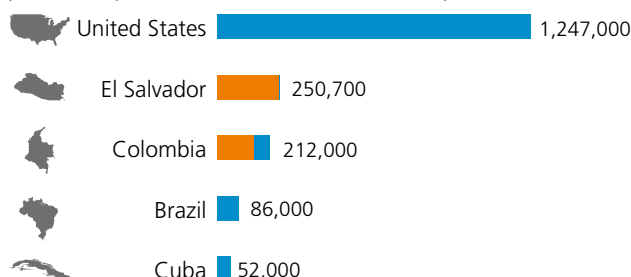


## THE AMERICAS



Conflict 404,000  
Disasters 1,687,000  
7.5% of the global total

### 5 COUNTRIES WITH MOST NEW DISPLACEMENT (conflict, violence and disasters)



Weather-related disasters once again impacted several countries in the Americas in 2018. In addition, unresolved conflict, criminal violence and social and economic crises continued to push people to flee. Disasters triggered the majority of new displacements in the region, accounting for around 1.7 million. In addition, about 404,000 new displacements associated with conflict and violence were recorded.

Hurricanes and wildfires triggered more than 1.2 million new displacements in the **United States**, the highest figure in the region. Florida was struck by two major hurricanes during the year. Hurricane Florence triggered 464,000 new displacements in August, and hurricane Michael another 375,000 in October. Unprecedented and devastating wildfires triggered 354,000 new displacements in California in the second half of the year, accounting for around 30 per cent of the total new displacements in the US (see United States spotlight, p.42).

Confrontations between different armed groups, intimidation and extortion triggered 145,000 new displacements in **Colombia** in 2018, an increase compared with previous years. The government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) signed a peace agreement in 2016, but to date the country's military has been unable to secure areas the demobilised guerrilla group used to control. The power vacuum has been filled by other armed groups vying for control of land, illegal mining and drug plantations and trafficking routes. Fighting between two smaller guerrilla

groups, the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), triggered most of the new displacements.

Norte de Santander was the worst affected department. Around 30,000 new displacements were recorded, the highest figure since 2002 and 20 per cent of the national total for last year. The department also shares a border with Venezuela, and its capital Cúcuta has been the main crossing point for refugees and migrants fleeing Venezuela's political and economic crisis (see Colombia spotlight, p.44).

More than 67,000 new displacements associated with disasters were also recorded in Colombia. Floods in the northern department of Antioquia led to more than 26,000 evacuations in April and May, when construction failures at the Ituango hydroelectric complex, Colombia's largest and one of its most controversial development projects combined with rising waters upstream, raising fears the dam would burst.<sup>190</sup> Torrential rains caused several rivers to break their banks in the southern department of Putumayo triggering more than 30,000 in August.

Around three million people have been recorded as fleeing **Venezuela** in the past 18 months, but the government's unwillingness to acknowledge its population's growing humanitarian needs means solid information about any internal displacement is scarce.<sup>191</sup> Evidence suggests that it has been significant, however, particularly toward border areas as people seek easier



*A city bus burned by gang members in Apopa, 19 kilometres away from the city of San Salvador, El Salvador. Photo: Shutterstock/ES James*

access to basic services in Colombian and Brazilian border towns.<sup>192</sup> Venezuela's crisis escalated significantly in 2018 as food shortages increased and the provision of basic services including electricity and healthcare deteriorated.<sup>193</sup>

At least 420 new displacements associated with conflict and violence were recorded in **Ecuador**, as the presence of FARC dissidents and drug trafficking groups such as the Mexican Sinaloa cartel in the province of Esmeraldas forced people to flee.<sup>194</sup> Esmeraldas is a strategic location for these groups because it shares sea and land borders with Tumaco, the largest coca-producing municipality in Colombia.<sup>195</sup> Joint military operations have taken place on both sides of the border and the emerging situation shows that drug production and trafficking remain significant drivers of conflict, instability and displacement in the region.

Violence associated with the drug trade also triggered at least 11,000 new displacements in **Mexico**, where the states of Chiapas, Guerrero, Michoacán, Oaxaca and Sinaloa were worst affected. Figures on internal displacement and policies to address it are far from comprehensive, but the modification of the coun-

try's General Victims Law to include IDPs as a vulnerable group and the Senate proposition to establish a specific law on IDP protection in 2018 are positive steps forward.<sup>196</sup>

Mexico also saw 13,000 new displacements triggered by hurricane Willa, which tracked across six states with wind speeds of up to 220 kilometres an hour in November. Many of these displacements can be attributed to evacuations organised by the authorities as a result of the advanced disaster risk management systems in place in the country.

In El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, which make up the **Northern Triangle of Central America**, high levels of violence, much of it urban, continued to trigger displacement. Gang activity, structural violence, generalised insecurity, heavy-handed state security responses, corruption and a culture of impunity have all been identified as drivers of internal and cross-border displacement in the region.<sup>197</sup>

Around 246,000 new displacements associated with conflict and violence were recorded in **El Salvador** and 950 in **Honduras**. Ongoing violence in **Guatemala**

suggests that displacement has taken place there too, but not enough data is available to compile an estimate. Of the three countries, not all recognise internal displacement associated with violence let alone collect data on it systematically, effectively rendering the phenomenon all but invisible. It is clear, however, that many IDPs fail to find safety and security in their own country, leading to significant numbers of cross-border movements within and beyond the region.<sup>198</sup> The caravans that gained momentum in 2018 are illustrative of this point.

## Urban perspectives

Many countries in the Americas have undergone rapid urbanisation over the last 50 years, and with it came a concentration of economic development in and around large cities. Increasing trade and employment opportunities have drawn economic migrants from rural areas and secondary and less economically active cities toward capitals and other major urban centres.<sup>199</sup> Internal displacement has tended to follow similar patterns.<sup>200</sup> These influxes have combined with natural urban demographic growth to make the Americas the most urbanised region in the world, with around 80 per cent of its population living in towns and cities.<sup>201</sup>

Its urban centres are characterised by the concentration of wealth in specific pockets and among specific groups, creating socioeconomic and spatial inequalities that drive urban poverty, segregation and marginalisation. Many poor people, including IDPs, live in rapidly expanding but unplanned, unregulated and underserved settlements in peri-urban areas.<sup>202</sup>

This issue is among the region's main urban challenges. Poorly planned urban development in the US has increased disaster risk in many cities, and evidence shows that disasters disproportionately affect poor households living in exposed areas, often leading to their displacement.<sup>203</sup> Estimates also suggest that more than 20 per cent of Latin America's urban population live in unregulated and underserved settlements, many of them built in hazard-prone and often insecure areas.<sup>204</sup> This puts the urban poor at particularly high risk of displacement triggered by disasters, criminal violence and evictions.

Many of the region's cities rank among the most dangerous in the world, and cases of individuals and families being forced to flee targeted and generalised

gang violence have been documented.<sup>205</sup> Violence perpetrated by criminal groups associated with drug trafficking in Mexico has triggered displacement in many cities, including Ciudad Juárez, Culiacan and Tijuana.<sup>206</sup> Direct and indirect security threats have also been observed to trigger intra-urban displacement, in which people move from one neighbourhood to another, in cities including San Salvador in El Salvador and Medellín in Colombia (see Medellín and San Salvador spotlight, p.81).<sup>207</sup> The scale and dynamics of urban displacement associated with criminal violence, however, remain poorly captured and understood across the region.

Some countries have implemented successful urban poverty reduction measures, particularly by upgrading informal settlements. Many initiatives in Brazil have combined physical and architectural with social and participatory components to prevent evictions and displacement.<sup>208</sup> Urban regeneration projects in Colombia that combine improved transport, security and social support have benefited hundreds of thousands of poor urban dwellers, including IDPs living in marginalised peri-urban areas.<sup>209</sup> Disaster risk reduction initiatives have also helped to mitigate displacement risk in cities such as Santa Fe in Argentina, Montego Bay in Jamaica and Lima in Peru.<sup>210</sup>

Cities in the Americas will play an ever-greater role in supporting durable solutions and reducing the risk of displacement. Robust urban planning with a focus on risk reduction and conflict prevention will be vital if its triggers and drivers are to be addressed and its impacts reduced.<sup>211</sup>

## SPOTLIGHT

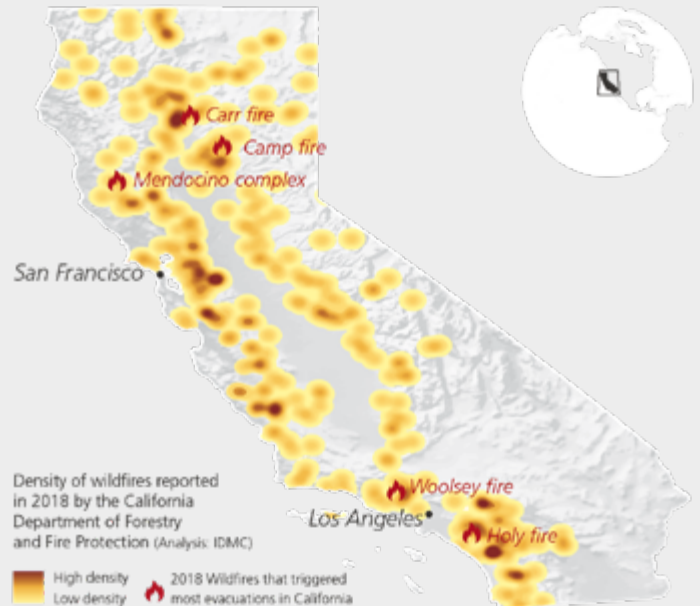
# UNITED STATES

## California wildfires: urban expansion and the risk of displacement

The western US state of California is highly prone to wildfires. In recent years, the combination of climate change and people's increased vulnerability and exposure to hazards made the wildfire seasons longer and more destructive. The extension of the two long seasons, the first spanning from June to September and the other from October to April, has the potential of turning wildfires into a year-round threat.<sup>212</sup> Prolonged drought, higher temperatures, stronger winds and the overuse of water for agriculture have caused significant harm to local ecosystems, leaving forests tinder-dry and littered with dead wood.<sup>213</sup> The increasing housing stock in the wildland-urban interface, where housing meets and intermingles with wildland vegetation, also means ever more homes are exposed to fire risk, which in turn increases the risk of displacement.<sup>214</sup>

The state experienced the deadliest and most destructive outbreak of wildfires in its history in the second half of 2018, burning about 355,000 hectares of land, four times the annual average for the past five years.<sup>215</sup> More than 100 people are thought to have died. At least 22 wildfires triggered over 354,000 new displacements, accounting for almost 30 per cent of the total new displacements recorded in the United States last year. The Carr, Holy and Mendocino Complex fires, named after the places where they started, forced the evacuation of over 90,000 people in July and August, and during the Woolsey and Camp fires a further 235,000 people in November.

Camp fire alone killed 85 people, displaced at least 53,000 and destroyed almost 14,000 homes.<sup>216</sup> It burnt 62,000 hectares of land and caused between \$11 and \$13 billion in commercial and residential losses. It was not the largest fire. Mendocino Complex burned almost



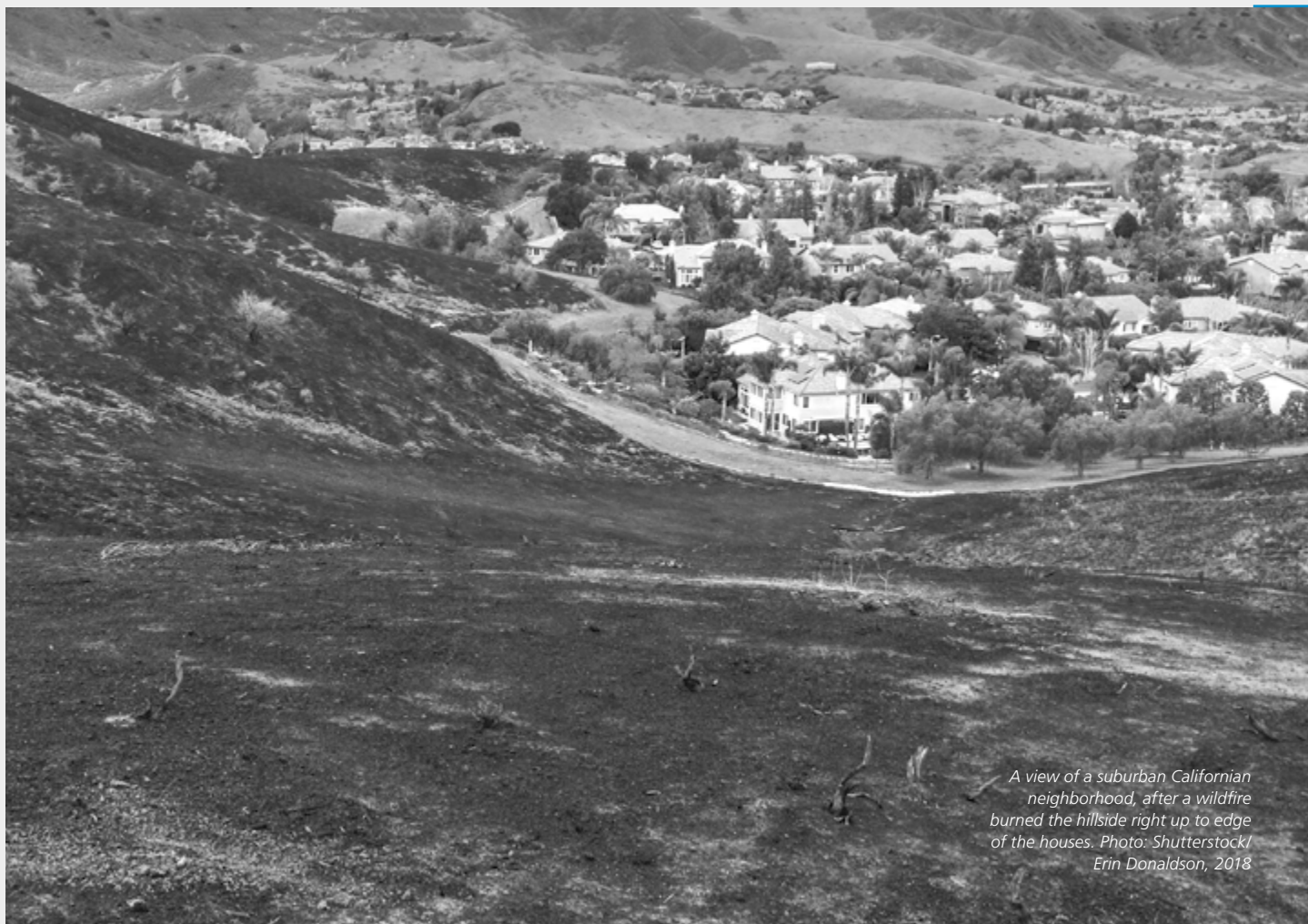
four times the area. Nor was it unique in how fast it spread. The Tubbs fire in 2017 moved at similar speeds. What set Camp fire apart and made it the deadliest and most destructive fire in California's history was what happened in Paradise, a town which lay in its path.<sup>217</sup>

Paradise, a picturesque town in Butte county nestled in the Sierra Nevada foothills, had a large percentage of its homes in the wildland-urban interface, increasing the town and its residents' exposure and vulnerability to wildfires.<sup>218</sup> Within a few hours of taking hold, the fire had spread and destroyed most of the town, displacing about 30,000 people. It was an example of urban conflagration, a phenomenon last seen more than a century ago in which a fire leaps from structure to structure igniting them as it goes.<sup>219</sup>

Since the 1906 San Francisco fire, urban design and development have included better materials and more defensible spaces, space between buildings and grass, trees or shrub, to prevent fire from spreading quickly.<sup>220</sup> Since the 1990s, however, millions of homes have been built in undeveloped areas on the fringes of towns and cities. This has increased the interface between wilderness and urban areas, and the trend is set to continue as ever more people move to such places to live closer to nature and reduce living costs.<sup>221</sup>

If future urban conflagrations are to be prevented, homes in the wildland-urban interface will have to be built with more fire-retardant materials and larger defensible spaces between them to slow the spread of fires.<sup>222</sup> The California Board of Forestry and Fire Protection recommends that homes have between 30 and 100 feet (10 to 30 metres) of defensible space, but without





*A view of a suburban Californian neighborhood, after a wildfire burned the hillside right up to edge of the houses. Photo: Shutterstock/ Erin Donaldson, 2018*

state enforcement of regulations on private property, such guidelines are more often than not ignored.<sup>223</sup>

In an area that was already experiencing a housing shortage, Camp fire left thousands of people homeless. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has dispersed millions of dollars in assistance to those who lost their homes, but many of those displaced still struggle to find somewhere to live locally. FEMA is encouraging people to look for housing in Sacramento, 135 kilometres away, and further afield, but this would disconnect people from their livelihoods and social networks.<sup>224</sup> The lack of available and affordable housing in the area will inevitably affect those with fewer resources the most.

The 2018 wildfire season in California demonstrates how climate change and urban expansion have combined to intensify fires, alter their patterns and extend the seasons. Average temperatures will continue to rise and populations living in the wildland-urban interface to grow, exposing more people to the risk of displace-

ment. The disaster in Paradise offers an example of what the future may hold if authorities do not enforce urban planning legislation and strengthen disaster prevention and response.<sup>225</sup>

## SPOTLIGHT

# COLOMBIA

## Norte de Santander, where two displacement crises converge

Two displacement crises converged in Colombia in 2018. The one that has attracted by far the most media attention had its origins in neighbouring Venezuela, where more than 3.4 million people are thought to have fled the country to escape economic meltdown and hyperinflation, increasing criminality and human rights abuses, worsening food shortages and deteriorating provision of goods and services.<sup>226</sup> Colombia has received more than half of Venezuela's refugees and migrants. Some have continued their journey onward to Ecuador and elsewhere in the region, but more than a million have stayed in the country.<sup>227</sup> Between 300,000 and 500,000 Colombians have also returned from Venezuela since the start of the crisis.<sup>228</sup>

These events have diverted the international community's attention and resources away from ongoing internal displacement in Colombia. Many aid providers now dedicate less than 30 per cent of their resources to the issue.<sup>229</sup> Despite the 2016 peace agreement between the government and the FARC, the number of new displacements associated with conflict and violence increased in 2018 compared with the previous year to more than 145,000.<sup>230</sup> In addition, 5.8 million people remain displaced in Colombia as of the end of the year.

The situation in Norte de Santander department, which borders Venezuela, is of particular concern. Around 30,000 new internal displacements associated with conflict and violence were recorded in 2018, the highest figure since 2002.<sup>231</sup> Within the department, the Catatumbo region has been particularly hard hit. Once a FARC stronghold, the territory has since been retaken by the ELN and the EPL, two other guerrilla groups which have been present in the area for decades. FARC dissidents and other armed groups have also joined the fray.<sup>232</sup>



Armed clashes intensified after the breakdown of an agreement between these groups on illegal businesses, including drug trafficking. Not only did coca cultivation in Catatumbo increase by 145 per cent between 2015 and 2017, but the expansion of the drug trade combined with the reconfiguration of conflict has led to a growing number of attacks against civilians.<sup>233</sup> At least 31 social leaders were assassinated in Norte de Santander in 2018, out of a national total of 172.<sup>234</sup>

Fighting between ELN and EPL in January and March restricted the movement of almost 18,000 civilians, whose access to basic goods, livelihoods and health services was also impeded. Humanitarian organisations struggled to reach those affected.<sup>235</sup> Children's education was also disrupted when 80 schools had to suspend classes because of violence and the presence of landmines.<sup>236</sup>

The accompanying influx of Venezuelans risks undermining livelihood opportunities for the department's IDPs and poor host communities. The situation in the capital, Cúcuta, highlights some of the challenges associated with the combination of internal and cross-border movements. Not only is it a destination for IDPs fleeing conflict and violence in rural areas of the department. It is also the busiest border crossing between Colombia and Venezuela, and hosts more Venezuelans than any



Venezuelan refugees and migrants cross the Simon Bolivar Bridge, one of 7 legal entry points on the Colombia-Venezuela border, the largest entry point with over 30,000 people crossing into Colombia on a daily basis. Photo © UNHCR/Siegfried Modola, January 2019

other municipality in the country. Thousands cross the border every day in search of food, medicine and basic services.<sup>237</sup> Hospitals and other social service providers struggle to meet the growing population's basic needs, and local authorities are close to overwhelmed.<sup>238</sup>

Cúcuta has the highest unemployment rate in the country, reaching 15.8 per cent between September and November 2018.<sup>239</sup> It also has the highest participation rate for informal labour, at more than 68 per cent of the workforce.<sup>240</sup> The influx of Venezuelans has increased competition for this type of work. There are few alternatives and some IDPs report finding it harder to secure employment.<sup>241</sup> The integration of Venezuelans into the workforce is well recognised as an unprecedented challenge for Colombia.<sup>242</sup>

This, in turn, has led to a rise in xenophobia toward Venezuelans. Threatening leaflets have been circulated in Cúcuta, Molotov cocktails have been thrown at places where they live and they have been targeted for robbery and extortion.<sup>243</sup> The lack of opportunities and increasingly hostile environment have led some

who cross the border into the city to move on directly elsewhere in Colombia, or further afield to Ecuador, Peru and Chile.<sup>244</sup> International humanitarian organisations, government agencies and the private sector have introduced initiatives to tackle xenophobia and refocus attention on the true priorities of the region's unprecedented displacement crisis.<sup>245</sup>

The government in Bogota has adopted an open and supportive approach to the influx of Venezuelans, of whom as many as 770,000 entered Colombia in 2018. In a spirit of reciprocity, it has acknowledged that in the past, Colombians have flowed into Venezuela in search of better opportunities or to escape conflict and violence. More than 574,000 Venezuelans were officially registered in Colombia as of February 2019, 240,000 were in process of registering and 218,000 had no legal status.<sup>246</sup> Supporting these refugees and migrants is rightly a priority in the region, but doing so should not be at the expense of those internally displaced, particularly at a time when peacebuilding and reconciliation are key priorities in Colombia.