



Convención, Catatumbo, Colombia, December 19, 2015. The text "FARC-EP" was first written in black, followed by "ELN" in red. Then, the latter was erased with white paint. This visual alteration reflects the historical territorial disputes among armed groups vying for control over the region and its population. Photo by Laura Camila Barrios Sabogal.

## Escalation of Violence amidst Colombia's Struggle for Peace: Causes and Implications of Catatumbo's Humanitarian Crisis

Laura Camila Barrios Sabogal & Jonas Wolff



# Escalation of Violence amidst Colombia's Struggle for Peace

## Causes and Implications of Catatumbo's Humanitarian Crisis

In January 2025, violent clashes between competing armed groups in the region of Catatumbo led to one of the worst humanitarian crises in Colombia's recent history, which left at least 55 civilians dead and more than 50,000 people forcibly displaced. Despite the declaration of a national emergency and the deployment of the military by the government of Gustavo Petro, the situation remains tense. In this TraCe Policy Brief, we identify key causes behind the most recent escalation of violence and discuss implications for ongoing and future attempts at building peace in Colombia.

by Laura Camila Barrios Sabogal and Jonas Wolff

On January 16, 2025, a massive violent confrontation broke out in Catatumbo, a region in northeastern Colombia bordering Venezuela. The violence pitted Colombia's one remaining guerrilla organization, the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), against a competing armed group that had emerged from the demobilization of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP), the *Frente 33*. Responding to the killing of a family in Tibú, which was attributed to the *Frente 33*, the ELN launched an attack against members and supposed supporters of *Frente 33*, unleashing violent clashes between the two groups.<sup>1</sup> Within a few days only, according to Colombia's Ministry of Defense, more than 50,000 people have been forcibly displaced, and at least 55 people assassinated,<sup>2</sup> turning these events into "one of the worst humanitarian crises Colombia has experienced in decades."<sup>3</sup> On January 20, the Colombian government responded, with President Gustavo Petro declaring a state of exception (*estado de conmoción interna*) and sending almost 10,000 soldiers.<sup>4</sup>

In this TraCe Policy Brief, we briefly contextualize the most recent events in Catatumbo and discuss key causes that help explain the escalation of violence. Finally, we identify implications for implementing the 2016 peace agreement with the FARC-EP guerrilla and the Petro government's ambitious Total Peace agenda.

### Context: Characteristics of Catatumbo

Catatumbo is located in the department of Norte de Santander, in northeastern Colombia, on the border with Venezuela. It comprises 11 municipalities and two Indigenous reserves (Motilón-Barí and Catalaura). The region is home to around 370,000 inhabitants, almost half of whom live in rural areas.<sup>5</sup> Catatumbo is rich in biodiversity and natural resources, including fertile land for agriculture, diverse wildlife, and significant mineral and energy reserves.

Decades of armed conflict have deeply affected Catatumbo's social fabric. Since the 1970s, guerrilla groups such as the ELN, the Popular Liberation Army (*Ejército Popular de Liberación – EPL*), and the FARC-EP have maintained a strong presence in the area.<sup>6</sup> After 1999, the arrival of paramilitary groups intensified territorial disputes, leading to a sharp increase in massacres, forced displacement, enforced disappearances, and sexual violence.<sup>7</sup> Following the demobilization of the paramilitaries in the early 2000s, guerrilla groups reasserted their presence, and since the demobilization of the FARC-EP in 2017, the ELN has become the dominant armed group in the region. Given the importance of coca cultivation in Catatumbo and its crucial role for transnational drug trafficking, Catatumbo has strategic importance for the ELN, which also uses Venezuela as a refuge and an operational basis. While the State has maintained a limited presence in Catatumbo, the FARC-EP dissident group *Frente 33* has continued to dispute the ELN's territorial control over Catatumbo.<sup>8</sup>

### Causes: What explains the recent escalation of violence?

The current escalation of violence in Catatumbo and the grave humanitarian crisis result from a complex interplay of factors that have shaped the region's conflict dynamics.<sup>9</sup>

Structural causes that have created the conditions for the renewed cycle of armed conflict include Catatumbo's strategic relevance for armed groups and a history of neglect by the state, where basic needs such as health care, education, clean water, and housing remain largely unmet, further deepening the region's socioeconomic marginalization. In this context, non-state armed groups such as the ELN have established parallel structures of governance that regulate daily life. They provide security, resolve disputes, and oversee both legal and illicit economic activities. In addition to forced recruitment and extortion, armed groups also impose loyalty on civilians and sanction those suspected of collaborating with "the



Source: *Insight Crime* as cited by *BBC*. Source of the map: <https://d-maps.com/m/america/colombia/colombie/colombie21.svg> (edited)

enemy.” Local communities, thus, find themselves in a very difficult context, in which rival groups make competing demands for collaboration that are enforced and punished by violent means. In this context, attempts by the Colombian state to address the situation in Catatumbo through military means have rather tended to increase the vulnerability of the local population.<sup>10</sup>

Building on these structural conditions, two situational causes help explain the most recent escalation of violence:

**(1) The strengthening of the ELN:** With the demobilization of the FARC-EP in the context of the 2016 peace agreement, the ELN has been able to exploit the power vacuum in former FARC-EP strongholds, gradually absorbing territories and illicit economies previously controlled by this formerly competing guerrilla. According to official estimates, in 2018 the ELN had already grown from approximately 3,000 to 4,000 members, and by 2024 this number had reportedly grown to more than 6,000 fighters, making the ELN the largest active armed group in Colombia.<sup>11</sup> The ELN has also expanded its territorial presence, from 96 municipalities back in 2016<sup>12</sup> to 231 municipalities in 2024.<sup>13</sup> More recently, however, the ELN has seen increasing military challenges from competing armed

groups, in particular by the *Clan del Golfo*, a post-paramilitary group also known as the *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* (AGC) or *Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia* (EGC).<sup>14</sup> In this context, the border region with Venezuela, and Catatumbo in particular, has further gained strategic relevance for the ELN. On the one hand, as noted by the independent think tank *InSight Crime*, Catatumbo “has become one of Colombia’s most profitable coca markets,” which has well-established drug-trafficking routes to Venezuela.<sup>15</sup> In recent years, the ELN has also significantly expanded its presence and operations in this neighboring country, effectively becoming a “binational guerrilla,”<sup>16</sup> while also expanding its involvement in illegal mining inside Venezuela.<sup>17</sup>

**(2) The unintended effects of the government’s Total Peace policy:** Since Gustavo Petro took office in August 2022, the government has pursued an ambitious agenda dubbed *Paz Total*, or Total Peace. The aim has been to negotiate peace agreements with all the major armed groups, including the ELN and the alliance of FARC-EP dissident groups to which the *Frente 33* in Catatumbo belongs (*Estado Mayor Central – EMC*, now *Estado Mayor de los Bloques y Frentes – EMBF*).<sup>18</sup> In the context of the government’s peace talks with the ELN and the EMC, in

### Major non-state armed groups in Colombia

**ELN:** With roughly 6,000 fighters, the ELN guerrilla is currently the largest non-state armed group in Colombia. With the ELN, peace negotiations had advanced most but got into a crisis in 2024 as an important ELN faction (*Frente Comunereros del Sur*) sought separate talks with the government.

**Clan del Golfo:** The *Clan del Golfo* (or AGC or EGC) emerged from the demobilization of the paramilitaries in the early 2000s and quickly became a major criminal organization with national reach. In recent years, it has grown and expanded most aggressively and is considered to have around 5,000 members. After a year of explorations, in February 2025 the Petro government announced the beginning of negotiations with the group.

**FARC-EP dissident groups:** The broad and diverse range of *disidencias* combine factions that refused to lay down their arms, demobilized fighters that have returned to arms, and newly recruited members. Over the years, two competing alliances emerged that in 2023 were estimated to have almost 4,000 (EMC) and 2,000 members (*Segunda Marquetalia*). Negotiations with the Petro government have been difficult and in 2024 led to divisions within both alliances. The EMC splinter faction which is now called EMBF has continued the talks with the government.

2022 ELN and the *Frente 33* reportedly reached an informal agreement in Catatumbo, essentially distributing territorial control.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, the peace talks led to temporary ceasefires, which reduced violent clashes between ELN and EMC, on the one hand, and state security forces on the other.<sup>20</sup> In Catatumbo, this arrangement allowed both groups to coexist while benefiting from reduced military pressure.<sup>21</sup> In August 2024, however, the ceasefire between the ELN and the government expired, as the peace talks suffered from splits within the guerrilla organizations, while talks with the EMBF (after its separation from the EMC) continued.<sup>22</sup>

As observers suggest, both the ELN and the FARC-EP dissident groups have used peace talks and ceasefires to consolidate power, expand territorial control, and strengthen their grip over local populations and illicit economies, which has meant increasing clashes between the competing armed groups.<sup>23</sup> In fact, in November 2024, Colombia's Ombudsperson's Office issued an alert for Catatumbo, highlighting increasing violent activities by the ELN in response to the resumption of military operations by the state security forces after the end of the bilateral

ceasefire; an expansion of the FARC-EP dissident group *Frente 33*; and rising tensions between ELN and *Frente 33*.<sup>24</sup> In January 2025, the ELN finally decided to expel its rival from Catatumbo.<sup>25</sup>

### Implications for Colombia's difficult path towards building peace

The recent escalation of violence in Catatumbo has implications that go beyond the dramatic humanitarian crisis in the region itself.

First, recent events in Catatumbo will put additional strain on the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement. This most directly concerns the process of reintegrating former FARC-EP combatants. On 22 January 2025, a report by the Ombudsman's Office on the crisis in Catatumbo noted the forced displacement of 102 ex-combatants, the disappearance of seven, and the killing of six demobilized fighters.<sup>26</sup> This lack of effective state protection and security guarantees undermines ex-combatants' commitment to the peace agreement. The ELN has admitted the targeting of former combatants, claiming that these supposedly demobilized fighters had actually joined the FARC-EP dissident group.<sup>27</sup> Be this as it may, this narrative endangers the personal security and well-being of all ex-combatants who remain in the reintegration process. In addition, it undermines the relations between ex-combatants and local communities, a crucial foundation for successful reintegration processes.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, the inability of the government to offer the bare minimum of protection to the civilian population will most probably further erode trust in state institutions, thereby facilitating the local recruitment of armed groups. While the government's military response to the violence has calmed down the situation at least temporarily, militarization alone offers no sustainable solution. Furthermore, as community leaders from Catatumbo have warned, military offensives against armed groups in the past have brought "stigmatization," "criminalization of the civilian population," as well as "human rights violations on the part of the Armed Forces."<sup>29</sup>

Second, the crisis in Catatumbo also has important implications for the Total Peace agenda and future peace negotiations. Numerous studies, even if supporting the overall aim to negotiate peace with all major armed groups, have pointed to flaws in its design and implementation.<sup>30</sup> The recent events in Catatumbo underscore several key challenges for this strategy and future negotiations. As the developments in Catatumbo show, ceasefires that are neither accompanied by a reduction in illicit activities nor by an increasing state presence in the respective regions can be used by armed groups to expand and strengthen. Catatumbo also confirms the need to better coordinate

negotiations with individual groups, including ceasefires, so that groups that comply with agreements are not taken advantage of by others. On a more fundamental level, the crisis raises the difficult question of how to convince armed groups that benefit heavily from booming illicit markets to negotiate peace seriously and, in doing so, dismantle their business model. This challenge becomes even greater when these groups no longer seem to directly confront the state but instead turn against each other, aiming to dominate criminal economies.<sup>31</sup>

More specifically, the crisis puts a heavy burden on any future negotiation with the ELN. After a major crisis in the government's talks with this guerrilla, in late 2024, the two sides had just agreed to resume negotiations.<sup>32</sup> In response to the violent offensive of the ELN in Catatumbo, the government officially suspended the talks once again, also reactivating the arrest warrants against ELN negotiators.<sup>33</sup> Restarting talks and rebuilding a minimum of trust will be very difficult. The crisis – and the ELN actions in particular – will also further undermine popular support for future negotiations. Still, given the overall strength of the ELN, a viable alternative to a negotiated solution remains equally difficult to envision.

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DOI: [10.48809/PRIFTraCePB2508](https://doi.org/10.48809/PRIFTraCePB2508)



## About TraCe

What effects do global developments such as technologization and climate change have on political violence? How can political violence be limited or legitimized by international institutions? How is it interpreted and conceptualized? Since April 2022, these questions are addressed by the BMBF-funded regional research center "Transformations of Political Violence" (TraCe), in which five Hessian research institutions work together with a variety of disciplinary perspectives.

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This policy brief was written as part of the research project 'Regional Research Center Transformations of Political Violence' [01UG2203A], funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).



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