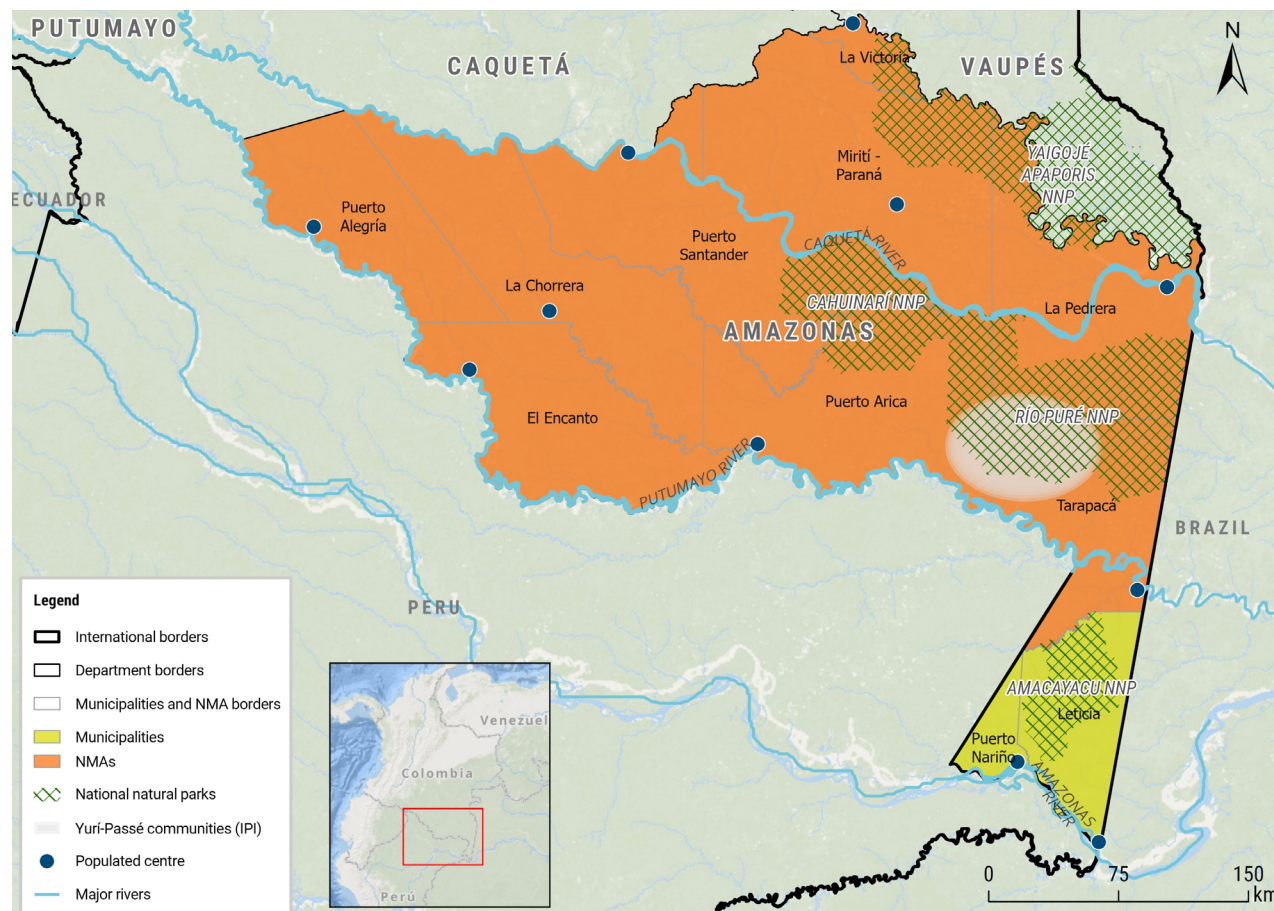


### OVERVIEW

The Amazon Rainforest, the world's largest tropical rainforest, spans approximately seven million square kilometres and crosses nine Latin American countries, including Colombia. In southeastern Colombia, the rainforest represents two-thirds of the country's total forested area, covering over 480,000km<sup>2</sup> (EIA 26/06/2019). This expansive region encompasses about six departments, with Amazonas department being the largest in the country, and over half of its population (51.7%) is indigenous. Amazonas department has faced a historical crisis, marked by longstanding issues rooted in the lack of state presence. The department struggles with poor infrastructure, limited basic services, insufficient economic development, and the presence of non-state armed groups and transnational organised crime groups. These have led to widespread poverty, exclusion, marginalisation, and protection issues, such as recruitment, child exploitation, homicides, threats, extortion, gender-based violence (GBV), and forced displacement (iMMAP/OCHA 09/01/2024; KII 12/12/2023; DP 11/05/2023).

The connection between climate and conflict in the Colombian Amazon manifests through a complex circle. Climate change impacts, such as rising temperatures and shifting rainfall patterns, directly affect livelihoods, especially those of indigenous communities. This, in turn, becomes a catalyst for conflicts around scarce resources, contested land, and economic opportunities. Activities such as illegal resource exploitation accelerate environmental degradation. Illicit economic practices linked to non-state armed groups and corruption further aggravate tensions. The intricate interplay of these elements creates a cycle in which climate change triggers conflicts, and these conflicts, in a feedback loop, further intensify environmental degradation, posing a significant threat to human security (GI-TOC et al. 03/11/2023; NUPI/ SIPRI 31/10/2022; WWF et al. 30/09/2021).

Map 1. Rivers, non-municipalised areas (NMAs), and municipalities in Amazonas department



Sources: ACAPS using data from DANE (accessed 16/01/24); WB (accessed 16/01/24); IMMAP (01/03/2022)

## About this report

**Aim:** This report aims to explain elements necessary to understanding the humanitarian crisis in Colombia's Amazonas department, with a specific focus on the impacts on the indigenous population. It also presents the differentiated humanitarian situation for each territorial axis within the department.

**Limitations and information gaps:** The Amazon crisis is characterised by a lack of quantitative data from humanitarian non-governmental sources supporting the many testimonies and warnings from different indigenous organisations about the humanitarian crisis and its impact on the Amazonian population. The only quantitative data available comes from the Colombian Government, but such is not up to date and likely underreported, especially the violent events that various non-state armed groups perpetrate on the population. While the wealth of qualitative accounts and continuous advocacy shed light on the severity of the situation, there is a lack of information regarding homicide rates related to the armed conflict, the specific number of children recruited, and instances of GBV. The lack of available disaggregated data on gender, age, and disability in Colombia hinders the ability to understand and address the specific needs and experiences of certain population groups.

**Methodology:** This analysis draws on a comprehensive review of secondary data, including reports and documents from both international and Colombian organisations, as well as from researchers. To enrich this data, key informant interviews were conducted between September–December 2023 with professionals from UN agencies, INGOs, and Colombian civil society organisations. Those interviewed possessed a wide range of expertise, from humanitarian sector workers and academics to individuals working directly with indigenous communities within the territory.

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## KEY FINDINGS

- Amazonas department faces significant challenges related to its vast geography, dense jungle, and scattered population, resulting in precarious infrastructure and access difficulties. The concentration of institutions in urban areas, such as Leticia and Puerto Nariño, leaves non-municipalised areas (NMAs) without state attention, affecting the coverage of basic services.
- Climate change and the El Niño phenomenon increase the frequency of adverse and extreme weather events, such as floods, landslides, heatwaves, forest fires, and reduced river flows, affecting the population's livelihoods, water access, and food security.
- The presence of non-state armed groups results in several protection needs, particularly affecting indigenous communities, indigenous peoples in isolation (IPI), children, environmental defenders, and park rangers. Porous borders with Brazil and Peru create complex regional dynamics, facilitating the movement of transnational criminal groups.
- Weak health infrastructure, violence associated with illegal activities and armed groups, and limited access to medical services contribute to the health crisis in the department. Water contamination from activities such as illegal mining leads to health issues, including acute respiratory infections and diarrhoeal diseases. These challenges then affect food availability and clean water access, contributing to food insecurity and malnutrition in the region.
- The region experiences high suicide rates, particularly in indigenous communities, with associated factors including the degradation of natural habitats, substance abuse, and loss of cultural identity.
- Inadequate transportation infrastructure, armed violence, and low population density challenge humanitarian operations and access in communities in need.
- The humanitarian needs identified across the territorial axes include challenges in health, WASH, and severe acute malnutrition (ACH et al. 01/07/2022). Each axis, however, presents specific needs demanding tailored interventions (KII 06/12/2023).
- In Caquetá axis, there are pressing issues related to river navigation, drug trafficking, and mining activities. Putumayo axis grapples with non-state armed group presence, mercury pollution, and extensive coca cultivation. Amazonas axis faces reduced Amazon River flow, affecting mobility and food prices and posing protection, child protection, and GBV risks. Looking ahead, these needs and impacts are likely to worsen.

## KEY CONCEPTS

**NMAs**, unlike districts under municipal jurisdiction, have their own administration and government, overseen by a magistrate appointed by the departmental government. In Amazonas, there are nine such areas, including El Encanto, La Chorrera, Puerto Alegría, and others, all managed by the Amazonas departmental government. These areas face high access constraints and incur high mobility costs (ACH et al. 01/07/2022).

**IPIs** are those who, in the exercise of their self-determination, avoid any contact with external societies (ACT 17/06/2021). They are currently subject to conditions of extreme vulnerability to threats and contact (GTI-PIACI accessed 16/01/2024).

**National natural parks** are extensive areas that house ecosystems representative of the country's natural diversity. They are protected within the national territory with the goal of conserving biodiversity, natural resources, and cultural heritage (PNNC accessed 29/01/2024).

**Environmentally protected areas** are geographically defined areas that have been designated, regulated, and managed to achieve specific conservation goals. Beyond conservation objectives, these areas may also serve additional functions, such as providing educational, recreational, or cultural benefits (PNNC accessed 29/01/2024).

**Forest reserves** are wooded areas established for the conservation of forests and biodiversity. They can be publicly or privately owned and may be managed by the Government, private organisations, or local communities (MADS accessed 29/01/2024).

**Territorial axis:** in Amazonas department, the Amazonas, Caquetá, and Putumayo Rivers are key to understanding the region's dynamics. These rivers, vital for transport, also form natural boundaries that, given the region's limited infrastructure and dense jungles, challenge community mobility. This topography results in three distinct territorial axes: northern Caquetá axis, central Putumayo axis, and southern Amazonas axis. It is important to note that these rivers also hold cultural significance, with most people identifying as Yuruparí (north), people of the centre, and people of the water (south). This perspective facilitates a deeper, more specific understanding of Amazonas, avoiding oversimplification (KII 06/12/2023).

**Indigenous health service providers** are organisations or individuals who deliver health services to indigenous communities in Colombia. Members of the indigenous communities themselves lead and manage these providers, ensuring that services are culturally appropriate and responsive to each community's specific needs. These providers typically offer basic primary care services, including general medical consultations, vaccination, maternal and child healthcare, and health education (AIC-EPSI accessed 17/01/2024).

**Transnational organised crime groups** are networks of individuals engaged in illegal activities across national borders. They operate for financial profit and use violence, corruption, and intimidation to achieve their goals. Transnational organised crime is not stagnant but is an ever-changing industry, adapting to markets and creating new forms of crime (SIPRI 02/09/2022; RIEC 15/03/2018)

## CONTEXT OVERVIEW

Leticia and Puerto Nariño are the two municipalities in the Amazonas department, with Leticia serving as the capital. Table 1 highlights the general lack of availability of basic services for Amazonas department's rural population (49%) when compared to the national level (24%). These findings align with a study conducted by the indigenous institute Sinchi, which reported that, despite potential improvement in community life conditions and wellbeing through public services, only an average of 17.8% of the indigenous households analysed in the department had basic public services available (SINCHI/MADS 2020).

By late 2023, communities and humanitarian organisations began to report a significant reduction in the flow of the Amazonas River in southern Amazonas department, aggravated by climate hazards and El Niño. This reduction jeopardises livelihoods, as some indigenous communities depend entirely on fishing, as well as transportation and access to food and clean water (3iSolution/IMMAP 04/01/2024 a; 3iSolution/IMMAP 04/01/2024 b; Greenpeace 26/10/2023). The intensification of resource grabbing and illegal activities – such as drug trafficking and illegal mining by various non-state armed groups – contribute not only to environmental degradation and deforestation in the region but also to escalating violence (KII 12/12/2023; Mongabay 14/10/2021). These impacts bring about significant changes in indigenous peoples and rural communities' living conditions and relationships with their specific territories. Such impacts also worsen the humanitarian crisis, with accelerated climate change acting as a contributing factor. Indigenous communities in Amazonas department bear the brunt of these challenges, facing disproportionate impacts and increasing vulnerability.

Table 1. Baseline information on Amazonas department's population statistics and access to basic services (municipalities and NMAs)

	LETICIA	PUERTO NARIÑO	NMAS	AMAZONAS DEPARTMENT	NATIONAL
Population (2024 projection)	54,927	10,928	20,463	86,318	52,695,952
% of the population living in rural areas (2024 projection)	28	60	100	49	24
% Share of ethnicity (2018)	Indigenous = 43.67 Afro-Colombian = 1	Indigenous = 96.25 Afro-Colombian = 0.37	Indigenous = 90.04 Afro-Colombian = 0.73	Indigenous = 86.22 Afro-Colombian = 0.69	Indigenous = 14.31 Afro-Colombian = 7.5
% Rural drinking water coverage (2018)	16.7	7.4	12.3	12.3	62.7*
% of rural sewerage coverage (2018)	1.8	0.99	8	4.9	79.8*
% of rural population in poverty according to the Multidimensional Poverty Index (2018)	67.8	79.2	87	84.2	38.6
% of rural scholar non-attendance (2018)	8.3	17.5	16	15.6	5.3
% of rural population with barriers to health service access (2018)	6.8	6.8	12	11.1	7.8
% of rural electricity coverage (2018)	83.6	78.8	30	39.1	81.39
Share of rural population experiencing food insecurity (2022)	–	–	–	28.4	32.5

\*2022

Sources: DANE (accessed 10/01/2024 a); DANE (accessed 10/01/2024 b); DANE (accessed 10/01/2024 c); DANE (accessed 29/01/2024); DANE (22/03/2023 a, 22/03/2023 b); DANE (accessed 202); ACAPS (22/12/2023).

Note: the figures for the indicators in the NMA column represent a calculated average of all nine NMAs in the department.

## DRIVERS

### Climate hazards

The Amazonas department is exposed to frequent floods and droughts. In 2023, indigenous communities identified heatwaves, floods, and droughts as the most significant events linked to extreme natural phenomena. Heatwaves affect children's education and agriculture, causing a decrease in crop productivity and reducing food availability in the short and medium term. Changes in river levels – a result of both droughts and floods – force fish to adjust their breeding seasons and migrations, altering their availability to indigenous communities (KII 23/01/2024). These impacts were specifically analysed in the community of El Vergel in Leticia municipality, comprising indigenous people from the Tikuna, Cocoma, and Yagua ethnic groups (3iSolution/IMMAP 04/01/2024).

### Non-state armed group presence

Networks of thousands of rivers enable non-state armed groups and transnational organised crime groups to move freely, shielded from authorities by the dense forest cover. At the porous and challenging-to-control borders, different non-state armed groups are in fierce competition for dominance in and exploitation of the Amazon as they look for control over the region's abundant resources (InfoAmazonia 03/08/2023). Operating in both the Amazon Jungle and the prisons of various border countries, the economic activities of such non-state armed groups vary, ranging from drug trafficking and mining to land occupation and timber trade (GI-TOC et al. 03/11/2023).

Certain non-state armed groups from Colombia and Brazil have a long history of activities in the Amazon.

- Founded in Colombia in the 1960s, the National Liberation Army (ELN) became Colombia's largest guerrilla organisation after the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-



EP) demobilised in 2016. While the ELN has not been traditionally prevalent in the Amazon, it has expanded its presence in Venezuela, using border regions for strategic purposes (ICG 14/12/2020). The ELN strategically operates on both sides of the Colombia-Venezuela Amazonian border, mainly controlling illegal gold mining.

- FARC-EP dissidents emerged from their opposition to the Colombian peace process (InSight Crime 20/10/2022). In the Amazon, dissident groups such as La Segunda Marquetalia and the Estado Mayor Central take advantage of weak control and available illegal economies to expand across borders (GI-TOC et al. 03/11/2023).
- Brazil's Primeiro Comando da Capital, initially focused on drug trafficking, has rapidly broadened its territorial and economic control, extending its influence in the Bolivian Amazon and having a tacit presence in Colombia (FIU 10/2021).
- Comando Vermelho, originating in Brazil, was initially a drug-trafficking organisation but has evolved into a broader criminal network present in Colombia and Paraguay.

Drugs are transported via river to the triborder area shared by Brazil, Colombia, and Peru, as well as by individuals carrying backpacks overland to reach the Brazilian border (GI-TOC et al. 03/11/2023).

While these are the principal armed groups, emerging non-state armed groups and transnational organised crime groups also contest the territory and its illicit economies (GI-TOC et al. 03/11/2023). An example of this is the non-state armed group known as Los Comandos de la Frontera, who in recent years have transitioned in recent years from sporadic intrusions to a more deliberate presence. They have set up camps, enlisted new members, and consolidated their authority over specific areas in Peru, notably Pacora, as well as along the border regions of Ecuador (GI-TOC et al. 03/11/2023; EE 14/03/2024). With the COVID-19 pandemic, countries closed their borders, but criminal enterprises – unrestrained by international boundaries – increased their control as governments limited their actions in the Amazon. Remote areas, particularly those near borders, have transformed into zones where these networks converge, participate in illicit trade, intensify conflicts, cross borders to evade law enforcement, and expand their illegal economic operations (InfoAmazonia 03/08/2023).

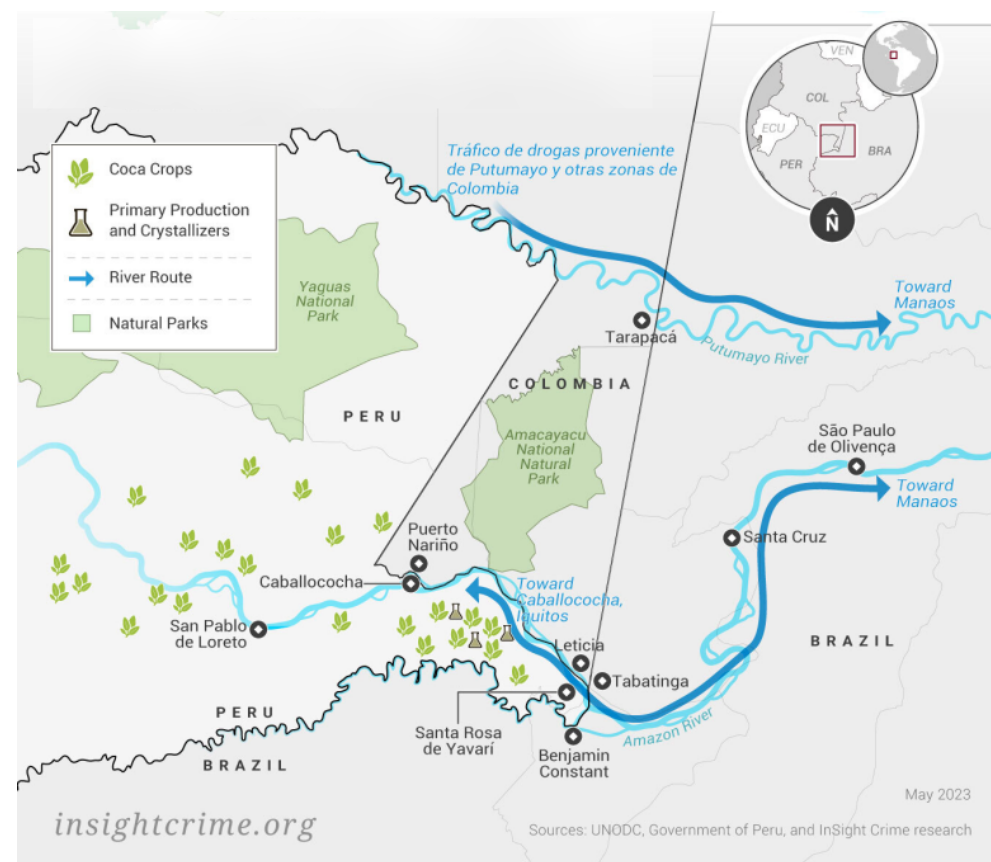
## Illegal economies

In the Amazon, various factors, such as the lack of infrastructure, basic services, education, and economic development, have created an environment where poverty, exclusion, and marginalisation prevail. In this situation, informal and illicit economic activities tend to become the population's primary means of subsistence (KII 27/12/2023). Although activities such as illegal mining and deforestation have existed for many years, external factors – such

as the pandemic and increased global demand – have fuelled their growth. With the increasing convergence of illicit economies, such as drug trafficking and illegal gold extraction, the line between legal and illegal businesses, and sometimes between state and non-state armed groups, has become blurred (GI-TOC et al. 03/11/2023).

## Drug trafficking

Map 2. Drug-trafficking routes in the triborder area between Brazil, Colombia, and Peru



Source: InSight Crime (08/08/2023)

Coca is a native plant of the Amazon with numerous traditional uses and significant cultural importance to indigenous peoples. The global demand for cocaine skyrocketed during the 1980s and 1990s, making drug trafficking a major conflict driver in Colombia. While not one of the country's strongest coca-producing centres, southern Amazonas department, in the triborder region where Brazil, Colombia, and Peru converge, maintains its historical position as a transit corridor for cocaine (InSight Crime 08/08/2023). While Colombia is a leading producer of coca, significant cultivation activities are also observed in the Amazon region of Peru. In recent years, coca cultivation and processing have increased and solidified along the Peru border. According to the Peruvian environmental NGO Pro-Purús, by mid-2023, there were 85 clandestine landing strips in the Central Jungle of Peru, indicating the expansion of the coca-growing area, particularly notable in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic (Propurus 17/08/2023; GI-TOC et al. 03/11/2023).

The hundreds of rivers and clandestine airstrips scattered throughout the region provide ample opportunities for trafficking. Non-state armed groups use various seaports in Brazil, as well as in Guyana and Suriname, to export most of the cocaine to Europe and West Africa (GI-TOC et al. 03/11/2023). A 2023 UNODC study highlighted the links between corruption, violence, and the reinvestment of drug money in other industries, sometimes legal ones, causing environmental damage, such as to livestock farming and agriculture. While cocaine trafficking dominates the drug trade in the region, cannabis trafficking is also present (UNODC 2023).

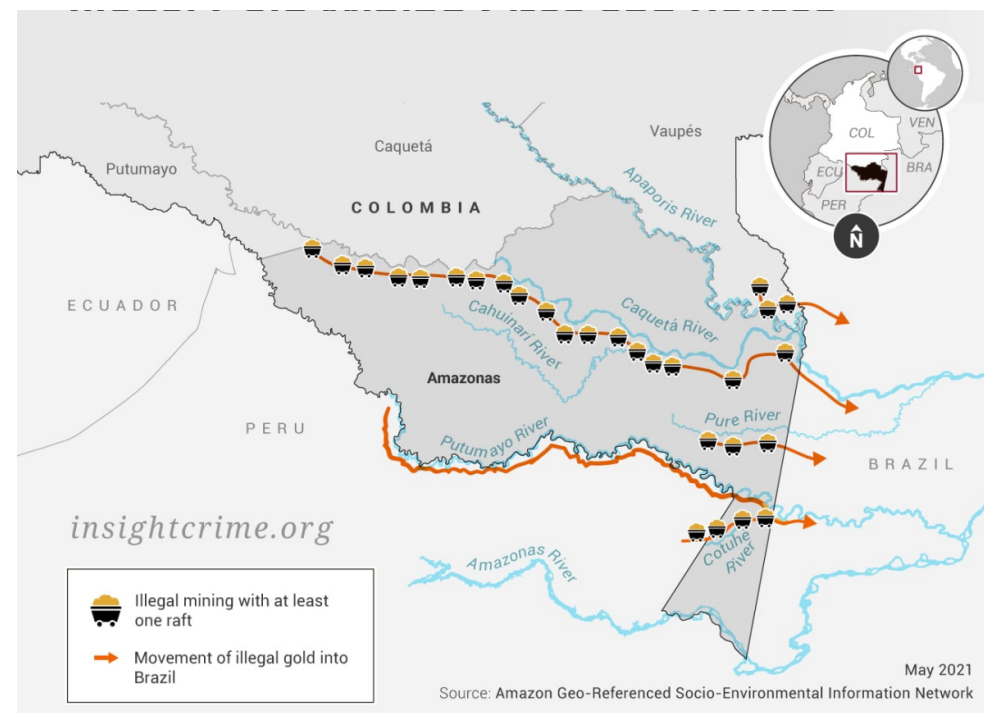
### Illegal mining

On the Puré River in 2022, the number of mining rafts increased by over 1,000% compared to 2020, when 25 were reported (EE 09/04/2023). Illegal mining has been a key income source for non-state armed groups in Colombia since the late 1990s. In the following decade, while the Government promoted mining bids for large companies, illegal mining by armed groups grew exponentially, accompanied by violence and environmental damage. Since then, the illegal extraction of minerals, primarily gold, has continued to expand throughout the country. During the pandemic, when the country's borders were closed, the presence of illegal mining between Colombia and Brazil extended over several kilometres (InSight Crime 08/09/2021).

Like other illegal economies, gold extraction in the Amazon follows economic boom cycles. The mineral's high market value in national and international markets, aggravated by the economic instability resulting from the pandemic, is leading to a continuous increase in mining operations on the Caquetá, Puré, Cahuinari, Putumayo, and Cotuhé Rivers. Mining in these areas emerges as a means of subsistence for peripheral communities lacking other

income sources, such as indigenous people and farmers. Profits from mineral exploitation and transportation attract armed groups linked to both armed conflict and organised crime (DP 26/01/2021).

Map 3. Illegal mining routes in Amazonas department



Source: InSight Crime (08/09/2021)

Armed groups are mainly involved in the extraction phase, during which they extort small miners. They charge for the entry of machinery, mercury, and gasoline to illegal mining sites. In some cases, miners pay fixed taxes just to operate in a territory under a specific group's control. In other cases, the groups add a percentage to this fixed fee for each piece of machinery introduced. These taxes can be paid in gold instead of cash (InSight Crime 08/09/2021).

## Deforestation and environmental degradation

Amazonas department has seen a surge in forest razing and land clearance amid continuing unrest in the countryside. The rate of tree loss is tied to conflict and violence. These ties are complex. Deforestation began to rise soon after the FARC-EP, which had operated mostly from rural areas, left the territory. In areas where the group operated, they tended to restrict deforestation. The armed group's departure from their strongholds provided an opportunity for other non-state armed groups and transnational organised crime groups to assert control. With state authority in the countryside still feeble, such groups pushed back to the forest to expand enterprises such as coca growing, cattle ranching, illegal gold mining, and logging, sometimes working with legal businesses (ICG 04/11/2021). Deforestation significantly increased, driven or supported by both emerging and established armed groups frequently engaged in fierce competition with each other.

Many IDPs and conflict-affected individuals face severe poverty and resort to forest clearing in their search for livelihoods (DP 26/01/2021). These livelihoods include livestock and agriculture, commercial logging, infrastructure development, and monocultures (EIA 26/06/2019). Cattle ranching emerges as the primary driver of deforestation (KII 29/09/2023). Despite being part of legal supply chains, it has come to surpass coca cultivation, illicit logging, and illegal gold mining in causing tree loss. While ranching is ostensibly a legitimate business, the corrupt and criminal practices of non-state armed groups and transnational organised crime groups drive increased tree loss, and the Government struggles to curb their activities within the sector. Illegally obtained land for grazing is often located in environmentally protected areas (ICG 04/11/2021).

The recent surge in livestock farming has become an unaddressed issue, fuelled by influential politicians and businessmen (KII 29/09/2023). Although soil and environmental degradation make the region unsuitable for livestock, the practice has deep-rooted traditions and sustains the livelihoods of numerous farmers (Cambio accessed 08/02/2024). Critics argue that the state has historically allowed cattle ranching in environmentally protected areas (KII 12/12/2023). Cattle grazing is observed even in national parks, where it is illegal. The opacity in the bovine supply chain facilitates the laundering of illegally raised cattle. To bypass regulations, cows from national parks, for which the required certification cannot be obtained, are integrated into the legal supply chain. The lack of traceability contributes to funding armed groups. There are even claims of cattle trafficking from Venezuela, where they are cheaper and from which they are then moved into Colombian national parks and forest reserves (ICG 04/11/2021; Mongabay 27/05/2021).

Behind deforestation, there are dynamics extending far beyond the sale of timber or drug trade involvement. While deforestation may occur for the illicit sale of timber or coca

cultivation, ultimately, the logging and burning of vast hectares of Amazonian forest are carried out to illegally seize national lands and introduce them into the land market (Cambio accessed 08/02/2024).

Deforestation heightens the country's susceptibility to climate change by increasing exposure to the impacts of extreme weather events. With the loss of trees, the country's ecosystems have become less resilient to climate stresses, such as seasonal droughts associated with El Niño or challenges such as river sedimentation. Soil degradation amplifies the consequences of climate change-induced flooding and droughts, along with related disasters such as landslides (EIA 26/06/2019). The largely unregulated clearance of land serves as a pathway for armed and criminal groups to accumulate wealth and extend their influence into remote areas, posing a significant threat (ICG 04/11/2021).

## AGGRAVATING FACTORS

### Poor infrastructure

Amazonas is the largest department in Colombia and, as a result of its dense jungle conditions, scattered population, and challenging access, even through waterways, it is largely considered a remote territory (USAID/IMMAP 09/09/2021). Rivers, long and powerful tributaries of the Amazon River, traverse the territory, along with numerous lagoons and swampy areas, presenting an extensive plain with several low-relief features. These factors have led to the concentration of institutions in the municipalities of Leticia and Puerto Nariño. Leticia serves as the department's capital, while Puerto Nariño functions as a centre for trade and tourism. Consequently, this has resulted in large territorial expanses completely devoid of state attention. In NMAs, these variables are replicated: vast territories of difficult access, precarious infrastructure, isolated human settlements, and a weak or limited institutional presence (DP 26/01/2021; OCHA 05/06/2020). The territory's conditions and poor infrastructure create difficulties for the coverage of basic services for the population and pose challenges for humanitarian access.

### Impact of climate change

As a result of climate change, the region is projected to experience more extreme rainfall events leading to floods, landslides, and land erosion. Enhanced hot seasons are also expected to increase the risk of wildfires, with severe ecological and health impacts (WB 05/07/2021). Climate variability phenomena, such as El Niño and La Niña, contribute to the

increasing frequency and intensity of droughts, floods, heatwaves, and wildfires in Colombia. El Niño, which started in June 2023 and is expected to last until April 2024, is associated with unusually dry conditions, enhanced rainfall variability, and abnormally high temperatures in large parts of the country (IRI accessed 22/01/2024; IDEAM 19/02/2024; NOAA 05/02/2024). In February 2024, the Colombian Government highlighted the increasing risk of heatwaves and wildfires in the Amazon region. It warned of an unprecedented potential for fires in the area. The Government activated international protocols to foster cooperation and improve aerial firefighting capabilities (MADS 28/01/2024; Mongabay 26/01/2024; Semana 27/01/2024).

## Regional dynamics

Amid the forests and vast geography, national boundaries do not always hold significance for the people inhabiting the territory, including non-state armed groups (InSight Crime 08/08/2023). Amazonas department, which shares borders with Brazil and Peru, is vulnerable to the dynamics occurring in these countries' neighbouring municipalities. The fluidity of movement across these porous borders can amplify challenges, as interconnected regional dynamics transcend geopolitical constraints, affecting the local population and contributing to the complexity of the situation within the Amazon region. The impacts of transnational organised crime groups from Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela further complicate the security landscape (Amazon Underworld accessed 29/01/2024). The development and strengthening of these groups can have consequences for the department's population.

## Humanitarian access constraints

In the Amazon, the transportation infrastructure is inadequate, particularly in terms of the availability of roads and airports outside departmental capitals. This is attributed to the fact that forests cover 93% of the region, with 79% designated as indigenous reserves and protected areas (USAID/iMMAP 09/09/2021). These characteristics, coupled with vast distances and low population density, pose logistical challenges and hinder both humanitarian and government operations. Incidents of armed violence and seasonal hazards also significantly challenge humanitarian access. These events have triggered population displacements, leading to difficulties in reaching those in need of humanitarian assistance. Most displaced individuals have reported receiving only medical attention (OCHA 09/01/2024). In the NMAs, the overall absence of state and humanitarian institutions is pervasive, primarily attributed to restricted territorial access and low population density (OCHA 26/10/2023; ACH et al. 01/07/2022).

## IMPACTS

### Protection impact

The crisis has unleashed protection threats, significantly affecting Amazonian populations. To establish territorial boundaries, non-state armed groups are imposing behavioural patterns through violent repertoires, including recruitment, child exploitation, GBV, homicides, threats, extortion, and forced displacement (OCHA 09/01/2024; DP 11/05/2023). In this context, women and girls are at heightened risk of sexual exploitation (DP 26/01/2021). The Amazon territory, where armed conflict and natural hazards converge, witnesses an alarming confluence of risks for indigenous communities, migrants, children, rural communities, and environmental defenders (ACH et al. 01/07/2022).

**Children.** Multiple testimonies and alerts denounce the increase in child recruitment to armed groups (KII 12/12/2023; KII 22/11/2023; Infobae 23/05/2023). Below-average education coverage, high school absenteeism rates, and a high multidimensional poverty index increase the risk of recruitment, use, and exploitation of children in the Amazon. There is also significant underreporting of this phenomenon stemming from fear of reprisals, lack of awareness, or limited access to information on existing guidance, support, and protection pathways. The risk of child recruitment and sexual or economic exploitation in the context of illegal mining and transnational crime is significant (DP 26/01/2021; OCHA 20/06/2023). The ILO classifies any work that exposes children to sexual abuse (physically or psychologically) as among the worst forms of child labour and, as such, should be prohibited by ILO Convention No. 182 (ILO accessed 29/01/2024).

**Indigenous communities,** particularly IPI Yuri Passé communities, face increasing risks from the encroachment of illegal miners and different armed groups. Armed groups prefer to pass through the areas of isolated indigenous groups to avoid being seen by the Colombian armed forces (KII 06/12/2023; Mongabay 01/11/2023).

**Park rangers.** National parks, vital for biodiversity preservation, are experiencing a surge in threats against park rangers (KII 06/12/2023). Incidents reported from 2019–2023 reveal a concerning pattern, with park officials facing explicit threats, access prohibitions resulting from military actions, and displacement, particularly affecting the Sierra de la Macarena, Serranía del Chiribiquete, Tinigua, and La Paya parks (Cuestión Publica 18/10/2023; Mongabay 17/10/2023).

**Environmental defenders.** Colombia ranks among the world's most dangerous countries for environmental and territorial defenders. Over the past decade, at least 382 environmental defenders have been killed in the country, 159 of whom were indigenous inhabitants



(Mongabay 01/11/2023). Reported incidents include threats, looting, and theft at control posts, highlighting continuous challenges in safeguarding these areas (Cuestión Pública 18/10/2023). Acts of violence against defenders are inadequately investigated, often leading to impunity (GI-TOC et al. 03/11/2023).

## Impact on livelihoods, nutritious food availability, and water access in the Amazon

The current situation in Amazonas department has triggered a series of devastating impacts on the very foundations of life in the region, affecting the soil and water sources and compromising the availability of nutritious food, clean water, and livelihoods (ACH 24/12/2023). Activities such as livestock farming have exerted pressure on the soil and compacted the land, rendering it unusable and driving deforestation. Alongside deforestation, the consequences of expanding livestock farming in unsuitable pasture areas include increased CO2 emissions and a rapid loss of soil fertility (Cambio accessed 08/02/2024).

The contamination of vital water sources resulting from illegal mining has caused a range of issues, from a shortage of potable water to a decline in the availability of fishery resources. Alerts of potable water scarcity have been raised since October 2023, with the current coverage insufficient to meet residents' needs (3iSolution/iMMAP 04/01/2024; Gobernación del Amazonas 2019).

In 2023, the dry season in the Amazon region extended until October, affecting the Amazon and Putumayo River flows. The decrease in precipitation instigated by El Niño has had the following results.

- It affected 61% of the population in rural and indigenous communities, for whom rainwater is the main water source in their homes. This is also because of the lack of a water supply system or other rural supply systems. In particular, 7,200 people from indigenous communities were left without access to essential services (OCHA 26/10/2023).
- It affected transitory crops and wild fruits, the basis of subsistence agriculture. This is a factor of food insecurity. In the department, 59% of households faced food insecurity (OCHA 26/10/2023).
- River flow decreased, leading to a 60% reduction in river transportation, increasing food costs, and reducing variety, especially in municipalities such as Leticia and Puerto Nariño, home to 50.4% of the department's population (OCHA 26/10/2023).
- It reduced the availability of fishery resources, representing 78% of family incomes and 81% of their protein intake. This has had a significant impact on livelihoods (OCHA 24/11/2023).

The presence of armed groups increases food insecurity for indigenous communities, as their perception of the jungle and rivers as unsafe spaces leads to reduced gathering, hunting, and fishing activities essential to their survival (ACH et al. 01/07/2022).

## Health impact

**Weak healthcare system.** Historically, the healthcare system in the Amazon has faced major challenges. By December 2021, Amazonas department had a significantly lower percentage of health service institutions (1%) and medical transporters (0.0012%) than other departments in the country (MSPS 2021). Deficiencies in the cold chain in health centres, lack of electricity, and insufficient medicine supply impede proper planning and adequate health coverage. Only two out of the six departments in the Amazon region – Caquetá and Putumayo – have healthcare capabilities exceeding the second level, encompassing paediatrics, gynaecology-obstetrics, internal medicine, and surgery. As at September 2023 were only five indigenous health service providers covering 115 communities across Colombia. This number is insufficient for the nearly two million indigenous individuals residing in reserves nationwide, according to DANE (La Silla Vacía 17/09/2023). Geographic barriers, including distance, inadequate transportation, and seasonal isolation, hinder continuous medical attention (ACH 24/12/2023). The facilities lack the infrastructure (medical equipment), particularly in NMAs where essential health services are inaccessible to dispersed communities (KII 27/12/2023). Transportation to the nearest healthcare provider is both expensive and time-consuming, sometimes taking days (Gobernación del Amazonas 2019).

Violence associated with illegal economies and armed groups has led some healthcare personnel to abandon medical facilities, leaving people without medical attention (MSF 26/07/2023). Indigenous communities in isolation are particularly at risk, and this situation can, in many cases, lead to the death of affected individuals. There are no official records regarding this situation (KII 22/11/2023).

There is a particular impact on women, who face challenges in menstrual management resulting from resource scarcity and a lack of access to affordable sanitary products. The purchase of sanitary pads is costly and, in some cases, girls and women resort to methods, such as using cloths, for which the disinfection process is not always guaranteed, potentially leading to hygiene-related concerns and health risks (OCHA 15/01/2024).

**Water contamination.** Illegal economies such as gold extraction and cocaine production contribute to soil and water pollution through the discharge of chemicals used in their production. The contamination of rivers and other water sources affects what people consume and causes health issues, acute diarrhoeal disease and acute respiratory infections affecting children the most (KII 23/01/2024; KII 29/09/2023; SINCHI accessed 02/01/2023; Gobernación del Amazonas 2019). The environmental degradation caused by mining has also left

the soil pockmarked with holes filled with rainwater, creating ideal conditions for mosquito breeding. As a result, malaria and dengue have become growing health issues in the region (KII 06/12/2023; KII 22/11/2023; ConsultorSalud 26/07/2023).

Illegal mining in the Amazon threatens the environment by altering river flow and introducing toxic mercury into the ecosystem (KII 12/12/2023; InfoAmazonia 03/08/2023). Mercury poisons local waterways and is absorbed by plants and consumed by animals, affecting not only the communities dependent on these resources but also those in more distant regions, such as IPI (PNNC 2018). Mercury pollution has severe consequences for the human body, resulting in various symptoms such as tremors, insomnia, memory loss, neuromuscular disorders, headaches, and cognitive and motor dysfunction (GI-TOC et al. 03/11/2023). In pregnant women, mercury can cross the placenta and affect foetal brain development.

**Malnutrition.** Armed group activities, alongside pollution, have driven away the animals once hunted for sustenance, jeopardising the local population's ability to feed themselves (KII 12/12/2023). In Amazonas department, malnutrition cases in 2019 were most prevalent among children under 12 months, accounting for 50% of the total. This was followed by children aged 12–24 months at 42% and those over 24 months at 8%. When considering the entire population of children under 5, chronic malnutrition is observed, particularly in indigenous communities. This is attributed to factors such as low birth weight, acute malnutrition, and iodine deficiency. Notably, iodine deficiency, specifically caused by illegal mining, can lead to neurological abnormalities in infants (Eslava-Schmalbach and Eslava-González 30/12/2020; Gobernación del Amazonas 2019).

**Suicide.** In Colombia, the departments of Amazonas, Guainía, and Vaupés share the highest suicide rates. While the exact percentage of underreporting remains unknown, caution should be exercised in interpreting the figures, as indigenous suicides in Amazonas department are believed to be significantly underreported. For context, while the national suicide rate is 5 suicides per 100,000 inhabitants, Amazonas nearly quintupled that figure in 2020, registering a rate of 23.6. These numbers might even be more alarming than suggested (La Silla Vacía 17/09/2023). Armed group recruitment is one factor associated with suicide in indigenous communities. Most suicides occur among men aged 19–30, a trend that may be linked to armed groups' profiling and targeting of this demographic (OPIAC 30/03/2023). Experts attribute this phenomenon, among other factors, to the destruction of communities' natural habitats, including sacred sites; alcohol and substance abuse; and what some describe as detachment and acculturation – a degradation of indigenous traditions and identity (KII 27/12/2023; La Silla Vacía 17/09/2023).

## HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN EACH TERRITORIAL AXIS

Understanding the Amazon region through distinct territorial axes is crucial. Its sheer size and the different challenges faced by communities within it demand a nuanced approach based on an in-depth understanding of the distinctive crises in each remote area (KII 06/12/2023).

### Caquetá axis

In Caquetá axis, rapids pose a challenge to river navigation, restricting the transport of large goods and limiting mobility. Drug trafficking and mining activities are prevalent here, involving the movement of people and products from Colombia to Brazil. There are emerging alliances between traffickers and miners, a dynamic different from the past. Climate change and El Niño have decreased fish populations in the Caquetá River, affecting local livelihoods. Drought conditions have also increased the prevalence of diseases such as malaria and dengue by creating breeding grounds in natural and artificial pools (KII 06/12/2023).

The NMAs in northern Caquetá axis include La Pedrera, La Victoria, Mirití-Paraná, and Puerto Santander. As at July 2022, based on the most recent figures available, it was clear that challenges in accessing the territory and low population density meant there remained no institutional presence in La Victoria. La Pedrera shares a border with Brazil, making it a crucial corridor for the transit of non-state armed group and transnational crime operations (DP 11/05/2023). As at July 2022, there was only one health post providing basic care in La Pedrera. In Mirití-Paraná, institutional presence included the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare, with a focus on identifying child malnutrition cases. In Puerto Santander, indigenous leaders face heightened threats (ACH et al. 01/07/2022).

In May 2023, these NMAs reported forced displacement events; armed group recruitment of minors; children and adolescent exploitation; and homicides, extortions, and threats as social control practices. Children and adolescents are recruited and exploited for arms- and drug-trafficking operations, working as cocaine transporters (DP 11/05/2023).

### Putumayo axis

Putumayo axis, where the IPI Yurí Passé communities live, is characterised by a significant presence of armed groups, who transit through Putumayo and Amazonas departments using the Putumayo River as their main transportation route (ACH et al. 01/07/2022). Putumayo axis's cross-border condition and the fact that coca crops on the Peruvian side are plentiful make the situation more difficult (CeroSetenta 21/12/2022; Ojo Público 04/09/2022). Putumayo axis is distinct for its extensive coca cultivation and both legal and illegal logging. These activities

have led to various protection risks, including threats to community leaders, recruitment, and extortion (KII 12/12/2023; KII 06/12/2023). Mercury pollution in rivers is also affecting the health and livelihoods of indigenous people.

Putumayo axis encompasses several NMAs in Amazonas department, including El Encanto, La Chorrera, parts of La Pedrera, Puerto Alegría, Puerto Arica, and Tarapaca.

- In Puerto Alegría and El Encanto, the presence of non-state armed groups has led to various protection incidents. In both locations, non-state armed group activities have forced families to relocate, disrupting community structures and livelihoods. Teachers in Puerto Alegría and El Encanto face heightened threats, undermining educational stability in the communities. Non-state armed group presence along the Putumayo River also restricts movement, particularly affecting Puerto Alegría and El Encanto. These restrictions limit access to essential resources and hinder daily activities (ACH et al. 01/07/2022).
- In Puerto Arica, the education infrastructure is in poor condition. Healthcare facilities are inadequate, there is a lack of safe drinking water, and mobility is constrained. These conditions undermine the community's wellbeing and increase its younger population's vulnerability to recruitment and exploitation by non-state armed groups (ACH et al. 01/07/2022).
- The Río Puré National Natural Park, which borders Brazil to the east, is also home to IPI, who face threats from non-state armed groups using nearby routes to avoid the military bases near the Brazil border (KII 06/12/2023). The Puré River is used for drug trafficking, and there is a growing presence of mining activities originating from Brazil. These developments lead to significant humanitarian impacts, including displacement, restricted access to resources, and heightened vulnerability to external influences, all of which threaten the traditional lifestyles and wellbeing of these isolated communities (ACT 17/06/2021). According to UNODC, the Puré River is at high risk from the exploitation of gold in the water, even though it is an area protected by the presence of IPI (UNODC 09/06/2022).

## Amazonas axis

Leticia and Puerto Nariño are the two main municipalities forming Amazonas axis, with Leticia serving as the department's capital. Consequently, these municipalities are the focal points for institutional presence (DP 26/01/2021).

In Amazonas axis, the humanitarian crisis is linked to various factors.

- The Amazon River's flow has decreased as a result of El Niño, affecting both mobility and food prices. Safe water is proving insufficient for the development of basic activities, reducing food production for both consumption and commercialisation.
- The axis faces significant protection threats, including child recruitment and targeted killings (KII 06/12/2023).