



COLOMBIA

Protection Analysis | ARAUCA

Analysis of protection risks related to the internal armed conflicts

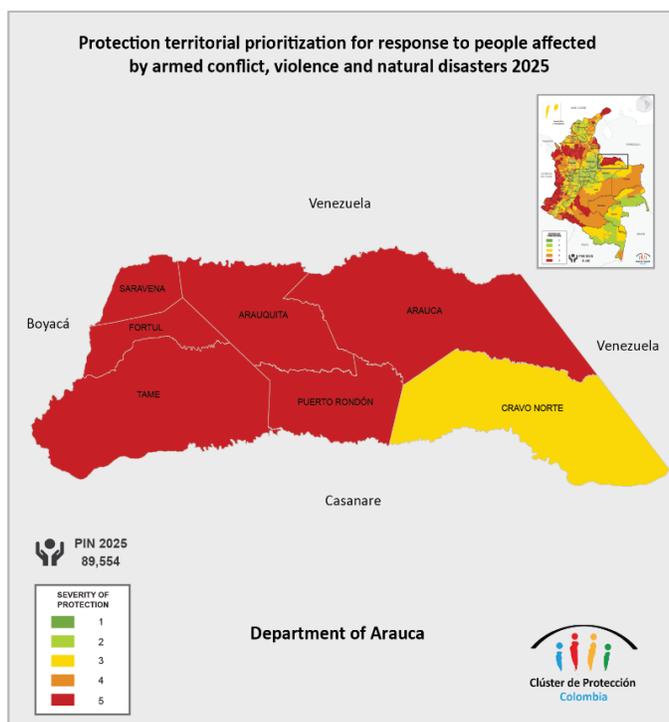
AUGUST 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Arauca, a department in Colombia, shares approximately 326 kilometers of its border with the Venezuelan state of Apure. It has an estimated population of 313,097, of which approximately 77,037 are Venezuelan nationals. Currently, dissidents from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (FARC-EP) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) are engaged in a violent struggle for political and economic control of the region, affecting both the border areas and the interior of the department. These actions have seriously affected leaders and defenders of human rights.

The armed conflict has intensified following the breakdown of historic non-aggression and coexistence agreements between FARC-EP dissidents and the ELN. This has led to an open and ongoing armed confrontation, in which the Colombian army is also involved.

The protection risks that require immediate attention in the period covered by this analysis are the following:



1. **Attacks against the civilian population and unlawful killings.**
2. **Impediment or illicit restriction of freedom of movement, confinement and forced displacement.**
3. **Gender-based violence (GBV) related to armed conflict.**
4. **Denial of access to resources, opportunities, services and/or humanitarian access.**
5. **Recruitment, use and utilization of children in armed groups.**

URGENT ACTIONS NEEDED

Urgent measures are required to end harmful coping strategies resulting from the increasing territorial and social control exerted by Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs), which adversely impact the civilian population. It is therefore critical to:

- Ensure the timely provision of humanitarian assistance by removing administrative barriers within institutions responsible for managing mass and individual emergencies in Colombia, and by enhancing their capacity for rapid response in affected areas.
- Implement comprehensive and long-term interventions in affected communities to foster lasting change.

UPDATE ON PROTECTION RISKS SEVERITY | SEVERITY 2024 – 2025

STRESS	SEVERE	EXTREME	CATASTROPHIC
-	Cravo Norte	-	Arauca, Arauquita, Saravena, Fortul, Tame, Puerto Rondón
SEVERITY VARIATIONS COMPARED TO PREVIOUS ANALYSIS			
INCREASE 14%	Arauca		
STABLE 72%	Arauquita, Saravena, Fortul, Tame, Puerto Rondón		
REDUCTION 14%	Cravo Norte		

CONTEXT

Victims of Displacement (2023 – August 2024)		Victims of confinement (2023 – August 2024)		Assassinated leaders (2023 – August 2024)		Missing Persons (2023 – August 2024)		Homicides (2023 – August 2024)	
10.200		8.519		21		207		279	
Women	0 – 17 years of age	Women	0 – 17 years of age	-	-	-	-	Women	0 – 17 years of age
50 %	23 %	48 %	37 %	-	-	-	-	48 %	14 %

Arauca is one of the departments most severely impacted by the internal armed conflict in Colombia. As of 2023, 34% of its population has been officially recognized as victims of the armed conflict (approximately 3 out of 10 people). Over the past three years, the effects of the conflict have been most pronounced in the rural areas of Arauquita, Tame, and Puerto Rondón, where human rights violations and breaches of international humanitarian law continue during confrontations between NSAGs and State security forces. Additionally, NSAGs employ strategies of territorial and social control to maintain their dominance in the department.

The risk level has escalated due to individual and collective threats, selective homicides, individual and mass displacement, confinement, mobility restrictions, and impacts on physical and psychological well-being. Other risks include gender-based violence (GBV), sexual violence, recruitment and use of children and adolescents, the presence of Antipersonnel Mines (APMs), Unexploded Ordnance (UXO), and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), and the detrimental effects on educational institutions. These factors are exacerbated by the territorial control exerted by NSAGs, disproportionately affecting women, children, adolescents, Venezuelan refugees and migrants, and indigenous communities.ⁱⁱⁱ

NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS (NSAGs)

The department of Arauca has historically been a battleground for territorial disputes between two NSAGs, competing for political and economic control linked to oil exploitation, extortion, smuggling, and drug trafficking. In 2022, the collapse of non-aggression agreements between these groups triggered a period of intense armed conflict, with severe consequences for the civilian population.

In this context, populations with high levels of unmet basic needs (UBN), particularly in rural and hard-to-reach areas—where three out of seven municipalities (Arauquita, Arauca, and Saravena) exceed the national average—face increasing vulnerability. The prolonged humanitarian crisis severely impacts their capacity for economic, social, and community subsistence.

PROTECTION RISKS

RISK 1 Attacks against the civilian population and illicit killings

Attacks on civilians are among the most severe consequences of the armed conflict in Arauca. The rise in selective homicides, particularly targeting social leaders^{iv}, human rights defenders, and vulnerable individuals, is a significant cause for concern. Reports from the Ombudsman's Office indicate that the killings of protected persons have increased compared to the previous year. In 2023, five social leaders were murdered in the department; by the same period in 2024, this number had doubled to ten.

These deaths, which include community leaders^v, demobilized individuals undergoing reincorporation, peasants, indigenous authorities, and members of the LGBTIQ+ community, are directly linked to the territorial dispute between state and non-state armed groups. The selective targeting of these individuals is associated with efforts by these groups to assert control over territory and population. The selective homicide of these people would be related to the dispute for territorial and population control between state and non-state armed groups in the territory. Additionally, the UARIV's single victim registry reported 50 killings in Arauca, including eight children and adolescents. This highlights the widespread nature of the violence, with a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable groups.^{vi}

RISK 2**Impediment or illicit restriction of freedom of movement, confinement and forced displacement**

Restrictions on freedom of movement, both through confinement and forced displacement, remain a critical issue in Arauca. In 2023, the Ombudsman's Office documented 112 cases of violations of the right to mobility, primarily in the municipalities of Tame, Saravena, Fortul, Arauquita, and Arauca. Most of the victims were civilians, reflecting the broad impact of these restrictive measures imposed by non-state armed groups. For the year 2024, the Victims Unit reports 15 people as disappeared/retained or kidnapped.

Displacements

During the first half of 2024, two mass displacements occurred in the municipality of Puerto Rondón, displacing a total of 348 people due to incursions by a NSAG in the villages of Normandía, El Progreso, and El Paisaje, where 18 people disappeared over a two-day period. In general terms, during 2023, approximately 8,504 people were forcibly displaced in the department, and by 2024, this number had reached 1,716^{vii}. It is important to note that the primary groups affected by mass displacement are children, adolescents, and women. Of the displaced, 23.13% were aged 0-17, 50.28% were women, and 73 individuals identified as part of the LGBTIQ community^{viii}.

The main causes of forced displacement are threats to life, personal safety, and physical freedom. Additionally, displacement is often used as a mean to prevent the recruitment, use, and exploitation of children by NSAGs, as well as to escape from threats and clashes between legal and illegal armed actors.

Confinements

In Arauca, the conflict between the ELN and EMC FARC has intensified since 2022, marked by territorial control, restrictions on mobility, and the imposition of curfews. These measures have resulted in confinement and severe limitations on access to fundamental rights, including basic necessities like food security, freedom of movement, healthcare, education, and livelihoods. In the department of Arauca during 2023, the Victims Unit reports a total of 2,155 victims of confinement^{ix}, and for 2024, the Local Coordination Team through humanitarian alerts issued by OCHA, has reported 25 communities affected by confinement for an estimated 6,364 people affected^x. According to the needs identified and the institutional response, there are gaps in the humanitarian response in terms of Health, Food, Shelter, Protection, Education in Emergencies, and WASH (access to hygiene items).

RISK 3**Gender-based Violence (GBV) related to the armed conflict**

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains one of the most pervasive and destructive forms of violence in Arauca, directly linked to the ongoing armed conflict. The use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and a tool for social control has been well-documented. In 2023, according to the Public Health Surveillance System (SIVIGILA), 1,083 cases of GBV were registered in the department, 20 of which were directly related to armed conflict, including seven cases of sexual violence.

The UARIV also reported 40 crimes against sexual freedom and integrity in 2023, directly related to the conflict. Despite the gravity of the situation, only a small percentage of these crimes are reported, and the barriers of access to justice and support services for survivors are enormous, especially in rural areas with limited State presence.

Women and girls are the main victims of GBV, facing greater risks of sexual abuse, exploitation, and violence in general. In addition, the conflict dynamics have generated new forms of violence against them, such as forced recruitment and sexual exploitation in contexts of territorial control. In 2024, the case of a sexually abused woman in the Vereda El Progreso, in the municipality of Puerto Rondón, once again highlighted how sexual violence continues to be used as an instrument of war.

RISK 4 Denial of Access to resources, opportunities, services and/or humanitarian access.

The presence of NSAGs in the region is multiple, complex, and historical, manifesting itself in various forms of territorial control and illicit activities that are exacerbated by the border dynamics between Colombia and Venezuela. Of the eight non-international armed conflicts in Colombia reported by the ICRC, at least three are in the department of Arauca^{xi}. Between 2023 and 2024, there has been an increase in incidents of humanitarian access to the department and attacks against the medical mission^{xii}, due to the imposition of increasingly strong rules of conduct and social control by the NSAGs, represented in the presence of illegal checkpoints, interference in humanitarian activities and/or theft of vehicles and intimidation of humanitarian personnel, threats, kidnappings, extortion, among other affectations; as well as the constant development of military activities and hostilities in the department, which have restricted the arrival of timely humanitarian assistance. Between 2023 and May 2024^{xiii}, at least 10 attacks against the medical mission and at least 28 incidents of humanitarian access have been identified in Arauca.

According to the Humanitarian Balance published by the International Committee of the Red Cross in 2024, during 2023 in Arauca, between 1 and 9 affectations were identified by explosive devices that limited circulation in the territories, and 29 violent acts caused against health assistance. Considering this, it can be recommended that entities with principles of neutrality continue to make calls and conduct pedagogical exercises on the content of and compliance with International Humanitarian Law with all the armed groups.

RISK 5 Recruitment, use and utilization of children in armed groups

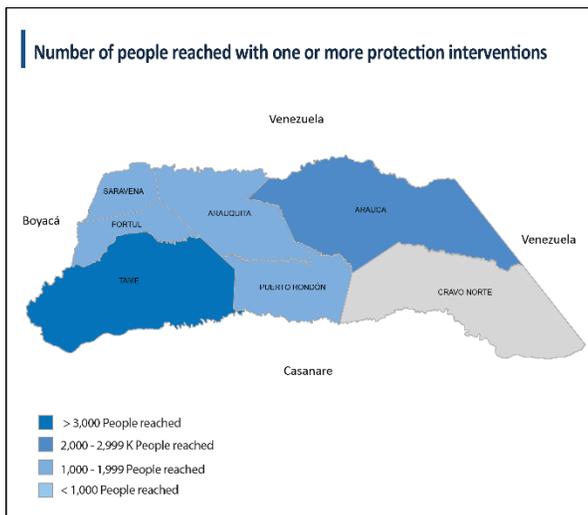
The recruitment, use and utilization of children and adolescents by armed groups is one of the most serious human rights violations in Arauca. The armed conflict has created an environment conducive to forced recruitment, especially in rural areas where poverty, lack of opportunities and the weakening of family and community structures are evident.

In 2023, the UN Secretary-General's report on Children in Armed Conflict ranked Arauca in the fourth place at a national level in terms of grave violations related to the recruitment, use and utilization of children and adolescents. During the first semester of 2024, this trend is estimated to have surpassed the previous year's figures, reflecting an intensification of this phenomenon. The Ombudsman's Office identified 15 cases of children at risk of recruitment, including members of Indigenous communities in Tame.

The recruitment of girls and adolescent women is especially alarming, because in addition to the risk of being involved in armed activities, many are victims of sexual violence and exploitation within armed groups, even considering the under-reporting of cases of recruitment, which are not made visible due to the complexity of the context, making it impossible to identify, report, care and follow up. These practices reinforce abusive power dynamics and perpetuate cycles of violence, devastatingly affecting the physical and emotional development of girls and adolescents. The disengagement of these children and adolescents from armed groups is a slow and complicated process that requires sustained efforts by the State and the international community for their rehabilitation and reintegration.

RESPONSE

PROGRESS IN THE AREA OF PROTECTION



As of August 2024, **11 organizations** have responded in the department of Arauca, reaching a total of **9.785 people**, of which 44% are women, 26% men, 15% girls and 15% boys. Protection activities have covered 6 of 7 municipalities of the department, concentrating in Tame and Arauca Capital, where 53% of the activities are implemented and 65% of the people have been reached.

Regarding the distribution of activities, 37% of the response from the Protection Cluster partners is focused in **activities on prevention and protection against risks** faced by individuals and communities. 32% corresponds to **complementary response to State efforts** to provide protection against violation of rights. And the remaining 31% are **activities that contribute to the achievement of durable and sustainable solutions** in the context of armed conflict and climate change.

General protection activities represent 72% of the actions implemented in the department. These include, mainly, the provision of **information, guidance, and legal assistance for access to the reparation of victims** of forced displacement, as well as the **delivery of emergency assistance that favor victims and/or survivors so that they can access institutional routes** which could promote the complementarity of State actions on protection.

Child protection represents 18% of the response in the department, mostly through **programs for the prevention of recruitment, use and utilization of children and adolescents**. Gender-based violence response represents 9% and focuses on case management services. And, in terms of Mine Action response, during 2024, three activities have been implemented for **mine risk education and support for access to routes of protection for survivors**.

From the Local Coordination Space in Arauca, important protection advocacy activities have been carried out, in which highlight:

- Advocacy with the Victims Unit for the recognition of massive events, such as confinements.
- Inter-agency Mission to 6 of the 7 municipalities to follow-up on situations of massive displacement and confinement.
- Strengthening of local actors/stakeholders such as Government Secretariats, Public Ministry, ICBF, teachers, among others, on issues of displacement, confinement and forced recruitment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this analysis, it is necessary to take urgent measures to stop exposure to the various risks that have been recorded across this document. The Protection Cluster, the Areas of Responsibility and its partners consider that the actions listed here are necessary to avoid affecting communities and, in particular, to prevent the continued deterioration of their quality of life.

RISK 1 Attacks against the civilian population and illicit killings

GOVERNMENT AND THE PARTIES IN THE CONFLICT

- Investigate and punish the events that have occurred as a mean of increasing prevention in the fight against impunity.
- Favor collective protection schemes against threats to human rights defenders to prevent their forced leave of the territory.
- Update the routes for prevention, protection and guarantees of non-repetition in risks against life and freedom.

HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

- Participate and influence in public policy scenarios of comprehensive attention to victims, specifically in Prevention and Protection Subcommittees to document the human rights violations generated in the context of the conflict and promote complementary responses to the competent authorities to guarantee spaces of trust that promote prevention, attention to risks and/or human rights violations, and guarantees of non-repetition.

RISK 2 Impediment or illicit restriction of freedom of movement, confinement and forced displacement

GOVERNMENT AND THE PARTIES IN THE CONFLICT

- Update the municipal and departmental contingency plans, with a real increase in the budget allocation that adjust with the department’s emergencies.
- Identify and promote the compliance with the routes of comprehensive attention to forced internal displacement, to access in situations of risk and protection violations.
- Promote the restoration of rights of the victims of displacement and confinement in the territory.
- Support solutions processes, including returns, relocations, and local integration principles.
- Promote the creation of community contingency plans in villages where mass displacement and confinement are concurrent or prolonged.

HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

- Bet on long-term intervention processes that guarantee proactive protection or by presence, allowing a more real accompaniment to the communities that allow prevention and strengthening of protective environments.
- Strengthen the training of civil servants in the public policy of attention to victims, especially in the functioning of institutional coordination spaces such as Transitional Justice Committees and subcommittees, protocols for attention to emergencies and the registry of the Victim’s Unit.
- Focus on strengthening protection or humanitarian spaces, with community infrastructure in communities affected by mass displacement and concurrent or prolonged confinement.

RISK 3 Gender-Based Violence (GBV) related to the armed conflict

GOVERNMENT AND PARTIES IN THE CONFLICT

- Strengthen state entities to ensure compliance with protection measures for survivors of GBV, such as the provision of Safe Houses for their shelter, easy access to transport to take safe routes, access to minimum subsistence supplies, among others that imply a comprehensive response, seeking to strengthen the technical capacities of multi-sectoral teams (health, protection, justice and education) to address gender-based violence under approaches and guiding principles.

- In addition to the gender approach, GBV requires an intersectional approach to understand the multiple affectations in population groups.
- Guarantee access to the route for prevention and response to gender-based violence through mobile teams that access the most affected territories by armed conflict, and at the same time, ensuring that the spaces for attention are easily accessible to the communities, so that they can opt for comprehensive, psychosocial, and legal attention, with the activation of the safe referral route.
- The Public Ministry must implement surveillance mechanisms to monitor full and unrestricted attention measures (housing, food, and transport) for victims of violence, in accordance with current regulations.
- Ensure concrete actions for the stabilization of the economic situation of survivors of gender-based violence.
- Train public officials (police, army, judges, prosecutors, family commissioners, health personnel) on gender-based violence, with emphasis on sexual violence related to the armed conflict, the rights of women and girls, international humanitarian law, and through this, promote the strengthening of coordination mechanisms between each of the entities so that the actions to be taken are more effective and comprehensive.

HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

- Support the sustainability of community-based organizations and women's networks that work to prevent, respond to, and denounce gender-based violence, promoting their own protection strategies that last over time, strengthening the participation of women-led organizations in leadership positions and decision-making.
- Guarantee the physical and long-term permanence of teams and personnel with the capacity to address cases with a differential approach, including ethnic approach, so that they can identify, activate routes and follow up on cases and trends, promoting personnel who have constant access to the most affected territories by the conflict, guaranteeing care measures in emergency situations through specialized humanitarian professionals who guarantee the guiding principles and approaches for interventions against GBV. This, through the implementation of Safe Spaces, psychosocial care, dignity kits, cash in emergencies, as well as strengthening the structure of temporary shelters and/or safe houses.
- Ensure the use of mass and community media that allow for a broad diffusion in diverse territories and in diverse forms (physical, digital, text, audio, social media, radio, television) to reach key messages related to preventing and responding to gender-based violence.
- Promote and prioritize support for entrepreneurship and employability initiatives for survivors of gender-based violence, in order to reduce risks and foster financial freedom for victims, so that they have more autonomy in decision-making, seeking to implement concrete actions to stabilize the economic situation of survivors of gender-based violence.
- Involve the male population in the planning and implementation of actions, especially in relation to the prevention of gender-based violence.
- It is recommended to implement sustainable strategies to overcome the limitations of duty-bearers (State) in fulfilling their obligations to guarantee a life free of violence.

RISK 4

Denial of Access to resources, opportunities, services and/or humanitarian access

GOVERNMENT AND PARTIES IN THE CONFLICT

- Demand respect for International Humanitarian Law, allowing humanitarian actors to access areas with communities affected by armed conflict, and allowing communities to access humanitarian response.
- Allow and maintain respect for and access to medical missions in the communities most affected by the armed conflict.

HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

- Strengthen and train field teams for humanitarian access in hard-to-reach communities or with prolonged conflicts. This training should also prioritize programmatic teams.
- Humanitarian organizations are encouraged to use inter-agency coordination spaces to articulate actions in communities that are confined or have mobility restrictions, in order to avoid harmful actions.
- Report and notify local coordination teams or the humanitarian team of incidents or barriers to humanitarian access, to make these protection risks visible to more humanitarian actors.

RISK 5 Recruitment, use and utilization of children in armed groups

GOVERNMENT AND PARTIES IN THE CONFLICT

- Increase awareness-raising, prevention and protection actions that involve families, teachers, local authorities, Indigenous peoples, and the community in general to build protective environments, life projects and generate actions for the recognition and mitigation of risk for children and adolescents.
- Actions at a community level on issues of prevention of recruitment, use, utilization, and gender-based violence (GBV) due to the protection risks faced by children, adolescents, and caretakers. The actions to be conducted should consider an ethnic and/or differential approach.
- Implement psychosocial care programmes with an ethnic focus because of the armed conflict, including psycho-emotional recovery actions aimed to children and adolescents.
- Activation and mobilization of the Departmental roundtable for the prevention of recruitment, use and utilization, for the monitoring and technical accompaniment of the municipalities.
- Implement the Safe Schools action plan at the territorial level to protect the educational community amid armed conflict and strengthen the protective role of education for children and adolescents.

HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

- Longer-term and permanent strategies for prevention and protection actions in communities with a focus on children and adolescents.
- Implementation of prevention and mental health actions for communities. Situations of crossfire, confinement, displacement, separation from parents or caretakers increase vulnerability and the adoption of violence as a way of life for children and adolescents.
- Institutional strengthening of local entities, civil servants, and public officials in actions for prevention and response in the care route.
- Support and funding for child/adolescent-led initiatives in communities.

Methodology

The methodology of this Protection Analysis Update (PAU) has combined periodic monitoring by the Arauca Local Coordination Team, the Children’s Sub-Working Group and the GBV Sub-Working Group, as well as qualitative inputs from meetings and consultations with local partners, key informants, and affected population. The analysis process has followed the methodology of severity, estimations of Persons in Need (PIN), and Protection Analytical Framework (PAF).

Limitations

This analysis has followed a logic of qualitative and quantitative analysis derived from official data for subsequent interpretation by experts. On the other hand, to avoid potential risks that could be generated for the communities, the meetings with them were limited.

Therefore, the exercises for information gathering and analysis of the humanitarian situation focused on secondary data and interviews with local actors.



For more information, please contact: **Sebastián Díaz** diazj@unhcr.org | **Gabriela Villota** gabriela.villota@drc.ngo

Notes

ⁱ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Colombia: Humanitarian Challenges 2023.

ⁱⁱ According to figures from Migration Colombia, there is a record of more than 270,000 people from Venezuela with the intention of staying who have pre-registered for the Temporary Protection Status (PPT) as of 30 June 2023.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information: MIRA report – Communities of Suerera, Shubacbarina (Teorema) y Karikachaboquita (Tibú) – Norte de Santander, Colombia, September 20, 2022 and Early Warnings 050-20, 004-21 and 025-21 Obusdman.

^{iv} Ombudsman’s Office, Follow-up Report No. 009.24 Early Warning No. 011-23 for the municipalities of Arauca, Arauquita, Fortul, Saravena and Tame, in the Department of Arauca. May 9th, 2024, Bogota.

^v Institute for development and peace studies (INDEPAZ), SOCIAL LEADERS, HUMAN RIGHTS DEFNDERS AND AGREEMENT SIGNERS MURDERED IN 2023. December 20th, 2023.

^{vi} Victim’s Unit (UARIV), National Information Network: Wednesday, July 31st, 2024.

^{vii} *Ibid.*

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x OCHA, Humanitarian Situation Alerts, <https://response.reliefweb.int/colombia/alertas-de-situacion-humanitaria>

^{xi} International Committee of the Red Cross(ICRC), Colombia: Humanitarian Challenges 2023.

^{xii} OCHA, Colombia: Humanitarian Access Balance 2022 (January - December) - 2023 (January - July).

^{xiii} OCHA, Colombia: Humanitarian Access Balance 2022 (January - December) - 2023 (January - July).