

## Increased forced displacement in Neiva: what is known and the information gaps

### METHODOLOGY AND INFORMATION GAPS

This analysis faced significant challenges gathering information. Data collection relied heavily on key informant interviews (KII), government reports, and secondary sources. The limited availability of reliable, up-to-date information and the absence of systematic humanitarian assessments posed constraints on the depth and rigor typical of ACAPS's standard methodology.

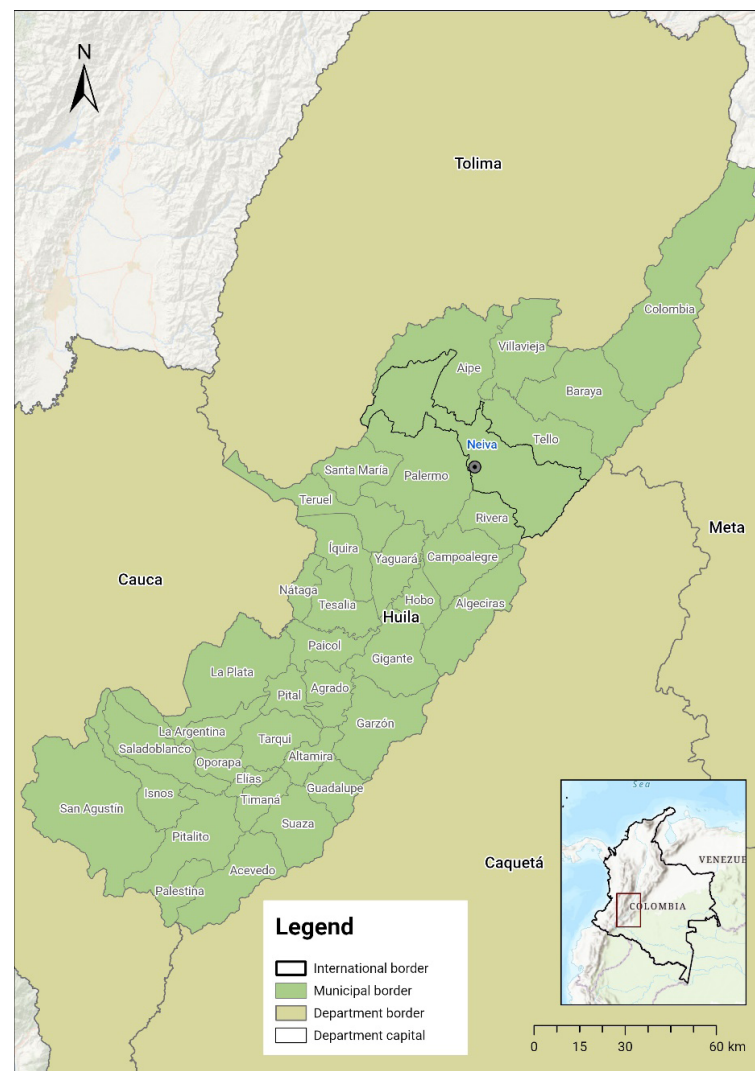
There are many information gaps regarding the conditions of IDPs in Neiva, and limited information on the humanitarian impacts they are facing. The department lacks a humanitarian country team, resulting in a lack of coordinated humanitarian response. This gap hampers efforts to systematically address and document the challenges faced by IDPs, leaving many without the support and resources necessary to improve their living conditions.

### CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

Since the beginning of 2024, as a result of escalating conflict and violence, the Neiva municipality has seen an influx of IDPs from surrounding municipalities, 95% of whom have been forcibly displaced (Caracol 11/12/2023). The department of Huila is in Colombia's southeastern region, bordering the departments of Caquetá, Cauca, Meta, and Tolima. Huila comprises 37 municipalities, including Neiva, which is situated in the central part of the department and serves as its capital (PNUD/ASDI 24/06/2010). According to a report published in early May 2024 by the Unit for the Attention and Integral Reparation to the Victims (UARIV), the city was hosting 53,386 IDPs (Diario del Huila 06/05/2024; Caracol 06/05/2024).

Based on Huila department figures, these IDPs come from diverse areas of origin: 55% from other municipalities in Huila, such as Algeciras, Baraya, La Argentina, La Plata, Nátaga, and Tello; 19% from the neighbouring department of Caquetá, such as the San Vicente del Caguán and Florencia municipalities; and the remaining 26% from other departments and areas bordering Huila, including Cauca (Diario del Huila 06/05/2024; Caracol 21/02/2024).

Map 1. Location of Neiva, Huila



Source: ACAPS

## KEY PRIORITIES

**53,000**

IDPS HAVE ARRIVED IN NEIVA AS A RESULT OF ARMED CONFLICT SINCE 2020.

**55%**

OF THE DISPLACED POPULATION COMES FROM OTHER MUNICIPALITIES IN THE HUILA DEPARTMENT.

**5.3**

INFORM CLIMATE CHANGE RISK SCORE FOR COLOMBIA.

As the capital of the Huila department, Neiva offers the most comprehensive range of services in the region. People may also perceive Neiva as a safer city than those in Caquetá and Cauca, making it an attractive destination for displaced individuals seeking better opportunities and security. The Colombian Red Cross indicated that, in 2024, Huila is among the ten departments with the highest number of IDPs (Diario del Huila 06/04/2024).

Displacement is primarily driven by security threats posed by non-state armed groups (NSAGs), particularly Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC-EP) dissidents such as the Estado Mayor Central (EMC), which has significant control in the department, and the Second Marquetalia in alliance with the Comandos de la Frontera in the southern part of the department (KII 05/06/2024). The increase in displacement incidents since 2022 has been notable, with armed confrontations, threats, and targeted assassinations pushing people to flee (PARES 06/05/2024). The increase in violent events and subsequent displacements is a result of NSAG attempts at territorial expansion, as they aim to control economies linked to extortion.

At present, there is no comprehensive information on IDP humanitarian needs in Neiva or Huila more broadly. Data on forced displacement in other Colombian settings has shown, however, that displacement aggravates household vulnerability through the loss of land, housing, and assets, alongside unemployment and marginalisation. Displacement also causes family separation and cultural uprooting, leading to significant psychological consequences. Displacement can lead to worse health conditions, increasing exposure to food insecurity, social disintegration with host communities, impoverishment, and a general deterioration in living conditions for displaced households (iDMC 14/05/2024; iMMAP 01/2024; MERPD 2007).

## ANTICIPATED SCOPE AND SCALE

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As insufficient preventative actions and inadequate government response is leading the humanitarian situation in Huila to deteriorate, the number of IDPs arriving in Neiva is likely to continue increasing (KII 05/06/2024; Caracol 10/05/2024). NSAG violence against communities is resulting, in particular, in an increase in homicides, child recruitment, sexual and gender-based violence, kidnapping and disappearance, and other protection risks in the municipalities of Algeciras, Garzón, Íquira, La Plata, Tello, and Tesalia (La Nación 04/03/2024; HCHR 14/02/2024; Infobae 16/05/2024). Rural areas of Neiva itself are also experiencing worsening conditions, including increased criminal activity and expanded NSAG territorial control, causing internal displacement within the municipality as residents flee to urban zones (KII 05/06/2024; DP 27/03/2023). Although urban zones are not entirely safe, a more robust state presence gives the impression that urban areas are more secure (KII 05/06/2024). The deteriorating security situation in neighbouring departments, particularly Cauca and Caquetá, further aggravates the crisis in Huila, as there is an increasing risk of more inter-departmental displacement into Huila as people flee violence in other departments. The end of the ceasefire between the Government and an EMC faction in several of the country's territories in March 2023 has led to an escalation in armed conflict, triggering displacement (KII 05/06/2024; Pares 06/05/2024; Caracol 20/05/2024). This escalation is expected to continue throughout 2024, as confrontations between this group and the Government – alongside conflicts between NSAGs themselves – are likely to increase in both Huila and its neighbouring departments (KII 05/06/2024; Pares 06/05/2024).

The steady rise in displacement into Neiva since 2020 suggests that this trend is likely to continue, particularly as a result of conflicts between EMC factions and the continuing strategic positioning of other NSAGs. The flow of IDPs into Neiva is likely to have significant implications on access to local resources and infrastructure, including food supplies, housing, healthcare, and educational services (KII 05/06/2024).

Factors that increase IDPs' vulnerability – in terms of unmet basic needs, overcrowded living conditions, limited access to clean water and sanitation, insufficient healthcare and educational facilities, lack of sustained support and resources, and limited access to employment opportunities – encompass a wide range of challenges (KII 05/06/2024). These vulnerabilities are compounded by protection risks, such as exposure to crime and exploitation, and the psychological trauma and stress resulting from displacement, which only further aggravate IDPs' hardships (KII 05/06/2024).

## CRISIS IMPACTS

### Livelihoods

Although there is a notable information gap around IDPs' access to livelihoods and employment in Neiva, the information available suggests that IDPs face significant barriers accessing sustainable livelihoods, affecting their ability to meet their basic needs. Despite being the department's capital city, Neiva faces significant economic hurdles. With an unemployment rate of 12.6% in January 2024 and ranking among the 14 cities with the highest unemployment in Colombia in 2023, integrating IDPs into the municipality is expected to pose considerable challenges (Noticias Al Sur 29/02/2024; Diario del Huila 01/02/2024).

Historically, research has shown that IDPs in Colombia are more likely to experience a sharp decline in income and consumption levels after displacement, leading to higher poverty rates compared to non-displaced low-income people and families (GPPR 25/01/2024; MERPD 2007). Internally displaced households often face comparatively worse socioeconomic conditions than prior to displacement, as well as relative to many low-income populations in host municipalities, although economic vulnerability exists across these groups. Internally displaced households also suffer considerable losses of physical and financial assets following displacement (UNHCR 16/11/2023).

IDPs arriving in Neiva are likely to face similar challenges, as they receive maintenance assistance for only three days and nothing beyond that period. According to an interviewee working with IDPs in Neiva, most IDPs struggle to find stable employment opportunities, leading them to either return to their place of origin, despite the continuing security threats that initially forced them to leave, or undergo multiple displacements in search of employment and more sustainable support. The same interviewee reported witnessing cases of IDP homelessness and begging on the streets of Neiva (KII 05/06/2024).

### Shelter

There is no current information on where IDPs are residing in Neiva. An interviewee working with IDPs in Neiva noted that the municipality does not have IDP shelters, forcing many to seek refuge with relatives or in informal settlements on the city's periphery (KII 05/06/2024). The most recent study on the IDP population in Neiva, from 2021, indicated that 70% were found to live in vulnerable conditions such as inadequate housing, lack of basic services, and exposure to health. Given that there continues to be a lack of dedicated shelter solutions for IDPs in Neiva and the city's economic situation has not significantly improved since 2021, including persistently high unemployment, it is likely that the current IDP population may be

facing similar challenges. The 2021 study found that economic strain forced many IDPs to share already limited spaces, worsening living conditions. Even those living with their nuclear family suffered from inadequate shelter, including issues such as poor infrastructure, lack of basic services, and unsafe conditions (Corporación Universitaria Iberoamericana 11/2021).

If the IDP influx continues or increases, overcrowding is likely to worsen, both in informal settlements and in the homes of relatives and friends. This increases displaced women's vulnerability to specific forms of gender-based violence typically aggravated by crowded living conditions, including intimate partner violence, threats, and physical and sexual assault (KII 05/06/2024). Overcrowding also increases competition for already scarce services and resources, such as food, livelihood opportunities, and school places, further hindering IDPs' access to livelihoods and education (KII 05/06/2024).

### Food security

An interviewee working with IDPs in Neiva noted that insufficient economic resources are leaving IDPs unable to afford food and having to skip meals (KII 11/06/2024). According to a 2023 UNHCR survey, conducted in collaboration with the Commission for Monitoring the Public Policy on Forced Displacement, 42.4% of the displaced population in Colombia reported skipping at least one meal weekly because of financial constraints, with four out of ten experiencing hunger as a result (ACNUR 26/04/2024). There is no specific data on food security among IDPs in Neiva, and it is unlikely that the three-day assistance provided by the local government is sufficient to meet needs. The lack of sufficient access to livelihoods also further aggravates IDPs' food insecurity situation, as many struggle to secure stable employment to support themselves (KII 05/06/2024).

### Health

The UARIV is responsible for ensuring that victims of armed conflict in Neiva receive health and education services, but there is very little information on the extent to which the unit is ensuring that IDPs actually do have access to these services. Some IDPs have access to the healthcare system in Neiva through the Health Promoting Entities, which are state-regulated organisations that provide insurance coverage. An interviewee noted, however, that other IDPs face barriers such as delays in transferring their Health Promoting Entities affiliation from their place of origin to Neiva, which can leave them without coverage for extended periods (KII 05/06/2024).

These barriers aggravate IDPs' increased risk of communicable diseases compared to the non-displaced population (Cantor et al. 29/10/2021).

## Education

There is no information on IDP school attendance rates in Huila, nor any disaggregated information on the number of school-age children being displaced. A Colombia-wide UNHCR study found, however, that over 51.1% of IDPs aged 27 and older have a low level of education: 11.3% have no education and 39.8% have only some preschool or primary education (ACNUR 26/04/2024). Displaced children in Colombia are also at increased risk of facing education interruptions as a result of their lack of documentation, psychosocial distress, and limited school places. This can make it challenging for displaced children to integrate into schools in host municipalities (EE 04/09/2021). It is likely that displaced children in Neiva are facing similar barriers to education.

The Neiva Mayor's Office latest report on education, from 2022, highlighted that school overcrowding is an issue for children aged 6–14, noting that this may be partially a result of the increase in migrant and displaced populations arriving in the area (Alcaldía de Neiva 17/01/2022). Children not enrolled in school face heightened protection risks, particularly to NSAG recruitment and use, which is a significant child protection threat in Huila and adjacent departments (COALICO 21/02/2024; Verdad Abierta 03/11/2023; EE 04/09/2021).

## DRIVERS OF THE CRISIS

Confrontations between various NSAGs – particularly FARC-EP dissidents present in the municipality, department, and neighbouring departments – and clashes with government forces continue to displace communities and create significant protection and humanitarian needs (KII 05/06/2024). In 2023, the Ombudsman's Office of Colombia issued an alert about the increase in threats, extortion, forced recruitment, and assassinations of community leaders (DP 27/03/2023). According to one interviewee, the Government has yet to address this alert, which remains relevant as threats and violence continue unabated in 2024 (KII 05/06/2024). There have also been reports of NSAGs imposing mobility restrictions, curfews, targeted killings, and identification cards, limiting movement between rural areas (Infobae 08/07/2023). NSAGs often require such identification cards in order to control and monitor movement, effectively restricting entry and exit to areas under their control. Communities have also reported an increase in the recruitment of children and adolescents, particularly in Huila's border areas, such as those abutting Caquetá and Cauca. These multiple protection risks have led to an increase in both individual and mass displacement. Individual displacement involves families or small groups fleeing their homes, often without prior warning or organised support, making it more challenging to monitor and assist. Mass displacement, on the other hand, involves larger groups of people being simultaneously forcibly displaced, usually leading to more immediate and visible humanitarian response efforts (Pares 06/05/2024; Caracol 20/02/2024; Verdad Abierta 03/11/2023).

People are being displaced both within and into the Neiva municipality, seeking security in the urban centre because it is perceived as safer (KII 05/06/2024).

NSAGs have strengthened their presence in the departments neighbouring Huila, particularly Cauca and Caquetá, with the aim of gaining more control over Huila. This strategy is potentially driven by NSAGs' interest in controlling the large extortion networks present in the department (Infobae 15/04/2024; La Nación 18/02/2024). The suspension of the ceasefire between the Government and an EMC faction in Cauca department has triggered increased violence and armed conflict between armed groups and government forces, leading to heightened insecurity and displacement of communities. Specific locations in Huila, such as Algeciras and La Plata, have been particularly affected by this escalation, forcing many to flee their homes (Caracol 20/05/2024). It is possible that these intensified conflicts will result in increased displacement into Huila, primarily to Neiva, as people seek security from continued hostilities (KII 05/06/2024).

## AGGRAVATING FACTORS

### Climate hazards and La Niña

The Huila department is susceptible to extreme weather events, including those triggered by La Niña (GdH 21/07/2014; FAO accessed 24/05/2024). La Niña is likely to develop before September 2024, with increased rainfall expected in several parts of the country, including Huila. La Niña is likely to lead to a higher risk of landslides, floods, and avalanches in hillside areas and riverbanks. This may have several implications, such as the impact on road infrastructure from increased river and stream flows, which can cause damage to bridges and roads, aggravating access issues for IDPs and communities (El Tiempo 24/02/2024).

As IDPs often live in informal settlements with precarious living conditions and increased exposure to rainfall, they are disproportionately affected by such weather events (KII 05/06/2024). Increased rainfall can also affect food security by damaging crops, leading to higher food prices (El Pais 13/05/2024). According to the seasonal calendar, the June–July rainy season can significantly affect crops in Neiva, particularly rice, one of the department’s major agricultural products. Excessive rainfall during this period can lead to waterlogging and flooding, which can damage crops and reduce yields (ACAPS accessed 16/06/2024; GdH accessed 16/06/2024). Seasonal forecasts for the June–August period anticipate above-average precipitation in northwest Colombia, which may trigger flooding. This may affect both displaced and host communities, further limiting access to shelter, water, sanitation, and other basic services in a context of limited preparedness capacities (WMOLC accessed 23/05/2024; IRI accessed 23/05/2024; Dario del Huila 15/05/2024).

According to the Huila department government, from March–May 2024, 17 municipalities experienced 41 incidents linked to extreme weather, such as landslides, windstorms, and flash floods. These incidents damaged 185 homes and affected numerous families (GdH 11/04/2024). Multiple municipalities in Huila have not signed emergency response agreements with the Fire Department, and some municipalities no longer have the financial resources to provide services to the community (Diaro del Huila 15/05/2024). The lack of preparedness and resources aggravates IDPs’ vulnerability to climate events, making them more susceptible to the impacts.

## FUNDING AND RESPONSE CAPACITY

Upon arrival, IDPs receive limited services from the Neiva Victims Unit and Mayor’s Office, only food assistance and shelter for three days (Unidad de Víctimas Neiva accessed 22/05/2024; Alcaldía de Neiva accessed 22/05/2024). Services are very tight, with responses from the UARIV taking approximately three months (KII 05/06/2024). The UARIV is responsible for ensuring comprehensive care, assistance, and reparations for conflict victims, including those displaced to Neiva (UARIV accessed 18/06/2024). The UARIV response, however, has been limited. IDPs must register with the Victims Registry and appear before the Public Prosecutor’s Office to give details of the events, a process that can take up to three months, delaying access to essential services (KII 05/06/2024). Once registered, IDPs can access healthcare, education, psychosocial support, financial compensation, and housing assistance. Despite these services, effectiveness and reach are often limited, with many IDPs facing delays and barriers (KII 05/06/2024; UARIV 27/06/2018). There is no updated information on the usage and capacity of these programmes. There are also UN organisations and NGOs operating in the area, but their presence is limited and often short-term, focusing on immediate relief instead of long-term support (KII 05/06/2024).

The Huila Victims Unit has emphasised efforts to assist victims of armed conflict and establish Immediate Action Teams in municipalities, as early warnings have been issued by the Ombudsman’s Office of Colombia. These teams are tasked with providing immediate response to protection risks, including addressing urgent needs and coordinating with officials to enhance security measures (GdH 30/04/2024). This initiative has strengthened coordination in Baraya, Colombia, Oporapa, Rivera, Saladoblanco, and Tello municipalities, focusing on preventing child recruitment, use, and other forms of violence (GdH 30/04/2024). The department government also formulated a contingency plan to mitigate risks from climate events, aiming to improve road recovery and coordinate prevention and response actions (GdH 11/04/2024). Despite these efforts, response capacity remains under significant strain, requiring more resources and support to effectively address IDP needs (KII 05/06/2024).