



COLOMBIA

Protection Analysis | NORTE DE SANTANDER

Protection risk analysis in the Catatumbo Sub-Region

APRIL 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The massive, forced displacement in the Catatumbo sub-region of Norte de Santander, which began on January 16, 2025 represents the most severe humanitarian crisis in Colombia in recent yearsⁱ, not only due to the differential impact on the affected population, but also because of the challenges involved in enabling the state to regain territorial control and ensure comprehensive protection of the population.

Catatumbo's geographical location on the border with Venezuela, and its connection with the central and northern regions in the country, makes it a key corridor for illegal economies, which has intensified the territorial dispute between non-state armed groups (NSAGs). The sub-region continues to be affected by armed conflict and violence, severely affecting the civilian population.

Since January 16, 2025, confrontations between the ELN and FARC EP dissidents (Estado Mayor de Bloques y Frentes – EMBF, Frente 33) have provoked an escalation of violence that has resulted in the forced displacement of more than 62.000ⁱⁱ people and the confinement and/or restriction to mobility of around 27.000. According to the DANE population projection 2025, at least 170.396 people reside in the eleven municipalities of Catatumbo, which would imply that around 37% of the population of Catatumbo has been displaced and 16% is confined or with restricted mobility.

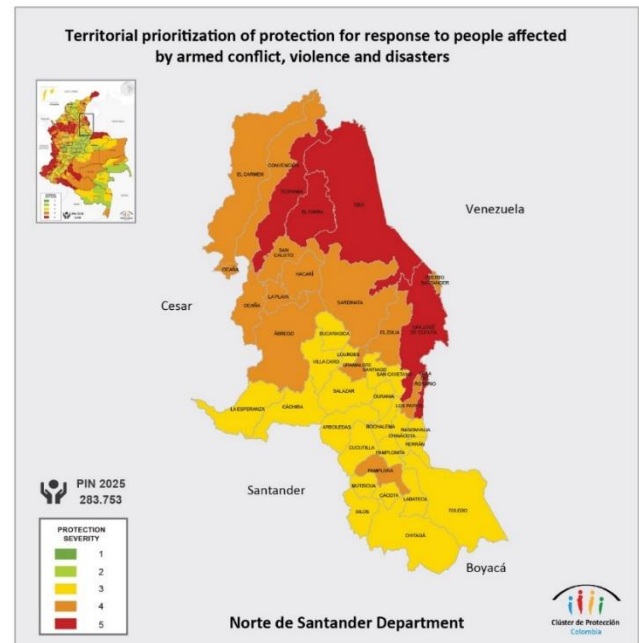
Peasant communities, the Motilón Barfⁱⁱⁱ and Yukpa Indigenous people, signatories of the Peace Agreement, refugees and migrants, and human rights defenders are particularly affected. Given to the magnitude of the crisis, the Colombian government declared a State of Internal Disturbance in the Catatumbo sub-region, which allows it to issue legislative decrees in order to respond to the causes of the disturbance to public order and prevent the extension of its effects. In coordination with local authorities, they have provided immediate and emergency humanitarian aid in receiving municipalities such as Tibú, Ocaña and Cúcuta. Access restrictions, insecurity and the magnitude of the emergency have overwhelmed institutional capacity, affecting the response in rural and urban areas. Despite coordination efforts and support, humanitarian needs remain critical.

Based on this context, the protection risks that require immediate attention in the period covered by this analysis are:

1. **Recruitment, use and utilization of children and adolescents.**
2. **Attacks on persons and civilian objects protected by IHL.**
3. **Gender-based violence.**
4. **Impediments or restrictions to freedom of movement, siege and forced displacement.**
5. **Presence of mines and other explosive ordnance.**

URGENT ACTIONS NEEDED

- Activation of municipal and departmental Transitional Justice Committees^{iv} as scenarios for the articulation of the public policy of integral attention to victims.
- Activation of complementary and subsidiary responses from the Governor's Office of the department of Norte de Santander and the Nation, articulated through the corresponding prevention and contingency plans (without discrimination based on the nationality of the victims).



CONTEXT

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS		PERSONS IN CONFINEMENT / RESTRICTED MOBILITY		INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AFFECTED		REFUGEE AND MIGRANT POPULATION AFFECTED		HOMICIDES		
62.447 ^v		27.668 ^{vi}		3.500 ^{vii}		4.737 ^{viii}		86 ^{ix}		
Mass displacement	Individual displacement	Confinement	Restricted mobility					Peace signatories	Social leaders	Minors
56.091	6.356	27.381	287	-	-	-	-	7	3	4

The department of Norte de Santander continues to be one of the departments most affected by the internal armed conflict and violence. The confrontation between Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) for territorial control, coupled with clashes with the security forces, especially in the Catatumbo sub-region, has generated constant risks of human rights violations for the civilian population, exposing them to serious protection risks. The strategic importance of Catatumbo lies in its connection between the interior of the country and its border relationship with Venezuela, a transit axis functional to the strengthening of illegal economies such as drug trafficking and smuggling, enhanced by the limited state presence. In addition, the region has been historically disputed for its natural resources (oil, coal, coltan, among others), which has intensified tensions over regional development models and increased confrontation between different non-state armed actors for their control. According to UNODC^x, Catatumbo continues to be the enclave with the largest extension of coca leaf cultivation in Colombia, representing 30% of the total number of enclaves and 12% of the total at a national level.

The dynamics of territorial control exercised by non-state armed actors, the intensification of disputes over strategic routes, the challenges in the implementation of the 2016 Peace Agreement, the difficulties in the progress of illicit crop substitution programs, the stalemate in negotiations with the ELN and the persistent gaps in the institutional response, have configured a risk scenario warned by the Ombudsman's Office at the end of the previous year. Early Alert N° 021-24 of August 15, 2024; Early Alert N° 026-2024 of November 15, 2024, which highlighted an imminent humanitarian emergency and a highly complex risk scenario:

- Reactivation of ELN hostilities after the breakdown of the bilateral ceasefire, which has led to attacks in several municipalities in Catatumbo.
- Reconfiguration and strengthening of the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), which has generated a confrontation with the ELN, directly affecting the civilian population and community leaders, especially in rural areas.
- Expansion of FARC dissidents (Frente 33), who seek to consolidate their presence in Catatumbo and extend their influence into municipalities in Santander and southern Cesar.
- Escalation of violence resulting from disputes between armed groups, which has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in the region, with a high cost in terms of human lives and civilian population.
- Restrictions on humanitarian access, which limits the provision of basic services and the strengthening of the social network, increasing the vulnerability of communities.

The risk scenario was described by the Ombudsman's Office and was complemented with the warnings from the GTP (Subnational Protection Cluster Team) in September 2024. In that order, since January 16, 2025, violent clashes began between the ELN and FARC EP dissidents, in which at least 90,000 people living in the area have been reportedly affected, resulting in the confinement of 27,668*, and the forced displacement (massive and individual) of 62,447*, the latter, mainly to the cities of Cúcuta (25,133), Tibú (13,541) and Ocaña (12,302). Likewise, there are reports of affectations to the indigenous people of the Catalaura and Motilón Barí Reservations in the municipality of Tibú (3,500), population that signed the peace agreement, as well as the refugee and migrant population (4,737), who have had greater difficulties in accessing rights, services, attention, orientation, assistance and integral reparation in the current context.

This emergency has generated at least 86 homicides, of which 4 correspond to minors, 7 signatories of the Peace Agreement and 3 social leaders^{xi}. Access limitations due to geographic and security issues have prevented the presence of humanitarian actors,

limiting the response to protection mechanisms for the affected population. In terms of security, access has been affected by the presence and fighting between non-state armed actors, but also by the existence of anti-personnel mines (APM).

Within the framework of the humanitarian emergency that has been presented since January 16, 2025, selective and multiple homicides, extortions, kidnappings, forced displacements, installation of antipersonnel mines and improvised explosive devices, drone attacks, confinements, disappearances, land dispossession, recruitment, use and utilization of adolescent children, restrictions on mobility, threats against human rights defenders, sexual violence against women, direct threats to the LGBTIQ+ population, among others, have been identified.

This massive displacement reveals a strategy of territorial emptying, which according to current figures and population projections affects about 37% of the dispersed rural population located in populated centers of the Catatumbo sub-region. In this scenario, possible repopulation and the risk of land dispossession arise, making it urgent to activate protection measures for abandoned lands that generate conditions for the return and avoid the repatriation of the victims of forced internal displacement.

This humanitarian emergency is a consequence of a prolonged absence of the state that has been taken advantage of by non-state armed groups to exert control over the population, its territory, and its dynamics. This situation violates the effective enjoyment of rights of the communities of Catatumbo, evidences the pressure that the communities have had to face in recent years, even under silence, and warns of the urgency to generate transformations in the governance of the region. At the same time, it shows the transformation of the Colombian armed conflict by presenting as the main cause (not the only one) the dispute between non-state armed actors for territorial control, different from what was some time ago the confrontation between non-state armed actors and the Armed Forces. This scenario reveals an interest of non-state armed actors to control the territory based on violence without the need to dispute regional or national power, which increases the risks of human rights and IHL violations in the region.

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PROTECTION RISKS

RISK 1 Recruitment, use and utilization of children and adolescents

In the context of the current humanitarian crisis in the Catatumbo sub-region, children and adolescents face great protection risks due to massive displacement, confinement and/or restriction to mobility, which prevents them from accessing fundamental rights such as education, health, or protective spaces. This situation exposes them to a high risk of recruitment, use and utilization due to the presence and confrontation of non-state armed actors, who have used recruitment strategies linked to economic offers, promises to cover basic needs and security, construction of military imagery and use of social networks to persuade them to join.

During 2024, according to the Children's Delegate of the Ombudsman's Office, attention was provided to 28 cases of recruitment, of which 14 presented threats and another 14 were recruited and/or linked to an armed group. According to the report presented by COALICO, there were 23 events categorized in Resolution 1612 that affected 288 children and adolescents in Norte de Santander in the context of the armed conflict. In the midst of the humanitarian emergency generated in Catatumbo since January 16, 2025, the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare -ICBF- has attended 43 adolescents disengaged from armed groups, exceeding in two months the records of attention compared to the previous year^{xii}.

In Catatumbo, non-state armed actors have consolidated their territorial, political, social, and economic control, exercising authority in these areas by implementing rules of coexistence, controlling the economy, and carrying out public works. In addition, they seek to legitimize their actions through donations of school and sports equipment. The existence of four "Resocialization Centers" in the Catatumbo sub-region operated by the non-state armed actors was alerted, they were presented to the community as rehabilitation

spaces for the consumption of psychoactive substances (PAS) and punishment for non-compliance with “rules of coexistence”, which are mainly focused on children, adolescents and youths, and represent a modality of involvement in the armed conflict and a serious violation of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), with cruel treatment, forced labor, gender-based violence and use to participate in armed actions in Venezuelan territory.

Given this scenario, and as warned by the Public Prosecutor's Office, families from rural areas have been forcibly displaced to urban environments due to threats of recruitment by non-state armed actors^{xiii}. Likewise, adolescents with imminent protection risks have been displaced to shelters without their caregivers or family members, resulting in family separation and mental health impacts related to anguish, stress, and uncertainty^{xiv}.

RISK 2 Attacks on persons and civilian objects protected by IHL.

Attacks against the civilian population in the Catatumbo sub-region have increased in severity and frequency as a result of the confrontation between the ELN, FARC dissidents and other non-state armed actors. Since January 2025, multiple incidents have been documented, including selective homicides, massacres, extortions, attacks on civilian property, and systematic threats against community leaders and human rights defenders.

Along this year, 86 homicides have been recorded, of which 4 have been of minors. 3 social leaders and 7 signatories of the Peace Agreement^{xv}. Furthermore, there has been an increase in direct attacks against vulnerable populations, such as peasants, Indigenous peoples, and displaced communities, as well as humanitarian workers and journalists documenting the crisis. These attacks have led to forced displacement, widespread fear, and increased restrictions on mobility in the region.

The destruction of civilian property is another strategy used by non-state armed actors to consolidate their territorial control. Attacks on homes, schools and health centers have been reported, further limiting access to basic services, and aggravating the humanitarian crisis. In addition, the use of explosive devices on rural roads and populated areas has impeded humanitarian access and put the civilian population at serious risk.

Threats and aggressions against social leaders and human rights defenders have been particularly alarming. Cases of persecution, intimidation and forced displacement of these key actors have been documented in municipalities such as Tibú, Ocaña and El Tarra. The lack of effective state protection mechanisms has exacerbated this situation, leaving these communities in a state of defenselessness.

Given the magnitude of the crisis, it is urgent to strengthen prevention and protection measures for the civilian population, guaranteeing the presence of institutions and compliance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL) by all armed actors. Moreover, coordinated action between the State, cooperation agencies and civil society is also required to reduce violence and guarantee the security of affected communities.

To mitigate the risks of attacks, a committee has been established, comprising representatives from the ombudsperson's office, the church, and the United Nations verification mission, with the aim of accessing communities that have been unable to receive humanitarian assistance. Communities are returning to their lands without any security guarantees, which has generated issues related to coexistence. The ombudsperson's offices have maintained communication with community leaders, attempting to guarantee access to the community through them. However, changes in leadership have made this strategy less effective.

RISK 3 Gender-based violence

According to the Delegate for Women's Rights and Gender Affairs of the Ombudsman's Office^{xvi}, between September 2022 and May 2024 there was a 92% increase in cases of gender-based violence (GBV) in the department of Norte de Santander, and 72% in the metropolitan area of Cúcuta. In 2024, the department registered 3.657 cases of GBV, with a rate of 213,93 per 100.000 inhabitants^{xvii}, very close to the national average (262.3). This violence includes physical, sexual, and psychological violence, affecting mainly women, girls and people with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity (OSIGD), especially in rural, Indigenous, and migrant communities in highly vulnerable situations.

Victims of the internal armed conflict and violence, as well as refugees and migrants, face multiple structural barriers to access justice, health and protection services, which generates processes of institutional re-victimization. Some of these barriers include the limited or non-existent presence of the State in some areas of Catatumbo, stigmatization, insecurity, limited supply of basic services, lack of infrastructure, xenophobia, poverty and social exclusion, among others.

The organizations of the Gender Subsector of the GIFMM/ELC have evidenced persistent difficulties in the effective activation of protection routes for victims and survivors. Significant gaps have been identified in the response of institutions such as the Family Police Stations and the Prosecutor's Office, with a lack of knowledge of regulations and competencies, especially with regard to the migrant population in an irregular situation.

In this regard, 4,443 cases have been documented of refugees and migrants displaced from Catatumbo who have been victims of multiple forms of violence and affectations, many of them excluded from integral attention by public officials. This systematic exclusion prevents access to reparation processes and seriously violates their rights in the current context of humanitarian emergency.

Girls and adolescents are particularly exposed to the risk of family separation, trafficking for sexual exploitation and other forms of GBV. According to GIFMM (2024) ^{xviii}, 68% of the households surveyed in Norte de Santander are headed by refugee or migrant women, many with children and adolescents under their care. This feminization of households increases their exposure to risks, due to the lack of access to basic services such as decent housing, food, drinking water and hygiene products.

There are persistent barriers to the full exercise of sexual and reproductive rights, including access to the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy (VTP), mainly due to operational limitations in the hospital network. These restrictions aggravate the risks of femicide, the return of survivors to their aggressors or prolonged exposure to unsafe environments.

Likewise, the LGBTIQ+ population has been the target of direct threats by Non-State Armed Groups in Catatumbo. Some women leaders have reported that these actors have declared this population a “military objective,” demanding their expulsion from the territory. These threats have led to forced displacement and have revealed underreporting in censuses and characterization processes, which limits the institutional response and the guarantee of their rights.

Norte de Santander department has a limited capacity to offer integral attention to victims and survivors of GBV. The complementary response of international cooperation has been key to fill gaps through psychosocial accompaniment, access to safe spaces and humanitarian assistance (in kind and in cash), which are fundamental to mitigate risks and prevent new violence.

The Colombian Femicide Observatory reported 90 femicides in the department in 2024, of which seven correspond to Venezuelan women^{xix}. This figure represents an increase of more than 300% compared to previous years. It is urgent to strengthen training and sensitization processes for public officials to ensure attention without discrimination or prejudice, especially towards refugee, migrant and displaced women.

Worryingly, there has been a significant increase in sexual violence against girls and adolescents in municipalities in the Catatumbo sub-region such as Sardinata (100%), Ábrego (72%), El Tarra (76%) and Tibú (40%)^{xx}. Cases of sexual violence have also been documented in protection routes, such as the La Don Juana sector. Between January and October 2024, humanitarian organizations reported 1,225 cases of sexual violence, mainly against women refugees and migrants in transit to the interior of the country. In municipalities such as Ocaña, El Tarra, Teorama and Convención, GBV rates exceed the national average.

The risks associated with GBV include sexual violence in temporary shelters, lack of clear information on care routes, lack of family or community support networks, and precarious economic conditions that lead to negative coping mechanisms such as begging, homelessness or survival sex. Likewise, cases of trafficking for sexual and labor exploitation, uncertainty about the continuity of housing and food support, lack of access to justice and lack of effective actions against perpetrators, including NSAGs, have also been identified.

Finally, the gaps in the institutional response and the lack of trust in the State are being exploited by illegal armed groups that use young women and single mothers for their recruitment and utilization. Through promises of economic aid, protection, or food, they promote their involvement in illicit activities and even use them as informants, reinforcing gender stereotypes that further expose them to violence and exploitation.

Between December 1, 2024, and January 31, 2025, the Ombudsman's Office documented 49 cases of sexual violence in the context of the armed conflict, of which 32 correspond to Venezuelan women. In February 2025, an additional 50 cases were identified. All of these cases are directly related to the massive displacements and the upsurge of violence in the Catatumbo region.

RISK 4**Impediments or restrictions to freedom of movement, siege and forced displacement**

Forced displacement in Catatumbo has reached critical levels due to the intensification of clashes between the ELN and FARC dissidents (Estado Mayor de Bloques y Frentes - EMBF, Frente 33) since January 16, 2025. More than 62,447 people have been displaced and close to 27,668 are confined, especially affecting peasant communities, Motilón Barí Indigenous people, signatories of the Peace Agreement, LGBTIQ+ population, human rights defenders, and refugee and migrant populations.

The imposition of coercive norms by non-state armed actors has generated a generalized atmosphere of fear, impeding access to fundamental rights, and increasing the humanitarian crisis. In the Catatumbo region, forced internal displacement was carried out individually or drop by drop as a strategy to make the communities invisible in the face of pressure from the non-state armed actor; it was even evident that there were prohibitions in the region against mass displacement. The magnitude of the emergency allowed people to flee to protect their lives after the violent pressure expressed through threats, restrictions to mobility, homicides of protected persons, presence of anti-personnel mines and explosive devices and countless situations linked to the territorial control exercised by one or another non-state armed actor.

The magnitude of displacement exceeds the capacities of receiving municipalities such as Cúcuta, Tibú and Ocaña, where shelters are overflowing, and displaced families face barriers in access to housing, food, health, and education. Furthermore, the risk of land dispossession has been identified, making return difficult and increasing the possibility of prolonged displacement.

Restrictions to Mobility and Confinement

Non-state armed actors have imposed restrictions on mobility and have confined entire communities as strategies for territorial and social control. Resolution 171 of 2016 of the Victims Unit, defines confinement as a situation of violation of fundamental rights, in which communities, despite remaining in a part of their territory, lose mobility, as a consequence of the presence and actions of illegal armed groups. This restriction implies the impossibility of accessing goods essential for survival, as a result of the military, economic, political, cultural, and social control exercised by illegal armed groups in the context of the internal armed conflict^{xxi}. Currently, 27,000 people, including peasant communities, Motilón Barí Indigenous people, signatories of the Peace Agreement, human rights defenders, and refugee and migrant populations, remain confined due to the emergency.

These restrictions have limited access to essential services and increased a generalized climate of fear, especially affecting the rural areas of Catatumbo. Risk perception is high: 51% of households surveyed by DRC during the fourth quarter of 2024 identified mobility restrictions as a risk factor in their environment^{xxii}. Attacks against the civilian population, the use of explosive devices, armed confrontations and fighting between NSAGs and the security forces have aggravated the situation, restricting movement, and the supply of essential goods.

Access to basic goods and services has been severely affected, with reports of food shortages, lack of medical care and school closures. In addition, restrictions on mobility have prevented humanitarian activities in certain areas. In sectors such as the road between Tibú and El Tarra, non-state armed actors have established rules of coexistence with reprisals for those who do not comply, while in Tibú they have imposed economic restrictions on merchants and transporters, demanding illegal payments to operate. The imposition of coercive norms by the NSAGs has generated a generalized atmosphere of fear. 100% of the families surveyed by DRC during the fourth quarter of 2024 reported psychosocial effects and 81% mentioned economic impacts. These dynamics have reinforced the confinement of entire communities, limiting their ability to subsist, and increasing their vulnerability.

Forced Displacement

Forced displacement in Catatumbo has reached alarming levels as a direct consequence of the intensification of fighting between non-state armed actors since January 16, 2025. In that month alone, more than 52,000 people were forced to flee their homes, mainly in rural areas of the department of Norte de Santander. Throughout 2024, increased threats against social, community and LGBTIQ+ leaders also drove new waves of displacement. The absence of effective protection measures by the State has left these people in a highly vulnerable situation, forcing them to flee without guarantees or an adequate institutional response.

Attacks on civilians and massive forced displacement in Tibú have led to the separation of families. Many of them send children and adolescents out of the territory for the fear of recruitment, while some members remain in their communities to protect their livelihoods or to avoid the occupation of their land by the NSAGs. In addition, displaced persons in Tibú have reported a serious

psychosocial impact, with symptoms of anxiety, stress, and insomnia, exacerbated by re-victimization and precarious conditions in the shelters.

The massive arrival of displaced persons in the urban center of Tibú has generated a humanitarian crisis characterized by barriers in access to essential rights and services. The presence of non-state armed actors has limited the access of humanitarian institutions and organizations to several villages where humanitarian activities were previously carried out, making it difficult to provide essential assistance and monitor the situation. The lack of information on care routes and procedures, and the lack of institutional presence have made it difficult to register victims in the RUV, hindering their official recognition. The situation is even more critical for displaced persons of Venezuelan nationality, who face administrative barriers and prevalence that ignore the impact of the armed conflict on the refugee and migrant population and the State's duty to protect them. In this regard, the Attorney General's Office^{xxiii}, through its directive 002 of January 2025, has requested the Public Prosecutor's Office to guarantee the rights and orientation/advice to the refugee and migrant population, victims of the internal armed conflict, regardless of their migratory situation.

Additionally, returns without guarantees continue to occur due to the lack of adequate humanitarian response, protection risks in shelters, fear of land appropriation by non-state armed actors and insecurity in the region. Cases have been reported of families who returned to rural areas without guarantees and, after returning, were forced to move again due to armed clashes. At the same time, it is necessary to consider forced displacement and repopulation as a strategy of non-state armed actors as a clue to the interests in the region and in which issues related to the protection of abandoned lands are central. This situation creates problems for coexistence between communities upon their return. The Ombudsman's Offices try to establish contact with community leaders to understand the situation and help the international community gain access to the area. However, the leaders have changed significantly, and maintaining contact is not always possible.

RISK 5 Presence of mines and other explosive ordnance

Norte de Santander is the fourth department with the highest number of victims of Antipersonnel Landmines (APM), Unexploded Ordnance (UXO), and other Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) in Colombia, reaching a record of 971 people, according to figures from the Action Group Against Antipersonnel Mines of the Peace Commissioner's Office^{xxiv}. This represents 8% of the number of victims nationwide, with the municipalities most affected being Teorama (189), Tibú (180), Hacarí (122), El Tarra (99) and Convención (91). Since the beginning of the emergency on January 16, 2025, there have been 13 events with APM/UXO/IEDs, of which 4 have been done with drones. The intensification of clashes between NSAGs and the fight for territorial control has prolonged the practice of installing explosive devices and minefields as a strategy to contain the enemy, marking invisible borders to protect or safeguard control areas, roads, camps, and illicit crops.

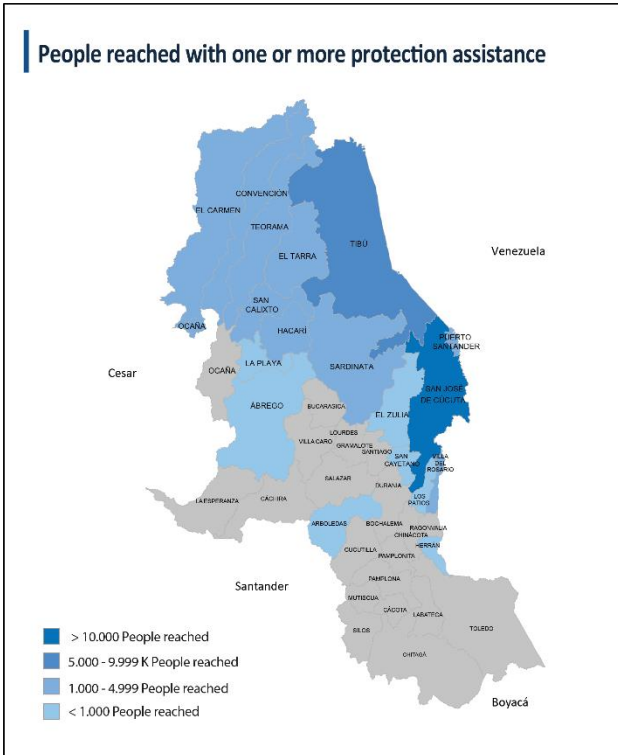
The recent humanitarian crisis in Catatumbo, which to date has left more than 62,000 displaced and close to 27,000 people confined, according to the Attorney General's Office, has increased the communities' risk of suffering accidents due to explosive devices, given that it has become known that the bridle paths for possible returns are mined, and there have been complaints by the community of the occupation of their homes by members of the NSAGs. This has increased the population's uncertainty about returning to their territories and has even multiplied the lack of knowledge of safe routes for children and young people to attend educational institutions. The installation and presence of explosive devices limits mobility, access to education, health, land use, basic natural resources such as water, infrastructure, and agricultural activities, among others.

These facts have increased the fear of the inhabitants to transit through areas that were previously considered safe, limiting humanitarian access, psychologically impacting the population due to the loss of their livelihoods and the anxiety generated by not being able to return to their territory due to the prolongation of the conflict, added to the lack of answers regarding their situation.

In the Catatumbo sub-region, it has not been possible to carry out humanitarian demining activities due to the difficulties of access and the deteriorated security conditions in the area, so the return of displaced persons is not an action that is contemplated in the short term. The high risk of accidents due to the explosive devices that have been installed in the region increases the possibility of injury, dismemberment and even death. The call from the communities and local authorities is to strengthen the activities in Antipersonnel Mine Risk Education, to promote safe behaviors in the communities and reduce the risk of suffering accidents by APM/UXO/IEDs.

RESPONSE

PROGRESS MADE ON PROTECTION



At the end of 2024, 16 organizations have provided ordinary response in the department of Norte de Santander, reaching a total of 35,082 people, of which 34% are women, 18% men, 24% girls and 24% boys. Protection activities have covered 25 of the 40 municipalities in the department, concentrating in Cúcuta, Tibú, El Tarra and Ocaña, where 63% of the activities are implemented and 68% of the people have been reached. The added value of Protection actions is associated with interventions that generated recurring support for at-risk communities.

Regarding the distribution of activities, 43% of the response of the Protection Cluster partners is focused on complementary response activities to the State's efforts to provide protection against the violation of rights. The 32% corresponds to prevention and protection actions in the face of risks faced by individuals and communities. The remaining 25% are activities that contribute to the achievement of lasting and sustainable solutions in the context of armed conflict and climate change as processes associated with the regularization of human settlements.

General protection activities represent 66% of the actions implemented in the department. These mainly include the provision of information, guidance, and legal assistance for access to reparation of victims of forced displacement, as well as the delivery of complementary emergency assistance to help victims and/or survivors to access institutional routes and/or to promote

the complementarity of state action in the area of 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. The 9% of the response is implemented in mine action through campaigns and workshops on mine risk education. Regarding the response to gender-based violence, in 2024, case management services were provided to GBV survivors and workshops on early identification and mitigation of GBV risks.

During 2024, the Protection Thematic Group (GTP) in Norte de Santander met biweekly to follow up on the context and monitoring of protection risks, as well as to socialize and coordinate protection actions to be implemented in the territory. At the same time, and within the framework of joint missions to the sub-region, they warned of the risk of massive displacement and the need to update the contingency plans in the region. Regarding to the articulation with state institutions, the GTP advocated with the relevant territorial entities, according to the protection risks identified; in the same line, the Areas of Responsibility of Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence supported in capacity building to territorial entities for risk identification.

In response to the humanitarian crisis in the Catatumbo subregion this year, 14 protection organizations have implemented 9,553 assistance activities. The main protection activities implemented during the emergency have focused on: i. Reception and emergency; ii. Registration and transition; and iii. Creating conditions for return that comply with principles. Both the ELC/GIFMM and the GTP/SLP have served as forums for analyzing risk identification and identifying appropriate advocacy schemes for local, regional, and national institutional coordination. The GTP has led group information sessions for access to routes for victims of displacement and confinement, supported the taking of statements and censuses to facilitate inclusion in the single registry of victims, supported the reception and profiling of the displaced population for the delivery of immediate humanitarian assistance, provided psychosocial support and socio-emotional strengthening for children and adolescents, and provided gender-based violence prevention activities, including the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (SPEA). Technical assistance has also been provided to the Governor's office of Norte de Santander and mayoral offices to qualify transitional justice committees and subcommittees for prevention, protection, and guarantees of non-repetition as part of the activation of contingency plans, as suitable scenarios for emergency response.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To face these complex protection challenges affecting the population of Norte de Santander, and specifically the Catatumbo subregion, urgent measures are needed to address both the structural causes of conflict and violence, as well as immediate vulnerabilities. Therefore, it is urgent to apply international humanitarian law, promote public policy coordination schemes to address forced displacement, and recognize the differential impact of the conflict on populations with special constitutional protection.

RISK 1 Recruitment, use and utilization of children and adolescents

TO THE NATIONAL, DEPARTMENTAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- Implement public policy guidelines for the prevention of recruitment, use, and exploitation by strengthening municipal immediate action teams (EAls). Also, consolidate the Departmental Roundtable for the Prevention of Recruitment, Use, Utilization, and Engagement (RUUV), seeking to develop action plans, define institutional pathways, and increase coordination among institutional actors to prevent and respond to cases of recruitment, use, and exploitation of children and adolescents, as well as sexual violence.
- Provide access and referral mechanisms for physical health care, mental health care, and psychosocial support in a coordinated manner between the health and protection systems.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION / HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

- Implement mental health and psychosocial support actions at community and family levels to strengthen coping capacities and promote the emotional well-being of children and adolescents with a differential approach by age, gender, and ethnicity.
- Technical support to the strengthening of the protection system for the care of children, adolescents and families affected by displacement and confinement and provide technical support for the implementation of the guidelines of the Public Policy for the Prevention of Recruitment, Utilization and Sexual Violence in high-risk municipalities.
- Strengthen the reporting of serious human rights violations in the context of the armed conflict to the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism under Resolution 1612 to make visible and document the humanitarian situation faced by children and adolescents.

RISK 2 Attacks on persons and civilian objects protected by IHL

TO THE NATIONAL, DEPARTMENTAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- Investigate, punish, and prevent attacks against the civilian population and civilian property, guaranteeing access to justice, avoiding impunity, and recognizing the differential nature of these crimes in the context of the armed conflict.
- Strengthen state response mechanisms in affected rural areas, ensuring the effective presence of civilian institutions and inter-sectoral coordination for the attention of communities exposed to attacks and displacement.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION / HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

- Strengthen the monitoring and reporting of violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL): Implement more robust mechanisms for documenting attacks against the civilian population, coordinating efforts with human rights organizations and the media to make violations visible and help to prevent impunity.
- Deploy protection strategies for humanitarian presence: Prioritize rural communities with high conflict intensity through the presence of humanitarian actors and the promotion of humanitarian corridors that facilitate both the delivery of aid and the safe evacuation of populations at risk.
- Strengthen local self-protection capacities and early warning systems: Accompany communities in the identification of risks and the implementation of damage reduction strategies, including the creation of community protection networks in alliance with local leaders, Indigenous peoples, and social organizations.
- Provide integral attention to victims of armed attacks: Guarantee access to specialized psychological assistance for survivors, family members and affected communities, as well as facilitate effective routes for denunciation, legal representation, and comprehensive reparation.

- Technically accompany advocacy processes for the protection of essential civilian assets, ensuring that humanitarian actors include these issues in the humanitarian dialogue and institutional coordination frameworks.

TO THE STATE, INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY

- Technically accompany advocacy processes for the protection of essential civilian assets, ensuring that humanitarian actors include these issues in the humanitarian dialogue and institutional coordination frameworks.
- Consolidate inter-institutional and inter-sectoral coordination mechanisms for the protection of civilian population, facilitating comprehensive responses that address both immediate attention and long-term prevention of attacks and their impacts.
- Design and implement differential protection actions for specific groups, including women, children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ persons, ethnic peoples, signatories of the Peace Agreement, and refugee and migrant populations, whose conditions of vulnerability are aggravated in contexts of direct violence.
- Strengthening the articulation between community protection mechanisms and institutional systems, promoting the generation of early warning networks, safe evacuation routes, accompaniment of leaders and communication with local institutions.
- Promote community dialogue spaces for the identification of risks, needs and protection priorities, allowing for a more contextualized, participatory, and sensitive response to the differentiated impacts of attacks.
- Promote community recovery processes after the attacks, including support for reconstruction of housing and basic infrastructure, restoration of livelihoods, collective psychosocial repair and strengthening of the social network.

RISK 3 Gender-based violence

TO THE NATIONAL, DEPARTMENTAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- Review, update, and strengthen public policies for prevention, attention, and response to gender-based violence, with a territorial, differential and rights-based approach, prioritizing high-risk rural and urban areas. It is recommended to define a single care route, clear and disseminated, under the leadership of the competent authorities.
- Guarantee effective protection measures for women social leaders and human rights defenders, through comprehensive routes that include the accompaniment of the Ombudsman's Office, activation of the National Protection Unit (UNP), humanitarian transport and economic support for protection, recognizing the specific risks they face in the emergency context.
- Design and implement specific actions for LGBTIQ+ people, ensuring differentiated access to institutional protection routes, prevention of violence motivated by prejudice and safe access to humanitarian services without discrimination. These measures must be included in risk analysis and response programs.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION / HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

- Provide technical support to local authorities in the design of gender-sensitive food and nutrition responses, including specific requirements for women and children.
- Impulse ongoing training to humanitarian and health system actors on prevention routes, GBV care protocols, self-care for humanitarian personnel, and comprehensive mental health and psychosocial support for survivors.
- Strengthen access to international protection routes for refugee and migrant women, in coordination with specialized actors, and support prevention mechanisms against human trafficking and human smuggling for sexual exploitation.
- Provide technical support to the competent authorities in the prevention, mitigation, and response to GBV, including the operational and strategic strengthening of the GBV Coordinating Committee in the territories.

TO THE STATE, INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY

- Actively involve women and girls in the planning, implementation and monitoring of humanitarian and protection programs, ensuring that their voices, needs, and concerns are integrated from the design to the implementation of responses.
- Mitigate the specific risks of GBV towards adolescent women and youth, ensuring the effective activation of protection routes in cases of sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, and human trafficking.
- Strengthen inter-sectoral articulation spaces for comprehensive responses to GBV, promoting effective coordination between the health, education, shelter, protection, food security and livelihood sectors.
- Promote community processes for GBV awareness and prevention, with an intersectional approach on, gender, age, and diversity, involving actively women leaders, young women, OSIGD population and community-based organizations.
- Facilitate joint training spaces for public officials, humanitarian actors and community leaders, prioritizing content on international protection standards, GBV care routes and available institutional mechanisms.

RISK 4

Impediments or restrictions to freedom of movement, siege and forced displacement

TO THE NATIONAL, DEPARTMENTAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- Promote inter-institutional coordination through the scenarios of the public policy for integral attention to victims. In that sense, Territorial Transitional Justice Committees (CTJTs), assistance and attention subcommittees, prevention, protection, and re-establishment as suitable scenarios to activate complementarity, subsidiarity and concurrence schemes foreseen in the normative framework.
- Update the municipal and departmental Contingency Plans, ensuring the active participation of all competent Secretariats and Directorates.
- Guarantee immediate humanitarian assistance, including food and necessities, while the registration is being formalized by the Victims Unit (UARIV), without discrimination based on nationality.
- Strengthen the modalities of temporary housing, proposing safe and sustainable alternatives such as leasing through monetary transfers, avoiding saturation and risks associated with shelters.
- Ensure the timely inclusion in the Single Registry of Victims (RUV) of all victims affected by this event, including refugees, migrants, and signatories of the Peace Agreement.
- Ensure coordination between national and local governments, strengthening institutional presence and intersectoral response.
- Promote land protection and urban regularization, in coordination with the National Planning Department (DNP) and the Ministry of Housing, for return, relocation or local integration processes under conditions of security, dignity and voluntariness.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION / HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

- Coordinate efforts for land protection and prevention of dispossession, in coordination with territorial authorities and restitution programs, especially in scenarios of return, relocation or local integration.
- Promote articulation between the national and local levels of the State, ensuring a coordinated and sustainable response in accordance with the realities of each territory.
- Provide complementary response to immediate assistance, especially in areas where institutional capacity is overwhelmed.
- Provide technical support to the registration, census and mass declaration processes, in coordination with ARIV and the CTJTs.
- Strengthen the offer of differentiated services in mental health, psychosocial support, legal assistance, and protection for vulnerable groups (children, women, LGBTIQ+ people, Indigenous people, people with disabilities, etc).

RISK 5

Presence of Mine and other explosive ordnance

TO THE STATE

- It is necessary to strengthen the presence of the State and civil authorities in the most affected territories, through the effective provision of essential programs and services that guarantee the population's access to the right to health, education, work, and other fundamental rights.
- Develop Mine Risk Education (MRE) strategies adapted to rural and urban communities affected by confinement and forced displacement.

TO THE CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR

- Strengthen local and institutional response capacities by training first response teams, community leaders, teachers and humanitarian actors in risk identification, victim care routes and emergency protocols for APM/UXO/IEDs accidents.
- Develop sustained MRE actions through face-to-face sessions, printed materials, radio messages, SMS messages and educational workshops adapted to rural and urban contexts.
- Strengthen community self-protection mechanisms. Identify risk areas with communities and design community maps of safe routes. Promote safe practices and early warning systems for suspected explosive devices.
- Improve access to emergency medical attention, physical rehabilitation, psychosocial support, and legal accompaniment for direct and indirect victims.
- Strengthen the link with actors in the Mine Action Sector (MCA) to prioritize emergency interventions, carry out non-technical studies, and advance in demining tasks when conditions permit.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Ombudsman's Office (2025): Data on forced human mobility dynamics in Colombia during 2024.
- ⁱⁱ ELC, GIFMM y EHP, Dashboard - Emergency Situation Catatumbo, Colombia.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Historical Memory Center, We are Barí: Ancestral Sons of Catatumbo.
- ^{iv} Guide For The Formation And Operation Of Territorial Transitional Justice Committees.
- ^v Ibid.
- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} OCHA, Colombia (2025), Situation Report No. 02: Humanitarian needs due to massive displacement and mobility restrictions in Catatumbo (Norte de Santander)
- ^{viii} Ibid.
- ^{ix} Governorate of Norte de Santander, PMU Balance Catatumbo, Bulletin N°53 of 17/03/2025.
- ^x UNODC, Monitoring Report on Territories affected by Coca Cultivation 2022.
- ^{xi} Governorate of Norte de Santander, PMU Balance Catatumbo, Bulletin N°53 of 17/03/2025.
- ^{xii} Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF) (2025), ICBF demands armed groups to stop recruitment of children in Catatumbo.
- ^{xiii} Ombudsman's Office (2023) EARLY ALERT No. 009-2023 .
- ^{xiv} Danish Refugee Council (2025), Protection Monitoring Snapshot: Humanitarian Impacts and Protection Risks Arising from the Massive Forced Displacement Crisis in Tibú, Norte de Santander.
- ^{xv} Governorate of Norte de Santander, PMU Balance Catatumbo, Bulletin N°53 of 17/03/2025.
- ^{xvi} Ombudsman's Office, 2023 Accountability Report, Women's Rights and Gender Affairs Representative: Achievements and Challenges.
- ^{xvii} SIVIGE. Cases of gender-based violence reported to the Public Health Surveillance System. Cut-off date: 31.10.2024. National Observatory on Gender-based Violence.
- ^{xviii} GIFMM (2025). Results of the Joint Needs Assessment for the Permanency-Based Population. Norte de Santander.
- ^{xix} Colombian Observatory of Feminicides.
- ^{xx} National Observatory of Gender-based Violence, The national rate for 2024 is 262.3 per 100,000 inhabitants.
- ^{xxi} UARIV, Resolution 0171 of February 24, 2016, by which confinement is defined as a victimizing event in the framework of Law 1448 of 2011, issued by the Victims Unit.
- ^{xxii} Ibid.
- ^{xxiii} Office of the Attorney General of Colombia, Directive 002 of January 14, 2025.
- ^{xxiv} Integral Action Against Antipersonnel Mines Viewer (2025). National Report on APM/UXO/IEDs Victims, available at: AICMA Viewer.

Methodology

In September 2024, the Protection Thematic Group (GTP) of Norte de Santander and the Protection Cluster, in collaboration with the Areas of Responsibility (AoR) of Gender-Based Violence, Child Protection, and Mine Action, organized a mission to the Catatumbo sub-region. The objective was to update the regional context and identify the main protection risks in the area. This mission identified the imminent risk of forced internal displacement and the confinement of rural communities. However, at the beginning of 2025, a humanitarian emergency occurred that required a coordinated response from the Local Coordination Team of Norte de Santander (ELC) for immediate humanitarian aid and institutional coordination. This protection analysis document is based on quantitative and qualitative data from inter-sectoral assessments, rapid protection assessments, and reports prepared by partners from the subnational and national teams of the Protection Cluster/Sector and the corresponding Areas of Responsibility.

