

COLOMBIA

Impact of floods in La Guajira

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

On 8 October, category one hurricane Julia swept through La Guajira department in northeastern Colombia, with extreme rainfall and maximum sustained winds of 65km/h that caused flooding (Reuters 07/10/2022; TeleSUR 07/10/2022; ECHO 07/10/2022). The hurricane affected over 159,000 people. Uribia municipality faced the highest impact with at least 22,000 people affected as at 8 October (El Universal 08/10/2022; OCHA 09/10/2022). The number of households affected in Uribia increased from 3,000 on 8 October to 5,000 households on 10 October (EE 10/10/2022; El Universal 08/10/2022). Over 60% of the affected population are Wayúu indigenous people, 12% are Venezuelan migrants and refugees, and 40% are children and adolescents (OCHA 09/10/2022).

On 9 October, the regional government of La Guajira declared a 'public calamity' in at least eight municipalities; Riohacha, Uribia, Albania, Hatonuevo, Distracción, Dibulla, Maicao, and Manaure are among those that have reported damages (UNGRD 10/10/2022; EE 10/10/2022). Several other municipalities have also reported damages, but the extent is currently unclear.

The Colombian Government is still evaluating the damages and response strategies (Cruz Roja Colombiana 10/10/2022; Canal Institucional TV 11/10/2022). The number of houses damaged oscillates between 5,400 and 6,400, with more than 170 completely destroyed. The hurricane has also affected one health centre (UNGRD 10/10/2022; Radio Nacional 09/10/2022). As at 12 October, municipalities such as Uribia had not received any aid and had limited access to water, food, and health facilities (Defensoria del Pueblo 12/10/2022; EE 12/10/2022).

ANTICIPATED SCOPE AND SCALE

- Since the end of August, heavy rains and subsequent flash floods from the second annual rainy season and natural phenomenon La Niña, expected to continue until November, have been affecting La Guajira department (OCHA 09/10/2022; El Heraldo 04/10/2022).
- The winds of Hurricane Julia affected the people living in the highest areas of La Guajira the most. Since the rainy season is expected to continue until November, there may be a risk of landslides for these communities (EE 10/10/2022).
- Connection and communication with rural communities are likely to remain disrupted because of continuing heavy rainfall (RCNRadio 11/10/2022; El Heraldo 11/10/2022).

HUMANITARIAN CONSTRAINTS

- Damage to roads and bridges have isolated some communities. 80% of families in Uribia are reported to be inaccessible (EE 10/10/2022). Road damage has constrained humanitarian aid delivery to the affected areas and information-gathering on the situation (OCHA 09/10/2022). Materials and urgent action are needed to restore the roads. Aid has had to be transported by air to some communities (RCNRadio 11/10/2022; Radio Nacional 09/10/2022).
- Armed groups have stolen NGO vehicles in the border area between La Guajira and Venezuela (SWI 08/06/2022).



KEY PRIORITIES

159,000

PEOPLE AFFECTED

6,400

DAMAGED OR
DESTROYED HOUSES

NATIONAL RESPONSE CAPACITY

Colombian Red Cross

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE CAPACITY

UN agencies
(UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM)

Action Against Hunger

World Vision

SECTORAL NEEDS

Shelter

According to the Colombian Government, as at 10 October, the hurricane destroyed 174 houses and damaged over 5,200 (UNGRD 10/10/2022). Local sources, however, report over 6,400 damaged houses (Radio Nacional 09/10/2022). The hurricane damaged more than 500 houses in Uribia municipality alone (EE 10/10/2022; Defensoría del Pueblo 09/10/2022). Many affected people are in the Apiamana shelter located in Uribia (Blu Radio 09/10/2022). Information on the number of houses affected in Riohacha, where the highest percentage of La Guarija's population lives, is currently unavailable, but more than 25 neighbourhoods were flooded in the municipality. Among the affected population, many are Venezuelan migrants and refugees and Wayúu indigenous people already facing compounding vulnerabilities (EE 10/10/2022). Flooding also disproportionately damages shelters and buildings in the region. Between 40–70% of houses in La Guajira department do not have water-resistant walls, as the materials used to build houses in the area (bahareque and mud) dissolve in water (DANE 16/04/2022; Perez et al. 10/2018). As the flood waters start to recede, structures may collapse, posing a risk of death and injury to affected communities.

Some affected communities have settled on empty lots, as they do not have access to materials to construct temporary shelters (OCHA 09/10/2022). Some people have evacuated to urban areas, although the exact numbers are unclear.

There is a need for NFIs, such as kits with blankets, mats, tarpaulins, hammocks, blankets, mattresses, raincoats, and solar lamps (OCHA 09/10/2022).

WASH

A combination of prolonged heavy rainfall, flooding, and the impact of the hurricane has affected pre-existing WASH interventions. Minimum WASH standards must be ensured in housing, community spaces, and temporary shelters; they require access to safe water, storage, and solid waste management (OCHA 09/10/2022). The sewage system in Riohacha has collapsed, and the population's access to water is limited (Diario del Cesar 10/10/2022; Radio Nacional 08/10/2022).

In 2021, only 20% of the population of La Guajira had access to drinking water. In 2020, 4% of the Wayúu indigenous people living in dispersed rural areas had access to drinking water (EE 06/10/2022; HRW 13/08/2022). As the rainy season continues, further flooding will likely aggravate the current impacts and increase the need for drinking water and waste management in affected areas.

Health

The hurricane has affected one health centre, but there is currently no information available on its location and the degree of impact (UNGRD 10/10/2022). The health cluster, which comprises five organisations, has reported having the capacity to respond to only 2,200 affected people (IMMAP et al. 29/06/2022).

Overflowing rivers have cut off the villages of Castilletes, Nazareth, Punta Espada, Puerto Estrella, and Siapana. Several people need urgent health assistance, but flooded roads hinder their mobility and access to healthcare (El Heraldó 07/10/2022; El Tiempo 06/10/2022). For some people, the journey to the closest health centre takes more than 28 hours (El Tiempo 10/10/2022).

People in isolated communities have been using storage tank lids to float on flooded water and transport themselves to access assistance, increasing the risk of accidents and injury, particularly for children (OCHA 09/10/2022).

The floods and constant rainfall have also caused the proliferation of the hazardous giant African snail in the region, which can constitute a risk to human health. People unaware of its danger touch it with their hands, risking contact with a gelatinous fluid that leaves a colony of bacteria, causing lethal infections such as meningoenkephalitis (El Heraldó 08/10/2022; LGH 08/10/2022).

As the affected communities have been experiencing compounding environmental hazards over the recent months, such as flash floods, there is a likelihood of outbreaks of waterborne diseases.

Food security

With the arrival of Hurricane Julia, food security has deteriorated. As a result, families and children have since been eating one meal per day or none at all (Caracol Noticias Youtube 12/10/2022). The floods that resulted from Hurricane Julia and the rainfall from La Niña have affected food access for families surviving on subsistence crops. There is no information available on the total number of hectares affected, although at least 30 agricultural hectares have been reported as damaged (Radio Nacional 09/10/2022).

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Environmental hazards

This region is prone to environmental hazards, with flooding being the most frequent. Because of the type of soil in the area, La Guajira department often experiences flooding from heavy rainfall (Government of La Guajira 2012). The region has two rainy seasons per year, the first between April–May and the second between September–November. The recovery period between rainy seasons may be insufficient for communities suffering from multiple floodings.

This region also often faces extreme heat and drought that affect water sources. In 2021, over 400 families in Uribia lacked access to drinking water and had to walk long distances to get it (Infobae 25/01/2022 and 10/03/2021). The constant impact of environmental hazards hinders the population's ability to fully address the effects on their livelihoods (OCHA/UNCT Colombia 12/05/2022).

Vulnerable populations

Hurricane Julia and the rainfall from La Niña have affected at least 19,600 Venezuelan migrants and refugees (OCHA 09/10/2022). La Guajira has the fifth largest Venezuelan population in Colombia, with 150,806 people distributed in its 15 municipalities. Over 47,000 Venezuelan migrants and refugees are in Riohacha, one of the areas that Hurricane Julia affected the most (GIFMM/R4V 05/08/2021). A large portion of the migrant population lives in settlements in uninhabitable areas, which do not provide sufficient protection from inclement weather and are susceptible to damage because of the construction materials used (El Tiempo 06/11/2020).

La Guajira is also home to roughly 98% (380,460 people) of the Wayúu indigenous population of Colombia. They are mainly concentrated in Maicao, Manaure, Riohacha, and Uribia, which are also among the municipalities that Hurricane Julia affected the most (Mincultura accessed 12/10/2022).

Malnutrition

La Guajira is the department with the highest cases of malnutrition and food insecurity among children in Colombia. An estimated 197 children under five years of age died of malnutrition in the first nine months of 2022 (EE 07/09/2022). This number is an 82.4% increase from the same time in 2021 (EE 07/09/2022; Defensoría del Pueblo 06/09/2022). In 2021, there were over 1,300 children under five years of age (924 of whom were indigenous) with malnutrition (OCHA 12/05/2022).

Armed groups

Several armed groups in the region dispute control over the territory and the border with Venezuela, restricting people's mobility (OCHA 12/05/2022; ICG 14/12/2020). In June 2022, an armed group attacked a humanitarian NGO in the border region in the state of Zulia, Venezuela (SWI 08/06/2022; OCHA 12/05/2022). Since 2019, Maicao has been on alert because of the presence of armed groups seeking to control the irregular crossings from and to Venezuela (Defensoría del Pueblo 16/09/2019). In 2021, there were three massacres involving armed groups. In March 2022, armed group attacks killed three members of the Wayúu indigenous community (Indepaz 30/09/2022; Infobae 02/03/2022).

MOST AFFECTED MUNICIPALITIES IN LA GUAJIRA



Source: OCHA (09/10/2022)