



NOTE

This is an excerpt from IDMC's 2019 Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID).

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.²²⁶ 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.²²⁷ Between 300,000 and 500,000 Colombians have also returned from Venezuela since the start of the crisis.²²⁸

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.²²⁹ 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 145,000.²³⁰ 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 2002.²³¹ 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.²³²



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.²³³ At least 31 social leaders were assassinated in Norte de Santander in 2018, out of a national total of 172.²³⁴

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.²³⁵ Children's education was also disrupted when 80 schools had to suspend classes because of violence and the presence of landmines.²³⁶

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 Bolívar 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.²³⁷ Hospitals and other social service providers struggle to meet the growing population's basic needs, and local authorities are close to overwhelmed.²³⁸

Cúcuta has the highest unemployment rate in the country, reaching 15.8 per cent between September and November 2018.²³⁹ It also has the highest participation rate for informal labour, at more than 68 per cent of the workforce.²⁴⁰ 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.²⁴¹ The integration of Venezuelans into the workforce is well recognised as an unprecedented challenge for Colombia.²⁴²

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.²⁴³ 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.²⁴⁴ 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.²⁴⁵

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.²⁴⁶ 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.

| Notes

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