



Home Office

Country Policy and Information Note

Colombia: Armed Groups and Criminal Gangs

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Executive summary

Two dominant armed groups in Colombia – the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC, also known as the Gulf Clan) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) - operate alongside and against more than 30 dissident armed groups of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and a similar number of criminal gangs.

Armed groups and criminal gangs exert control and influence mainly in rural areas close to Colombia's international borders and coastlines. Criminal gangs also operate in urban centres.

Armed group and criminal gang members are usually youths/young men under 24 who are lacking in alternative economic opportunities. Women are also recruited into groups and gangs, typically though not exclusively, into gender-stereotyped support roles. Children as young as 8 may be enticed or forced to join groups.

The main sources of revenue for armed groups and criminal gangs come from their involvement in the drugs trade and extortion. Their main activities include the routine exercise of control over territory through violence and threats, kidnappings, the use of explosive ordnance, and human trafficking. Many armed groups have been, or are currently, involved in armed conflict with the state and/or one another. Groups and gangs may also impose invisible borders and curfews within areas under their control.

A person fearing persecution from an armed group or criminal gang is **not likely** to fall within the Refugee Convention on the grounds of political opinion.

In general, a person living in an area occupied by an armed group or criminal gang is likely to face persecution or serious harm **in that area, only when:**

- a. (i) they are considered by the group or gang to be a 'military objective' or 'target', **and/or**
(ii) they are otherwise perceived by the group to seriously oppose or hinder the group's activities or interests, **and**
- b. the size and/or presence of the group or gang is such that it has significant control and influence over the area, rather than merely operating within it

Persons who may become military objectives of an armed group or criminal gang include human rights defenders, environmental activists, witnesses and informants and former gang members.

The state is willing but not able to provide protection against the most powerful of the armed groups, such as the AGC and the ELN.

However, the state is willing and able to provide effective protection against smaller gangs and armed groups with limited influence and control over one or more areas.

Internal relocation is likely to be viable depending on the facts of the case.

A refused claim is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

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Assessment

About the assessment

This section considers the evidence relevant to this note – that is information in the [country information](#), refugee/human rights laws and policies, and applicable caselaw – and provides an assessment of whether, **in general**:

- a person is likely to face a real risk of persecution/serious harm at the hands of armed groups and criminal gangs
- a person is able to obtain protection from the state (or quasi state bodies)
- a person is reasonably able to relocate within a country or territory
- a grant of asylum, humanitarian protection or other form of leave is likely, and
- if a claim is refused, it is likely or unlikely to be certifiable as ‘clearly unfounded’ under [section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002](#).

Decision makers **must**, however, still consider all claims on an individual basis, taking into account each case’s specific facts.

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Points to note

The term ‘FARC-EP’ is used by various sources cited within the country information (section 7 onwards) in this document, to refer to (a) the demobilised guerrilla militia group, FARC, in its original form; (b) its successor group of dissidents who refused to lay down arms and formed after FARC’s demobilisation; and/or (c) both groups (sometimes interchangeably).

For the purpose of the assessment (sections 1 to 6) in this document, ‘FARC’ has been used to refer to the group that demobilised in 2016/2017 and the term ‘FARC-EP’ to refer to the dissident group of former-FARC members who re-formed.

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1. Material facts, credibility and other checks/referrals

1.1 Credibility

- 1.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).
- 1.1.2 Decision makers must also check if there has been a previous application for a UK visa or another form of leave. Asylum applications matched to visas should be investigated prior to the asylum interview (see the [Asylum Instruction on Visa Matches, Asylum Claims from UK Visa Applicants](#)).
- 1.1.3 In cases where there are doubts surrounding a person’s claimed place of origin, decision makers should also consider language analysis testing, where available (see the [Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis](#)).

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1.2 Exclusion

- 1.2.1 Armed groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC, also known as the Gulf Clan), the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – Army of the People (FARC-EP), the Segunda Marquetalia, the United Self-defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) and the criminal gang, Tren de Aragua, have been responsible for serious human rights abuses. They have also, at various times, been designated as terrorist organisations in the European Union and/or the United States. Other armed groups and criminal gangs have also been responsible for serious human rights abuses (see [Overview: Activities and impact](#), [Armed groups](#), and [Vulnerable groups: Overview](#)).
- 1.2.2 If the person has been involved with FARC and/or another armed group or criminal gang, decision makers must consider whether there are serious reasons for considering whether one (or more) of the exclusion clauses is applicable. Each case must be considered on its individual facts and merits.
- 1.2.3 If the person is excluded from the Refugee Convention, they will also be excluded from a grant of humanitarian protection (which has a wider range of exclusions than refugee status).
- 1.2.4 For guidance on exclusion and restricted leave, see the Asylum Instruction on [Exclusion under Articles 1F and 33\(2\) of the Refugee Convention](#), [Humanitarian Protection](#) and the instruction on [Restricted Leave](#).

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2. Convention reason(s)

- 2.1.1 A person who fears an armed group or criminal gang is not likely to be able to demonstrate a link to the Refugee Convention on grounds of political opinion. This is because, while non-state armed groups maintain (and vie for) pockets of territorial control, and carry out some state-like functions in areas of control, their presence and capacity are not so pervasive to be considered ‘political’ in nature.
- 2.1.2 In the country guidance case of [EMAP \(Gang violence, Convention Reason\)](#), heard on 27 April and 9 June 2022 and promulgated on 16 November 2022, the Upper Tribunal (UT) considered whether persons who fear a gang in EI

Salvador fall within the scope of the Refugee Convention on the grounds of political opinion.

2.1.3 The UT in [EMAP](#) held that the main gangs operating in El Salvador, MS-13 and Barrio 18, are 'political actors' and that:

'... (ii) Individuals who hold an opinion, thought or belief relating to the gangs, their policies or methods hold a political opinion about them.

'(iii) Whether such an individual faces persecution for reasons of that political opinion will always be a question of fact. In the context of El Salvador it is an enquiry that should be informed by the following:

'(a) The major gangs of El Salvador must now be regarded as political actors;

(b) Their criminal and political activities heavily overlap;

(c) The less immediately financial in nature the action, the more likely it is to be for reasons of the victim's perceived opposition to the gangs.'

(Headnote, paragraphs (ii) and (iii))

2.1.4 The UT in [EMAP](#) provided further analysis of the applicability of political opinion in paragraphs 112 to 122 of the determination. It considered that there are a range of reasons why a gang (or gangs) target a person, not all of which will fall within the Refugee Convention.

2.1.5 The UT's findings in [EMAP](#) are specific to El Salvador but the situations in El Salvador and Colombia have some similarities and merit comparison. Both have high levels of organised crime dominated by gangs which have de facto control over parts of the country and have sought to influence the state (see [Risk](#)).

2.1.6 However there are significant differences between the 2 countries:

- Colombia has a more diverse criminal landscape with up to 60 criminal gangs as well as armed groups with paramilitary or guerrilla militia origins - large transnational groups and smaller local outfits - working and competing with the largest 2 groups, the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC, also known as the Gulf Clan) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). As a result, the AGC and ELN are not as dominant as the MS-13 and Barrio 18 are in El Salvador (see [Risk](#)).
- The AGC and ELN are reported to be absolutely and relatively smaller in Colombia (up to 15,000 members, ~0.03% of the population) than the MS-13 and Barrio 18 in El Salvador (60,000 members, 1% of the total population). Reportedly, all armed group and criminal gang members in Colombia (17,600 to 36,000, ~0.036% to ~0.073% of the population) are significantly fewer in number and proportion than only the MS-13 and Barrio 18 in El Salvador.
- Armed groups and criminal gangs in Colombia exert less control and influence than their equivalents in El Salvador. Estimates indicate that during the armed strikes in March and May 2022, when groups temporarily exerted greater influence and control (than normal), the AGC controlled nearly 16% of Colombia's municipalities, while the ELN controlled almost 6%. In comparison in El Salvador sources described

gangs consistently wielding control or exerting influence in over 94% of the country (see [EMAP](#), [Risk](#), [Internal relocation](#), [Size of groups](#), [Territorial control and capability](#), [ELN](#) and [Population of Colombia](#)).

- In El Salvador, MS-13 and Barrio 18, and gangs generally including international drugs trafficking groups, have sought to influence the state. However, the influence of armed groups and criminal gangs on political affairs in Colombia is not as extensive as in El Salvador (see [Risk](#), [Links with government and politicians](#) and [Corruption and state abuses](#)).

- 2.1.7 On the available evidence, the situations are sufficiently different to conclude that armed groups and criminal gangs in Colombia are not ‘political actors’ and that the UT’s findings in [EMAP](#) in relation to political opinion **do not apply** to a fear of such groups in Colombia. Therefore a person who fears a gang in Colombia does **not** fall within scope of the Refugee Convention on grounds of political opinion (see [Risk](#)).
- 2.1.8 Even if they could, establishing a Convention reason is not sufficient to be recognised as a refugee. The question is whether the person has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of an actual or imputed Refugee Convention reason.
- 2.1.9 For further guidance on the 5 Refugee Convention grounds see the Asylum Instruction, [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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3. Risk

- 3.1.1 Whether a person is at risk from an armed group or criminal gang will depend on:
- their profile, actions, and the reason(s) for the group’s interest,
 - the area the person usually resides in and will return to; and
 - the group’s intent, size, reach and capabilities.
- 3.1.2 In general, a person living in an area occupied by an armed group or criminal gang is likely to face persecution or serious harm **in that area, only when:**
- (i) they are considered by the group or gang to be a ‘military objective’ or ‘target’, **and/or**
 - (ii) they are otherwise perceived by the group to seriously oppose or hinder the group’s activities or interests, **and**
 - b. the size and/or presence of the group or gang is such that it has significant control and influence over the area, rather than merely operating within it

Persons who may become military objectives of an armed group or criminal gang include human rights defenders, environmental activists, witnesses and informants and former gang members.

- 3.1.3 Compared with the wider population of Colombia, indigenous and afro-descendant persons may face a higher risk of discrimination and the general impacts of armed groups’/criminal gangs’ activities due to the resource-rich, strategic regions in which these communities generally live. However, they

are not likely to face persecution or serious harm due to their race alone.

- 3.1.4 While women and LGBTI persons may face an increased risk of violence/sexual violence, and children an increased risk of forced recruitment, compared with the wider population of Colombia, these groups are not, in general, at risk of persecution (see relevant para(s) below). Similarly, landowners, public workers including healthcare workers and journalists are also at increased risk of discrimination compared to the wider population of Colombia. However, these groups are not, in general, at risk of persecution (see relevant para(s) below). The onus is on the person to demonstrate otherwise.
- 3.1.5 Colombia has a complex history of armed conflict and a diverse criminal landscape. Today, the 2 largest armed groups are paramilitary group, the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC), and left-wing guerrilla militia group, the National Liberation Army (ELN). Operating alongside, and against, them are over 30 armed dissident groups (which emerged after former guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), demobilised in 2016/2017) and between around 20 to 30, but potentially up to 60, criminal gangs (see [Overview: Numbers and territorial presence](#), [Armed groups](#) and [Criminal gangs](#)).
- 3.1.6 Sources indicate the AGC's territorial control, predominantly and traditionally in the north/northwest of Colombia, has expanded to the Pacific coast and the Panama and Ecuador borders. During armed strikes held by the AGC in May 2022, the group reportedly controlled 178 municipalities across 11 departments. It also attempted, with little success, to take over territory close to the Venezuelan border, an area increasingly dominated by the ELN. In its own March 2022 display of control, the ELN launched attacks in 66 municipalities in 11 departments (though impacting 17) in the northwest, southwest, and east. The ELN is also extending into remote southern departments, where FARC dissidents too are present, particularly along the Ecuador, Peru and Amazonian-Brazil borders. Present in over 119 municipalities in 2022, FARC dissidents are also nearby the Venezuelan border in the east and the Pacific coast in the west, while criminal groups similarly operate in international border/coastal regions, but also in urban centres including Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, and Buenaventura (see [Overview: Numbers and territorial presence](#), [Armed groups](#) and [Criminal gangs](#)).
- 3.1.7 Estimated numbers of members of armed groups and criminal gangs vary depending on the source. For all groups and gangs, estimates range between 17,600 and 36,000 (~0.036 to ~0.073% of the total population), while for Colombia's two largest groups, the AGC and ELN, estimates range respectively from 1,200 to 9,000, and from 2,500 to almost 6,200. However, some sources did not specify whether estimates referred to armed combatants, non-armed members, or both. Further, some of the ELN, EMC, and Segunda Marquetalia are reportedly in Venezuela, though how many is unclear (see [Overview: Numbers and territorial presence](#), [Population and demography](#), [AGC/Gulf Clan](#) and [ELN](#)).
- 3.1.8 Members of armed groups and criminal gangs are usually male youths, under 24 years old, and lacking in alternative economic opportunities. Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds can be recruited as young

as 12 years old for combat purposes and 8 years old to run errands, often lured to join groups or gangs by enticing offers. The UN Secretary General indicated that of 130 children it verified as having been recruited in 2022, 100 were released, 18 were killed, and 12 remained associated. However, other sources suggested release is unlikely and escape is rare and dangerous. While there are inherent difficulties with ascertaining the true extent of the forced recruitment of children by groups and gangs, available information supports that numbers are proportionately low. Overall, more boys than girls are recruited. However, girls are more likely to be recruited for the purposes of sexual exploitation (see [Recruitment and leaving armed groups and criminal gangs](#)).

- 3.1.9 The main sources of revenue for armed groups and criminal gangs are drugs-manufacture/trafficking, and extortion, as well as arms trading, illegal mining and logging, and human trafficking including sexual exploitation. Armed groups/criminal gangs commit other crimes including murder, sexual violence, kidnappings, the unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers, the use of explosive ordnance, forced displacements and confinements (see [Overview: Activities and impact](#)).
- 3.1.10 Armed groups and criminal gangs declare persons they consider oppose or hinder their activities or interests as ‘military objectives’ or ‘targets’. Persons targeted may include human rights defenders, social/political leaders, landowners, environmental activists, witnesses/informants, public/judicial workers, former FARC members, and those who evade groups’/gangs’ recruitment attempts, or who escape once recruited. Sources indicate that armed groups/criminal gangs may threaten a target’s family members in order to reach them. Sources also indicate that indigenous and afro-descendant persons fall victim to armed groups’/criminal gangs’ activities disproportionately due to their collective land ownership, relative poverty, and/ or their remoteness, geographically, and therefore from protection mechanisms and employment opportunities (see [Targets of non-state group violence](#), [Recruitment and leaving armed groups and criminal gangs](#) and [Overview: Activities and impact](#)).
- 3.1.11 Women and girls bear the brunt of sexual violence inflicted by groups/gangs and are vulnerable to being recruited for sexual exploitation. In 2023, the United Nations’ OHCHR received 100 allegations of armed conflict-related gender-based violence. The UN verified sexual violence perpetrated against 17 girls by armed groups in 2022 (see [Vulnerable groups](#), [Recruitment of children](#) and [Population and demography](#)).
- 3.1.12 Sources indicate some instances of armed groups and criminal gangs subjecting LGBTI persons to violence/sexual violence/designation as military targets. However, the available information does not indicate a significant prevalence of gang or armed group violence targeting LGBTI persons amounting to a general risk of persecution (see [Vulnerable groups](#)).
- 3.1.13 The 2016 government/FARC peace agreement affected an initial decline in Colombia’s level of violence. However, a return to pre-agreement levels followed within the first six months of the agreement, and violence and killings at the hands of armed groups/criminal gangs continue; as of February 2023, the Colombian city of Buenaventura was named the world’s

13th most dangerous city based on its murder rates. This is due to the activities of, and conflict between, two criminal groups, the Shottas and the Espartanos. In 2022 the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) verified 92 of 128 allegations of massacres (defined as the murder of at least 3 civilians in a single incident), with 321 victims. Criminal organisations were the main alleged perpetrators (see [Overview: Activities and impact](#), [Other criminal gangs](#), and [Effectiveness of state protection mechanisms](#)).

- 3.1.14 The conflict-related activities of armed groups/criminal gangs, and their use of violence to intimidate and coerce communities, has resulted in the increased displacement of Colombians since the 2016 peace agreement, from 10,000 to tens of thousands per year.
- 3.1.15 Estimated displacement figures for 2022 varied widely between sources, ranging from approximately 85,000 people (~0.17% of Colombia's 2023 population) to 339,000 people (~0.69%). Despite the variation, all sources agreed this was an increase compared to 2021.
- 3.1.16 Figures for confinement (where people are forced to remain in their homes or neighbourhoods) also increased, with estimates of up to 119,000 people (~0.24% of the 2023 population) in 2022, compared to just over 1,400 people (<0.003%) in 2017.
- 3.1.17 In 2023, these figures decreased. Freedom House reported 19,000 people (~0.04%) displaced in the first half of 2023, compared to over 35,000 (~0.07%) during the same period in 2022. Human Rights Watch recorded 64,000 people (~0.13%) confined between January and October 2023, down from 96,000 (~0.19%) during the same period in 2022.
- 3.1.18 Indigenous and afro-descendant communities have been disproportionately affected by these displacements and confinements, as criminal groups often exploit the remote regions where they live (see [Freedom of movement](#), [Population and demography](#) and [Indigenous and afro-descendant persons](#)).
- 3.1.19 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the Asylum Instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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4. Protection

- 4.1.1 In general, the state is willing but is unlikely to be able to provide effective protection against the most powerful of the armed groups, such as the AGC and the ELN. This is because of poor implementation of security policies, low presence of security forces in rural areas where most armed group/gang abuses occur, and corruption.
- 4.1.2 However, the state is, in general, both willing and likely able to provide effective protection where the size and/or presence of the feared group or gang is such that it does not have significant control over or influence in the area in question, but merely operates within it.
- 4.1.3 Each case must be considered on its facts, taking into account the group's nature, capability and intent, and the profile of the person.
- 4.1.4 The Colombian National Police (CNP) and Colombian National Army (CNA),

which have around 180,000 and 225,000 personnel respectively are responsible for operations against illegal armed groups. In addition, the National Protection Unit (UNP), is responsible for the protection of communities and individuals at risk. The Petro government of Colombia, which came to power in August 2022 has introduced what is widely considered to be a radical policy called 'Total Peace' which seeks to negotiate with around 25 armed groups and criminal gangs simultaneously (see [Security forces](#) and [Government policies, legislation and approach](#)).

- 4.1.5 Crimes committed by armed groups and criminal gangs may be tried by Colombia's Justice and Peace Tribunal, or by a transitional justice system. The latter, created by the 2016 government/FARC peace deal, comprises 3 strands: the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP – which tries pre-1 December 2016 conflict-related crimes); the Search Unit for Presumably Disappeared Persons (UBPD – which oversees/contributes to the search for conflict-related disappeared persons); and the Commission for the Clarification of the Truth (Truth Commission/CEV – which is tasked with establishing the truth of the conflict, ending in June 2022 with its final report). Some sources indicate that Colombia's judicial system is generally stable and independent of its executive. However, sources also indicate instances of corruption and inefficiencies and, consequently, instances of impunity (see [Judicial system](#), and [Political structure and climate](#)).
- 4.1.6 The state has had some success in combating armed groups'/criminal gangs' activities. The JEP prosecuted several high-ranking military figures, and before its August 2022 exit, Colombia's previous government saw once-dominant criminal groups, including the Rastrojos, weakened. With the introduction of 'Total Peace', over 25 armed groups/criminal gangs engaged or showed interest and the current government proved capable of at least opening negotiations and securing tentative concessions from armed groups and gangs. A drop in murder rates followed including in Buenaventura, one of Colombia's most dangerous cities. The USSD said that in 2023 the state generally investigated human rights abuses and violent crimes by armed groups and prosecuted those responsible ([Effectiveness of state protection mechanisms](#), [Government policies, legislation and approach](#)).
- 4.1.7 However, while murders dropped slightly, other forms of armed group violence/criminal activity reportedly rose, as did the murder rate in Buenaventura after its initial decline. Unilateral government ceasefires in the first 6 months of 2023 reportedly afforded armed groups/criminal gangs the respite to grow in size and grip. A survey suggested only 28.5% of Colombians felt 'Total Peace' was working well while 67% felt public security had deteriorated (though the parameters of the survey were not stated), and less than 15% of 9 million armed conflict-registered victims received reparations by August 2023. Despite mixed reporting about whether security services are adequately resourced, there was consensus that they fell short on implementation and were hindered by corruption (See [Effectiveness of state protection mechanisms](#), [Corruption / collusion with armed groups](#), and [Overview: Numbers and territorial presence](#)).
- 4.1.8 Colombia's judicial systems, while generally stable, are undermined by inefficiencies, corruption, and interference by groups and gangs. Sources

indicate witnesses and judicial workers may be threatened, intimidated, and subjected to violent reprisals by armed groups or criminal gangs, and witnesses may be made ‘military targets’ by them. A lack of witness protection, and that armed groups have infiltrated and corrupted local state authorities, has led to a distrust of security forces and a reluctance of witnesses to report crimes. However a reluctance to report crimes or seek protection does not in itself mean protection is not available (see [Judicial system](#), [Effectiveness of state protection mechanisms](#), [Corruption / collusion with armed groups](#), [Witnesses and informants](#), and [Witness protection](#)).

- 4.1.9 Armed groups and criminal gangs manage the prevention of crime and lay down justice in areas under their control. International Crisis Group noted that in some ELN- and FARC-dissident-controlled areas, residents take problems to the controlling group to resolve, and community representatives report this system to be “effective”. Most indigenous and afro-descendant communities also have an internal mechanism for the provision of protection and justice within their territories. ‘Ancestral guards’, which claim to be unarmed, are recognised by the Colombian authorities providing they comply with Colombian legislation. However, indigenous authorities have become targets of armed groups and criminal gangs and are therefore unlikely to be able to offer effective protection against such groups (see [Non-state protection mechanisms](#), [Overview: Activities and impact](#), [Indigenous and afro-descendant persons](#) and [Environmental activists and landowners](#)).
- 4.1.10 For more detailed information on the criminal justice system, law enforcement agencies and guidance on protection, see the Country Policy and Information Note, [Colombia: Actors of Protection](#). For further guidance on assessing state protection see the Asylum Instruction, [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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5. Internal relocation

- 5.1.1 In general, internal relocation is likely to be reasonable but decision makers must consider the profile of the person, their previous experiences, the reasons why the armed group or criminal gang has an interest in them, and the size, capability and intent of the group or gang they claim to fear.
- 5.1.2 For persons fearing armed groups and gangs in rural areas, relocation to cities such as Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali, where in general only smaller criminal gangs operate, may be appropriate. The department of Caldas, in west-central Colombia, is one example of a department that has seen very little in the way of armed group activities in recent years. Decision makers should consider the facts of the case and consult the [interactive map](#), published by InSight Crime in May 2022, for information on territorial control/presence of armed groups in Colombia when considering areas for potential relocation (see [Overview: Numbers and territorial presence](#)).
- 5.1.3 While the onus is on the person to establish a well-founded fear of persecution or real risk of serious harm, decision makers must demonstrate that internal relocation is reasonable (or not unduly harsh) having regard to the individual circumstances of the person.
- 5.1.4 Colombia is around 4.7 times the size of the UK. The majority of its almost

50 million population live in the resource-rich north and west of the country, while 60% of Colombia, the south and east, is sparsely populated. Armed groups exert control or influence in rural areas, close to Colombia's international borders and coastlines. Criminal gangs operate in similar regions, but also in urban centres such as Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, and Buenaventura. However, there are parts of Colombia, both in its main cities and some rural areas, where groups and gangs do not have control or exert influence. Even Colombia's most dominant armed groups, the AGC and the ELN, have limited reach. Sources indicate that the AGC is present in more than 200 of 1,123 of Colombia's municipalities (>17.8%), and took control of 178 (almost 16%) of them in strikes it made in May 2022. In March 2022, the ELN's own display of control reportedly saw them launch attacks in 66 municipalities (almost 6%). Sources also indicate that FARC dissident groups have a presence in 119 municipalities (almost 11%). International Crisis Group's February 2023 report said that fewer than 15% of Colombia's population live in areas under the sway of at least 1 armed group (see [Population and demography, Overview: Numbers and territorial presence, AGC/Gulf Clan](#) and [ELN](#)).

- 5.1.5 Sources indicate that while armed groups and criminal gangs are likely to be capable of tracking a 'military objective' in another part of Colombia if the person relocates, whether they may seek to do so depends on how motivated the group or gang is, and the reason for declaring them a target. If the motive was to instil fear or force a target out of an area, they will not track them upon relocation. However, if the group or gang seeks personal vengeance, or the target continues to cause problems for the group or gang, they likely will track the target after relocation (see [Tracking of persons by groups or gangs](#)).
- 5.1.6 Armed groups and criminal gangs sometimes enforce confinements, curfews, or otherwise restrict movement, either via direct orders or the use of explosive ordnance such as landmines, in areas they control or where they are engaged in armed conflict. Indigenous and afro-descendant persons are disproportionately affected by such practices. Women, girls, youths, LGBTI, and indigenous and afro-descendant persons, without support networks may find it difficult to support themselves in areas of relocation (see [Freedom of movement, Vulnerable groups](#) and [Overview: Activities and impact](#)).
- 5.1.7 In general, there are parts of the country where a person would not have a well-founded fear of persecution or real risk of suffering serious harm and it will be reasonable for them to relocate there.
- 5.1.8 For more detailed information on internal relocation, see the Country Policy and Information Note, [Colombia: International Relocation](#). For further guidance on considering internal relocation and factors to consider, see the Asylum Instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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6. Certification

- 6.1.1 Where a claim is refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.
- 6.1.2 For further guidance on certification, see [Certification of Protection and](#)

[Human Rights claims under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 \(clearly unfounded claims\).](#)

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- 7.1.2 The United States' Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) World Factbook stated that Colombia has a total area of 1,138,910 square kilometres², almost 4.7 times the size of the UK's 243,610 square kilometres³.
- 7.1.3 ProColombia, Colombia Co, and the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism (Ministerio de Comercio, Industria y Turismo), published an undated webpage on a jointly hosted website, which stated: 'Colombia is organized in 1123 municipalities, 32 departments and 5 districts.'⁴

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7.2 Population and demography

- 7.2.1 The CIA World Factbook also stated that in 2023, Colombia's population was estimated to be 49,336,454 (24,097,683 males and 25,238,771 females). Its ethnic make-up, estimated in 2018, was approximately 87.6% Mestizo [mixed race] and White, 6.8% Afro-Colombian, 4.3% Amerindian, and 1.4% unspecified. The majority of people live in the resource-rich north and west of Colombia, while the vast grasslands of the south and east, though comprising around 60% of the country, are sparsely populated⁵.

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8. Overview

8.1 Overview: Armed groups and criminal gangs in Colombia

- 8.1.1 In September 2023, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), a Swiss-based independent civil society organisation which focuses on global strategies against organised crime⁶, published a summary report on Colombia. The report formed part of GI-TOC's work to compile a 2023 Global Organized Crime Index, assessing countries' levels of criminality and resilience to organised crime over a two-year period, using both qualitative and quantitative sources⁷. Referred to hereafter as the '2023 Global Organized Crime Index: Colombia report', it stated:

'Colombia is home to many powerful and sophisticated mafia-style groups, paramilitary forces and guerrillas which are involved in long-standing and complex conflict fuelled by drug trafficking. These groups are involved in transnational organized crime and low-level activities such as extortion with a substantial social impact. They also exert social control and governance over certain areas, imposing norms, regulating civilian activity and providing social services in lieu of the state. The state's decades-long fight against these groups continues to use up a large share of the country's budget and military and police resources.'⁸

- 8.1.2 In November 2023, the Global Institute for Global and Areas Studies (GIGA), an independent social science research institute based in Hamburg,

² CIA World Factbook, '[Colombia](#)' (Geography), last updated 29 February 2024

³ CIA World Factbook, '[United Kingdom](#)' (Geography), last updated 5 March 2024

⁴ ProColombia et al, '[... \[T\]he political and administrative organization work... Colombia?](#)', undated

⁵ CIA World Factbook, '[Colombia](#)' (People and Society), last updated 29 February 2024

⁶ GI-TOC, '[About Us](#)', undated

⁷ GI-TOC, '[Global Organized Crime Index](#)', undated

⁸ GI-TOC, '[Colombia](#)' (p5), September 2023

Germany⁹, published a report, citing various sources, which stated:

‘Tracking the trajectory of specific groups or persons is... difficult, often impossible. Hence the ACLED [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, a disaggregated data collection, analysis, and crisis mapping project database¹⁰] labels many groups “political militias” without them having an actual name.

‘... NSAAs [non-state armed actors] are mostly divided along their political or criminal agendas, but this distinction is not clear-cut.’¹¹

8.1.3 On 11 January 2024, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published ‘World Report 2024’, covering events of 2023, which stated: ‘Many of these groups [the numerous armed groups operating in Colombia] have fluid and complex links to each other...’¹²

8.1.4 Justice for Colombia (JFC), an organisation set up by the British trade union movement to support Colombian civil society in its human rights, labour rights, peace and social justice struggle¹³, stated, on an undated webpage:

‘The armed conflict in Colombia officially began in 1964 with the formation of two separate guerrilla groups, the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] and the ELN [National Liberation Army]. The violence in Colombia however had started long before.

‘... The Colombian armed conflict was a direct result of a deep rooted social and political conflict. In spite of huge natural wealth, a large number of Colombians live in poverty. This poverty is particularly concentrated in rural areas. Whilst 30% live below the poverty line in urban Colombia, this number rises to 65% in rural regions. Colombia is as a result one of the most unequal countries in the world.

‘Throughout Colombia’s history the opportunities for this social inequality to be addressed through the political system has been obstructed by systematic political violence. Opposition parties, progressive political movements, and community activists have been targeted in order to protect the political and economic status quo. Guerrilla organisations emerged in response to this situation and the armed conflict was therefore a direct result of an unanswered social and political conflict.’¹⁴

8.1.5 On 8 March 2023, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) published a report entitled ‘Humanitarian Challenges 2023: Colombia’, citing various sources, which stated:

‘According to the ICRC’s legal classification of conflicts, based on the criteria laid down in IHL [international humanitarian law], there are currently seven non-international armed conflicts in Colombia. Three of these are between the state and the following non-state armed groups (NSAG): the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Gaitanist Self-Defence Forces of Colombia

⁹ GIGA, ‘[The GIGA](#)’, undated

¹⁰ ACLED, ‘[About ACLED](#)’, undated

¹¹ GIGA, ‘[Coping with Complexity: Dealing with Non-State Armed Actors](#)’ (p9,24-25), November 2023

¹² HRW, ‘[World Report 2024](#)’ (p161), 11 January 2024

¹³ JFC, ‘[Who We Are](#)’, undated

¹⁴ JFC, ‘[Colombian Armed Conflict](#)’ (Origins, Root Causes), undated

(AGC) and former FARC-EP [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – Army of the People] currently not adhered to the Peace Agreement (former FARC-EP).

‘The other four conflicts are between NSAG. One is between the ELN and the AGC, and the other three are between the former FARC-EP and the Segunda Marquetalia, the Border Commandoes–Bolivarian Army (CDF-EB) and the ELN respectively.’¹⁵

8.1.6 On 29 November 2023, the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) published a report entitled ‘Humanitarian Context Analysis: Mine Action Sector in Colombia’, within which it placed the 7 armed conflicts in Colombia in 2022, according to the ICRC, into the following table¹⁶:

Seven armed conflicts in Colombia in 2022, according to ICRC

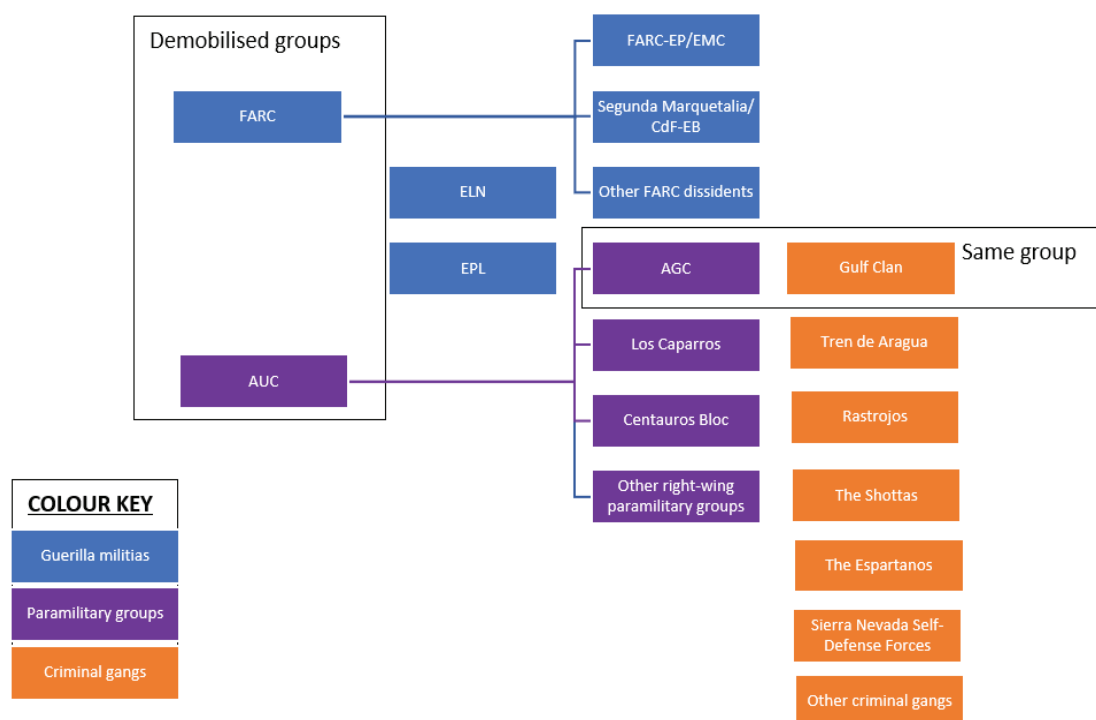
Colombian State	VS	National Liberation Army (ELN)
Colombian State	VS	Gaitanistas Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC)
Colombian State	VS	FARC-EP non-signatories of the Peace Accord
ELN	VS	AGC
FARC-EP non-signatories of the Peace Accord	VS	ELN
FARC-EP non-signatories of the Peace Accord	VS	Segunda Marquetalia (Dissidences of the FARC-EP)
FARC-EP non-signatories of the Peace Accord	VS	Comandos de la Frontera - Bolivarian Army

Source: ICRC / Report “Colombia: Retos Humanitarios 2023”.

¹⁵ ICRC, ‘[Humanitarian Challenges 2023: Colombia](#)’ (p5), 8 March 2023

¹⁶ UNMAS, ‘[... Mine Action Sector in Colombia](#)’ (p3), 29 November 2023

8.1.7 The information available regarding the various armed groups and criminal gangs in Colombia from several sources has been summarised by CPIT into an organogram below^{17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35}.



(see also [Annex A: Quick reference guide for armed group/criminal gang aliases](#) for non-abbreviated group/gang names and aliases, and [Armed groups](#) and [Criminal gangs](#) for more information about each of the groups and gangs)

8.1.8 Encyclopaedia Britannica defined a 'guerilla' as a: '... member of an irregular military force fighting small-scale, limited actions, in concert with an overall political-military strategy, against conventional military forces. Guerrilla tactics involve constantly shifting attack operations and include the use of

¹⁷ JFC, '[Colombian Armed Conflict](#)' (Origins, Root Causes), undated

¹⁸ InSight Crime, '[Gaitanistas – Gulf Clan](#)', 5 December 2023

¹⁹ InSight Crime, '[FARC](#)', 23 November 2023

²⁰ The Independent, '[... What are Colombia's ex-FARC splinter groups?](#)', 1 December 2021

²¹ GIGA, '[Coping with Complexity: Dealing with Non-State Armed Actors](#)', November 2023

²² El Pais International, '[... the illegal armed groups in Colombia's latest ceasefire](#)', 5 January 2023

²³ InSight Crime, '[... Disarmament of Colombia's Armed Groups?](#)', 28 December 2022

²⁴ USSD, '[Country Reports on Terrorism 2022](#)', 30 November 2023

²⁵ EUAA, '[Colombia: Country Focus](#)', December 2022

²⁶ Public Reason, '[Armed conflicts in Colombia in 2021](#)', 27 March 2022

²⁷ InSight Crime, '[ELN... Unmatched Criminal Presence in Colombia](#)', 2 March 2022

²⁸ InSight Crime, '[EPL](#)', 15 July 2022

²⁹ ACAPS, '[Colombia - Key crises to watch...](#)', 26 July 2023

³⁰ El Ciudadano, '[This is how the 'Aragua Train' operates...](#)', 30 November 2022

³¹ InSight Crime, '[Águilas Negras Threats Haunt Colombia](#)', 2 April 2019

³² InSight Crime, '[New Leadership Drives Conflict in Colombia's Eastern Plains](#)', 19 July 2022.

³³ InSight Crime, '[Rastrojos](#)', 20 July 2022

³⁴ El Pais International, '[... the illegal armed groups in Colombia's latest ceasefire](#)', 5 January 2023

³⁵ London Politica, '[Who are the Shottas and the Espartanos?](#)', 24 February 2023

sabotage and terrorism.³⁶

- 8.1.9 The same source defined a 'paramilitary' as a: '... group or organization that operates outside a country's formal military structure. Paramilitaries are typically modeled after military organizations and may have similar training and equipment. These groups often have political or ideological aims and may be involved in activities such as counterinsurgency, anti-terrorism, or internal security.'³⁷
- 8.1.10 For a timeline of key events, see the BBC News article, '[Colombia country profile](#)', published on 14 February 2023.

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8.2 Overview: Numbers and territorial presence

- 8.2.1 See Insight Crime's [interactive map](#), published May 2022, for information on territorial control/presence of armed groups in Colombia³⁸.

- 8.2.2 On 24 February 2023, International Crisis Group (ICG) published a report based on field research in several areas of Colombia, namely Arauca, northern Cauca, southern Córdoba, Nariño, Soacha, Cartagena and Bogotá, as well as previous work on rural insecurity which included more than 90 interviews with interlocutors between September 2022 and February 2023³⁹. The report, citing various sources, stated:

'An estimated seven million Colombians – close to 15 per cent of the population – now reportedly live in areas under the sway of one or more armed groups.

'... While the military estimates that there are roughly 18,000 combatants serving as members of armed and criminal groups, it also acknowledges that, based on the number of groups that expressed an interest in the total peace agenda [see [Government policies, legislation and approach](#)], the real total may be as much as 36,000.'⁴⁰

- 8.2.3 On 13 April 2023, Reuters published an article which stated:

'More than 17,600 people are members of the four major armed groups and 23 gangs with which the Colombian government hopes to reach peace or surrender deals, two security agency reports seen by Reuters show.

'... The new figures are higher than that of previous official estimates, but are also a fundamental check on the groups' own membership claims, which are often inflated, said the sources.'⁴¹

- 8.2.4 On 7 May 2024, Reuters published an article which stated:

'Colombia's four main illegal armed groups grew during 2023... according to a secret security report seen by Reuters.

'The report focused on leftist guerrilla group the National Liberation Army

³⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica, '[Guerrilla](#)', undated

³⁷ Encyclopaedia Britannica, '[Paramilitary](#)', undated

³⁸ InSight Crime, '[How Colombia's Criminal Groups Are Preparing...](#)', 27 May 2022

³⁹ ICG, '[Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable...](#)' (p2), 24 February 2023

⁴⁰ ICG, '[Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable...](#)' (pi,4-5), 24 February 2023

⁴¹ Reuters, '[Exclusive: Colombian armed groups and gangs have 17,600 members...](#)', 13 April 2023

(ELN), crime gang the Clan del Golfo and two dissident factions of the now demobilized FARC rebels, the Estado Mayor Central (EMC) and the Segunda Marquetalia.

‘The report, produced annually, assesses illegal armed groups’ size and military might, three security sources with knowledge of the report said, adding that illegal groups often try to amplify their power for leverage at peace talks with the government.

‘... The ELN, the EMC and the Segunda Marquetalia all have members in neighboring Venezuela, the report said.

‘Even as they grew their total headcounts, the four armed groups lost a combined 3,000 members last year, between those killed, captured or who surrendered to authorities, the report added.

‘... “[V]ery important profits... have allowed them to pay for recruiting people into their ranks, expanding, building structures that are intended to establish their presence in other territories,” Velasquez added.⁴²

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8.3 Overview: Activities and impact

8.3.1 On 25 March 2024, the United States Department of State (USSD) published its ‘2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia’, covering events in 2023, (the USSD 2023 Country Report hereafter) which stated:

‘Nonstate armed groups, including U.S.-designated terrorist organizations such as dissidents of the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia [FARC] and the National Liberation Army [ELN], drug-trafficking organizations, and small criminal gangs, committed abuses. These groups were significant perpetrators of human rights abuses and violent crimes, including unlawful killings, kidnapping, human trafficking, bombings, restrictions on freedom of movement, sexual violence, unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers, and threats of violence against journalists, women, human rights defenders, and religious leaders.’⁴³

8.3.2 The same source stated:

‘... Armed groups, notably the ELN, FARC dissidents, and the Clan del Golfo, committed unlawful killings, primarily in areas with illicit economic activities and without a strong government presence... The Attorney General’s Office reported that from January 1 to July 31 [2023], there were 45 cases with 93 homicides of civilians not related to the conflict but committed by FARC dissidents, ELN, and other illegal armed groups.

‘... The ELN, FARC dissidents, and other groups continued to lay land mines. According to the OHCHR, from January 1 to July 23 [2024], the Comprehensive Action Group Against Antipersonnel Mines reported five persons died from landmine explosions and 58 were wounded [compared with three persons killed and 71 wounded by improvised explosive devices and land mines between 1 January and 29 September 2022 according to the

⁴² Reuters, ‘[Colombia's illegal armed groups grew in 2023 -secret security report](#)’, 7 May 2024

⁴³ USSD, ‘[2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)’ (p1-2), 25 March 2024

then-High Commissioner for Peace, Danilo Rueda⁴⁴].

‘... Criminal organizations, FARC dissidents, the ELN, and common criminals kidnapped persons. According to the Ministry of Defense, there were 3,875 kidnappings from January 1 to June 30 [2023]. Of the kidnappings, 15 were attributed to FARC dissidents, 13 to the ELN, and the remainder to other organized armed groups and criminal organizations.’⁴⁵

For more information on the Comprehensive Action Group Against Antipersonnel Mines (AICMA), see the AICMA [‘Who we are’](#) webpage. N.B. the AICMA website was originally published in Spanish. COI from this source has been translated using a free online translation tool. As such 100% accuracy cannot be guaranteed.

8.3.3 The USSD 2023 Country Report also stated:

‘NGOs and the OHCHR reported Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities were disproportionately affected by illicit economic activities in territories with weak local governments. According to the Truth Commission’s final report [dated 28 June 2022], 38 percent of Afro-Colombians and 27 percent of Indigenous persons were registered as victims of the conflict, despite together representing less than one quarter of the country’s population.’⁴⁶

8.3.4 On 11 January 2024, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published ‘World Report 2024’, covering events of 2023, which stated: ‘In the border areas of Colombia’s Arauca and Venezuela’s Apure state, fighting between the ELN and a coalition of FARC dissident groups have caused a dramatic increase in violence, including a spike in killings.’⁴⁷ The report did not quantify this statement, nor cite the source(s) of information it was based upon.

8.3.5 ICG’s February 2023 report stated:

‘Colombia’s most isolated and unprotected citizens, including rural women and children, are among the primary victims [of the multitude of local operations that have resulted from the break-up of larger armed and criminal groups and which seek control of illicit businesses and trafficking routes]. The recruitment of minors into armed groups, together with sexual exploitation and gender-based violence, have become hallmark forms of coercion practised by these groups.

‘... As an official in the Pacific department of Chocó put it, “The groups are doing things that no state has been capable of doing, like charging taxes and laying down justice”.

‘... [T]hose living in areas of armed group control now find themselves at the mercy of a constantly changing and ever more sophisticated balance of enticements and violence. The ELN, FARC dissident fronts and the Gulf Clan offer “services” such as the provision of justice and the prevention of crime; most offer salaries to those who join their ranks and economic opportunities for anyone along their trafficking supply chains. At the same

⁴⁴ USSD, [‘2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia’](#) (p15), 20 March 2023

⁴⁵ USSD, [‘2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia’](#) (p16,17-18), 25 March 2024

⁴⁶ USSD, [‘2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia’](#) (p33), 25 March 2024

⁴⁷ HRW, [‘World Report 2023’](#) (p163), 12 January 2023

time, they impose curfews, recruit, demand collaboration and forcefully silence anyone who would question their authority.’⁴⁸

- 8.3.6 On 6 March 2023, the UN Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) published a report, citing various sources, which provided an analysis of the human rights situation in Colombia between 1 January and 31 December 2022⁴⁹. The report stated:

‘In July [2022], the Office published the report “Territorial Violence: Recommendations for the New Government”, which identified 156 municipalities where violence by non-State armed groups and criminal organizations seriously impacted the human rights situation.

‘These groups and organizations maintain a presence in several territories and exercise control over the population using coercion, intimidation, violence and threats to counter the opposition to the development of their activities. In addition to acts of sexual violence, killings and disappearances, in several territories the groups extort, control or limit the mobility of the population and its productive activities.

‘In some places, such groups seem to supplant State functions, regulating aspects of community life and making decisions on family issues or delivering “justice”.

‘Violence by armed actors in rural areas and in some urban centres severely affects indigenous, African descent and peasant leadership and community life, as well as women, girls and members of the LGBTIQ+ community. It is in this context that the majority of killings of human rights defenders are committed, affecting the organizational capacity of communities and their social fabric.’⁵⁰

- 8.3.7 The ICRC March 2023 report stated:

‘Last year [2022], we recorded 348 cases of people who have gone missing in relation to the armed conflicts and violence since the Peace Agreement was signed [in 2016], of which 209 went missing in 2022 [in 15 departments].

‘... Our figures, which account for only a fraction of the cases, show the issue is still a live one in the country... Arauca, Chocó, Cauca, Nariño and Norte de Santander were the worst affected. These departments accounted for 79 per cent of all our recorded cases. Since the Peace Agreement was signed in 2016, we have recorded 1,122 disappearances.

‘The control and pressure that weapon bearers exert not only shape the daily lives of communities, but also determine communities’ access to the institutions tasked with looking for their loved ones and meeting their needs. In some cases - out of fear of reprisals - families prefer to wait months or years before reporting a relative as missing.’⁵¹

- 8.3.8 The same source stated:

‘We remain deeply concerned by the sexual violence that continues to occur

⁴⁸ ICG, ‘[Protecting Colombia’s Most Vulnerable...](#)’ (pii,2,9), 24 February 2023

⁴⁹ OHCHR, ‘[Situation of human rights in Colombia...](#)’ (para 1), 6 March 2023

⁵⁰ OHCHR, ‘[Situation of human rights in Colombia...](#)’ (paras 7-10), 6 March 2023

⁵¹ ICRC, ‘[Humanitarian Challenges 2023: Colombia](#)’ (p4,7), 8 March 2023

in the armed conflicts. These acts of violence are frequently used by weapon bearers as reprisals to generate fear or demonstrate power and to destroy the social fabric of the local population. There are many forms of sexual violence besides rape, such as sexual harassment or forced nudity, that can have devastating consequences for the victims, their families and their communities.

‘However, most cases are never reported out of a fear of being attacked again or a feeling of guilt or shame.’⁵² The source did not quantify the scale or extent of the conflict-related sexual violence that it stated continued to occur.

8.3.9 The ICRC’s March 2023 report also stated:

‘Last year [2022], we recorded 515 victims of anti-personnel landmines, explosive remnants of war, launched explosives and controlled detonation devices. Of these, 56 people were killed; the remainder survived with physical and psychological scars...

‘These cases were recorded in 18 departments, of which six - Cauca, Antioquia, Arauca, Nariño, Norte de Santander and Meta - were the worst affected, accounting for 70 per cent of all victims. Unfortunately, the analysis shows that new areas have now been hit by this issue.

‘Of the 86 municipalities in which incidents occurred last year [2022], 57 per cent had recorded no victims in 2021. In 2022, incidents involving explosive hazards were recorded in 26 new municipalities that had not recorded any victims of such hazards in the previous four years. These figures show that the evolution of this issue is bound up with the dynamics of the armed conflicts and violence, which are constantly shifting and can vary widely from one area to another.

‘... In total, 54 per cent of the victims [278 in absolute terms] recorded last year were civilians, of which 43 were children.

‘... 30 municipalities... recorded incidents involving explosive hazards where, in addition, the local population also had to deal with mass displacement and confinement [and psychological impacts/anxiety]. Cases like this also occurred in areas that recorded no direct victims but in which the presence of explosive hazards has had devastating effects.

‘... The provision of health care is also affected by certain situations – such as the detonation of explosive devices near health facilities or the confinement of communities, which prevents them from accessing health care.’⁵³ The report did not specify how many of the 56 people it said were killed in 2022 by explosive ordnance were civilians.

8.3.10 Reuters’ April 2023 article stated: ‘According to the reports [2 security agency reports seen by Reuters], many of those counted as armed group or gang members do not usually carry weapons themselves, but are part of support networks that provide combatants with supplies, ferry

⁵² ICRC, [‘Humanitarian Challenges 2023: Colombia’](#) (p4-5), 8 March 2023

⁵³ ICRC, [‘Humanitarian Challenges 2023: Colombia’](#) (p6), 8 March 2023

communications, share intelligence, or even plant bombs.⁵⁴

8.3.11 The 2023 Global Organized Crime Index: Colombia report stated:

‘Colombian criminal violence is fuelled by extortion and protection racketeering perpetrated by organized-crime networks, especially in rural areas. Mafia-style groups engage in this illegal activity, charging merchants, landowners and businesses for protecting them against other criminal networks that might attack their territory. They also engage in cartel racketeering and use social-media platforms and digital strategies to intimidate and terrorize the population. In cities, smaller bands control streets and impose their taxation, extortion and security obligations on businesses that operate within their territories. These types of activities increase when conflicts break out among criminal groups. In rural areas, criminal groups charge landowners protection money or extort them to the point that they have to hand over their land rights. They also tax and extort illegal mining activities and drug transport in the territories they control. Their show of force indicates the amount of control these groups enforce on a territory, affecting businesses and even intimidating street vendors into paying them.’⁵⁵

8.3.12 On 4 October 2023, ICG published an article which stated:

‘Lower homicide rates in many areas conceal a more sinister reality: that is, armed groups have attained such a stifling hold on daily life that they no longer need to use violence to dispense with rivals or silence critics. Instead, civilians comply out of fear.

‘... To hold territory, armed and criminal groups turn their coercive powers on communities, many of which lack state protection.

‘... [G]roups also increasingly rely on insidious and often hard-to-detect forms of violence and social control to deter detractors, while keeping a low profile for themselves... Across the country’s southern departments - namely, Cauca, Caquetá and Putumayo - armed groups have coerced unarmed civilians to encircle soldiers and demand that they leave.

‘Armed and criminal groups are hoping to consolidate their hold on these and other areas in October’s [2023] local elections, when mayorships and local council seats are up for grabs. These groups covet influence over these officeholders, primarily as a means of laundering illicit revenues, for example through state procurement contracts, and for purposes of shaping security operations.’⁵⁶

8.3.13 GIGA’s November 2023 report stated: ‘All armed actors fund their activities by either “taxing” or directly participating in the illicit economy, mostly but not exclusively vis-à-vis illegal drugs (production and trade).’⁵⁷

8.3.14 UNMAS’ November 2023 report stated:

‘Currently, Colombia is experiencing a deterioration in security in several departments of the country due to actions carried out by various armed groups. In particular, the indiscriminate use of Explosive Ordnance (EO)

⁵⁴ Reuters, [‘Exclusive: Colombian armed groups and gangs have 17,600 members...’](#), 13 April 2023

⁵⁵ GI-TOC, [‘Colombia’](#) (p3), September 2023

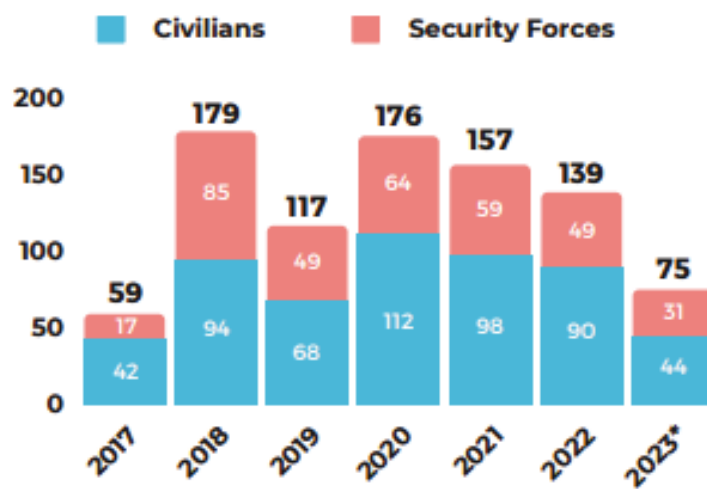
⁵⁶ ICG, [‘...Colombia: Is “Total Peace” Back on Track?’](#) (p1,4), 4 October 2023

⁵⁷ GIGA, [‘Coping with Complexity: Dealing with Non-State Armed Actors’](#) (p25), November 2023

exacerbates the vulnerability and risk faced by rural populations, ethnic communities, children, and adolescents who are dealing with the presence of Anti-Personnel Mines (APM), Improvised Explosive Devices (IED), and Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) in their territories.

‘... [F]rom 2017 until August 31, 2023, 902 new victims of APM, IED, and UXO have been recorded, of which 60.8% were civilians, according to the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace... According to the national database, the annual figures are: 59 victims in 2017, 179 in 2018, 117 in 2019, 176 in 2020, 157 in 2021, 139 in 2022, and 75 between January and August 2023 [58.7% civilians, 41.3% Armed Forces members].

Victims of accidents with APM / IED / UXO (January 2017 - August 2023)



Source: OACP AICMA. Data from January 2017 to August 2023.

‘... In 9 (39.1%)... departments [of 22 where the presence of explosive ordnance is estimated to have an impact and pose protections risks to the communities based on historical records], victims have been reported in 2023, and in 17 (74%) of them, events related to the use of Anti-Personnel Mines have occurred.

‘... In 2023, there were anti-personnel mine accidents in six... municipalities [of 35 where the presence of explosive ordnance is estimated to put people in imminent danger of death or harm, or of having their livelihoods disrupted], resulting in 44 victims.

‘... While there is a 28.5% decrease in the number of victims compared to the same period in 2022, it is important to continue monitoring the data in the coming months, as administrative and verification processes typically result in a delay in the registration of victims in the database.

‘... According to reports from communities and seizures made by the security forces, it is inferred that the new accidents are related to the installation of new Explosive Ordnance (EO) by illegal armed groups. They use these devices both to attack security forces and to defend the territories

and routes where they have a presence and conduct their illicit activities...'⁵⁸

See the UNMAS article, '[Humanitarian Context Analysis: Mine Action Sector in Colombia](#)', for details of the 22 departments and 35 municipalities where increased protection needs due to the presence of EO are estimated.

8.3.15 On 25 December 2023, Al Jazeera published an article which stated:

'Between January and October [2023], a total of 287 people were abducted, a 73-percent increase over the same period the previous year, according to the Defence Ministry.

'... [After a peace deal between FARC and government] kidnappings started to dip, reaching a low of 92 in 2019.

'That downward trend, however, reversed as Colombia experienced renewed violence.

'Rival armed groups and criminal networks rushed to fill the power vacuum the FARC had left behind, capitalising on the opportunity to take over its illegal drug and mining ventures.

'Kidnapping, experts say, became an important tool to finance their growing ranks.

'Critics have also blamed the increase on President Gustavo Petro, who took office in 2022... [and] pledged to improve security through peace talks...

'... But the agreement does not explicitly ban kidnapping - a loophole that critics say groups may be exploiting to maintain control over populations and turf.

'... However the ELN and other armed groups have since shifted their stance. On December 11 [2023], the Estado Mayor Central (EMC), an armed group composed of former FARC members, signed a bilateral agreement with the government to end kidnappings for ransom.

'The ELN followed suit. On December 17 [2023], its leaders likewise agreed to suspend kidnappings for ransom once a temporary bilateral ceasefire is reinstated in January [2024].

'But the breakthrough was not without criticism. Neither the EMC nor the ELN said if they would release hostages already in their custody, a fact which provoked scepticism - even within the government.

'... A total of 91 civilians remain in captivity across all of Colombia's armed groups and criminal gangs, according to the Ombudsman's Office, although underreporting is common.'⁵⁹

8.3.16 Whilst it does not explain or quantify the scale and extent of abuses committed by armed groups, the HRW 2024 World Report stated:

'The 2016 peace accord between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the government [see [Government policies, legislation and approach](#)] ended a five-decade-long conflict and brought an initial decline in violence. But violence took new forms and abuses by armed

⁵⁸ UNMAS, '[... Mine Action Sector in Colombia](#)' (p3-5), 29 November 2023

⁵⁹ Al Jazeera, '[... \[U\]ptick in kidnappings...](#)', 25 December 2023

groups increased in many remote areas, reaching similar levels to those that existed immediately before the peace process.

‘... Numerous armed groups operate in Colombia fueled by illegal economies, including drug trafficking and illegal mining.

‘... Armed groups continue to commit serious abuses against civilians.’⁶⁰

8.3.17 On 14 February 2024, the UN Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) published a report which provided an analysis of the human rights situation in Colombia between 1 January and 31 December 2023⁶¹ after it ‘... conducted approximately 962 field missions and 278 capacity building activities with civil society and State institutions’⁶². Citing various sources, the report stated: ‘The Office received 123 allegations of possible massacres [‘the extrajudicial execution of three or more persons in a single incident, or incidents related by responsibility, place and time’⁶³] in 2023, of which 98 were verified and 25 were considered inconclusive. An increase of 6.5 per cent was observed compared with those verified from 2022. Of the verified massacres, 320 victims were recorded... 93 per cent of the verified massacres, the alleged perpetrators were non-State armed groups and criminal organisations.’⁶⁴

8.3.18 On 29 February 2024, Freedom House published the 2024 Freedom in the World country report, covering events of 2023, which stated:

‘... [I]n some locations, armed groups have maintained a [university] campus presence to generate political support and intimidate opponents.

‘... Individual expression is generally protected in major urban centers, but it remains inhibited in more remote areas where the state, insurgents, and criminals vie for control.

‘... Some parts of the country, particularly resource-rich zones and drug-trafficking corridors, remain highly insecure. Remnant guerrilla forces - including both the ELN and dissident factions of the FARC - and paramilitary successor groups regularly abuse the civilian population, especially in coca-growing areas.

‘... Violence and instability in some areas threaten property rights and the ability to establish businesses. Guerrillas, paramilitary successor groups, and common criminals regularly extort payments from business owners and rural property holders.’⁶⁵ No further details about these matters were provided in the report, however.

8.3.19 On 25 June 2024, the USSD published a report entitled ‘2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Colombia’, covering events from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, which stated: ‘Groups at high risk for trafficking include ... those living in areas with active illegal armed groups and criminal organizations.’⁶⁶

⁶⁰ HRW, ‘[World Report 2024](#)’ (p161), 11 January 2024

⁶¹ OHCHR, ‘[Situation of human rights in Colombia...](#)’ (para 1), 14 February 2024

⁶² OHCHR, ‘[Situation of human rights in Colombia...](#)’ (para 9), 14 February 2024

⁶³ OHCHR, ‘[Situation of human rights in Colombia...](#)’ (footnote 7 on p3), 14 February 2024

⁶⁴ OHCHR, ‘[Situation of human rights in Colombia...](#)’ (para 11), 14 February 2024

⁶⁵ Freedom House, ‘[Freedom in the World 2024 - Colombia](#)’ (D3,D4,F3,G2), 29 February 2024

⁶⁶ USSD, ‘[2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Colombia](#)’ (section: Trafficking profile), 25 June 2024

9. Armed groups

9.1 Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia - AGC) / Gulf Clan (Clan del Golfo)

9.1.1 InSight Crime, a Washington DC-based think tank and media organization⁶⁷, published an article on 5 December 2023 entitled 'Gaitanistas – Gulf Clan'. Information from that has been summarised by CPIT into a timeline below:

- The Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia – AGC), also known/referred to as 'the Gaitanistas', Gulf Clan, [Clan del Golfo⁶⁸] and the Urabeños, emerged in 2006 after warlord, Vicente Castaño, split from the AUC's demobilisation process and, with 2 of his lieutenants, rearmed a paramilitary unit
- Despite Castaño being killed in March 2007, and a series of successive AGC leaders being killed or captured over the following years, the AGC expanded, particularly into strategic drug-trafficking areas
- From 2009, Dario Antonio Úsuga (alias "Otoniel") jointly led the AGC (before leading it solo from 2012). The group adopted a new organised crime 'franchise' model, and controlled much of Colombia through local criminal organisations
- In 2017, the government killed the AGC's second-in-command in a major offensive; Otoniel offered to [conditionally⁶⁹] surrender and demobilise the AGC but the government declined, instead continuing to weaken his control. Otoniel went on the run until his capture in October 2021 after which Jobanis de Jesús Ávila Villadiego (alias "Chiquito Malo") took over leadership
- In May 2022, Otoniel was extradited to the US and imprisoned for 45 years on drugs charges. In late 2022, the AGC agreed to participate in the new President's Total Peace plan (see [Government policies, legislation and approach](#)), however little progress has been made since
- March 2023 saw frictions appear among the AGC's central leadership⁷⁰

9.1.2 The same source stated:

'The Gaitanistas [AGC]... controls territories where it regulates or directs the coca paste production market and guards shipments along trafficking routes.

'... The AGC's model is based on local cells that are financially self-sufficient. As such, some cells have moved into criminal economies outside of drug trafficking, such as illegal mining, extortion, migrant smuggling, and microtrafficking. Groups may also direct or tax other criminal activities within their territory.

'... The AGC franchise has a presence in at least 20 of Colombia's departments, as well as internationally. The group's base and territorial

⁶⁷ InSight Crime, '[About Us](#)', undated

⁶⁸ GIGA, '[Coping with Complexity: Dealing with Non-State Armed Actors](#)' (p23), November 2023

⁶⁹ Colombia Reports, '[...\(AGC\) / Gulf Clan](#)', 25 October 2021

⁷⁰ InSight Crime, '[Gaitanistas – Gulf Clan](#)', 5 December 2023

stronghold is centered around the Gulf of Urabá in the departments of Antioquia and Chocó, and stretching into Córdoba. They have an extensive presence throughout the rest of these departments, as well as along the Caribbean coast, in the city of Medellín, and in departments such as La Guajira, Santander, Valle del Cauca, and Norte de Santander.

‘The group has also fought for control of criminal economies on the border between Colombia and Venezuela. However, given the strength of rival groups... the AGC has been unable to establish much territorial control. Its presence in the area is limited to areas around Puerto Santander and Cúcuta, while it has no presence in Venezuela. A series of arrests in Panama suggest that the AGC may have subcontracted operations to a local gang... to expand its franchise model and the control it has over drug trafficking and migrant smuggling on the border between Colombia and Panama.

‘... Otoniel’s capture led many analysts to speculate that the gang would enter a decline. However, this has not been the case, and the AGC has remained one of Colombia’s strongest criminal groups.

‘... [T]he AGC appears to be acting strategically. While it is still defining its role in Petro’s Total Peace [see [Government policies, legislation and approach](#) for details], the group has also expanded its territorial control into areas where other groups such as the ELN and EMC are present. These groups’ active dialogues with the government have limited their ability to carry out armed offensives, occasionally giving the AGC an edge.’⁷¹

9.1.3 GIGA’s November 2023 report, which cited various sources, stated:

‘... [T]he Colombian paramilitary group Urabeños [AGC]... first fought insurgencies for the state but soon gained the capabilities to challenge the latter by establishing control over markets, territory, and the drug trade.

‘... The AGC is today present in over 200 Colombian municipalities. Its traditional strongholds have been Antioquia and Urabá, but after the FARC’s demobilisation [in 2017] the AGC, in filling the void left behind herewith, expanded to the Caribbean coast and the frontier regions with Ecuador and Venezuela. Its patterns of embeddedness resemble those of the paramilitaries but today lack an anti-insurgency ideology.

‘... Contrary to the paramilitary groups, the AGC is increasingly taking on the Colombian military and police. Under the name of “Plan Pistola,” they fight and attack state security forces - mostly the police. Regarding civil society, “armed strikes” (paros armado) are used as a demonstration of control over the local populations in restricting their mobility, declaring curfews, and similar (the last in May 2022). While this is often seen as a reaction to the capture or assassination of one of their leaders, it is mostly a show of force.

‘... Extortion and inclusion in the illegal economy (mostly but not exclusively based on drugs) are the AGC’s main sources of income. Today, they are supposed to be the largest drug cartel in South America.’⁷²

9.1.4 On 1 February 2022, Reuters published an article, entitled ‘Colombia

⁷¹ InSight Crime, ‘[Gaitanistas – Gulf Clan](#)’, 5 December 2023

⁷² GIGA, ‘[Coping with Complexity... Non-State Armed Actors](#)’ (p23,25,26), November 2023

security forces kill 15 members of Clan del Golfo crime group' which stated:

'The Clan del Golfo is largely made up of former far-right paramilitaries who returned to lives of crime after a peace agreement with the government. It holds alliances with five international organized crime groups for distributing 20 tonnes of cocaine each month, according to Colombian police.

'The Clan del Golfo... is battling both dissident members of the demobilized FARC... and... the leftist... ELN... for territorial control of key areas for drug trafficking and illegal mining across the South American country.'⁷³

9.1.5 On 5 May 2022, BBC News published an article which stated:

'... Mr Duque [the then-President of Colombia] compared Otoniel [the then-leader of the AGC] to the notorious Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar.

'... The Gulf Clan operates in many provinces and has extensive international connections, is engaged in drug and people smuggling, illegal gold mining and extortion.

'It is believed to have about 1,800 armed members, who are mainly recruited from far-right paramilitary groups.

'... The gang controls many of the routes used to smuggle drugs from Colombia to the US, and as far away as Russia. Authorities in the US have described it as "heavily armed [and] extremely violent".'⁷⁴

9.1.6 On 12 May 2022, Al Jazeera published an article which stated:

'From the morning of May 5 [2022] until midnight on May 9 [2022], the armed group enforced a self-declared "armed strike" across the country's northwest in response to the extradition to the United States of its detained former leader Dairo Antonio Usuga, also known as Otoniel.

'The Gulf Clan [AGC] took control of 11 of Colombia's 32 departments over the four-day span. It imposed strict lockdowns, shuttered local businesses, closed off roads, disrupted transportation links, and warned residents to stay inside or risk being shot or having their vehicles burned.

'... During the course of the "strike", the Gulf Clan committed at least 309 acts of violence, according to the Special Jurisdiction of Peace (JEP) tribunal...

'... A total of 178 different municipalities in the country were under Gulf Clan control, with 138 of them under strict lockdown rules.

"They wanted to demonstrate their military strength to show that in many areas of the country they are the de facto authority and not the state," said a JEP representative...

'... Twenty-four civilians were killed during the "strike", the JEP also said, and a further 15 attempted murders were recorded. The Ministry of Defence reported six deaths, while NGO Indepaz recorded 18 over the course of the strike.

'... [L]ast week's armed strike proved the group, which local NGO Pares has

⁷³ Reuters, '[Colombia security forces kill... members of Clan del Golfo crime group](#)', 1 February 2022

⁷⁴ BBC News, '[Otoniel: Colombia drug kingpin extradited to US](#)', 5 May 2022

said counts as many as 3,260 members, is by no means on shaky ground, analysts said.

'... The Gulf Clan operates clandestinely in approximately 109 municipalities across the country, according to rights group Indepaz, but most predominantly in the north. It controls numerous drug trafficking routes and cocaine processing labs, and uses violence to extort and intimidate populations.'⁷⁵

9.1.7 On 5 January 2023, the international edition of El Pais, a newspaper based in Spain⁷⁶, stated:

'According to intelligence reports from the Duque administration, the Gulf Clan has an armed force of 1,200, and "is exclusively dedicated to the drug trafficking business." Other reports place the number higher at 3,300 troops. The same intelligence report says that in late 2021, the Gulf Clan was seeking to expand into central Colombia.

'... The Gulf Clan is openly warring with rivals like the... ELN... and the Sierra Nevada Self-Defense Forces. Analysts like Trejos and Reynell Badillo of the UNCaribe think tank say the Gulf Clan is not a traditional drug cartel, but more like a criminal conglomerate. "It's more than a drug cartel. It manages a portfolio of illegal businesses," said Trejos... [with] diversification, urban presence and extortion activities... While some Gulf Clan members came from armed groups that were demobilized during the 2004 peace process, it should not be viewed as a successor paramilitary force. Trejos and Badillo agree that these forces will be key to demobilization in urban areas.'⁷⁷

9.1.8 The HRW 2023 World Report stated: 'In May [2022], the AGC ordered an "armed strike," imposing movement restrictions on civilians in over 170 municipalities in 11 states... [which] suggested an alarming geographical expansion, compared to its 2012 armed strike, affecting 26 municipalities.'⁷⁸

9.1.9 ICG's February 2023 report stated that a senior Petro administration official said, during a September 2022 interview in Bogotá with the ICG, that '... the number of fighters in... one criminal group, the Gulf Clan, has increased from roughly 2,500 in 2016 to 9,000 today.'⁷⁹

9.1.10 Reuters' April 2023 article stated: '... The next largest group [after the ELN], according to the [2 security agency] reports [seen by Reuters], is the Clan del Golfo... with 4,060 members, 1,620 of whom are combatants.'⁸⁰...

9.1.11 On 24 April 2023, The Irish Times published an article which stated:

'Road signs and houses across Baja Cauca [a sub-region of the Colombian Department of Antioquia located approximately 175 miles North of Medellín⁸¹] are spray-painted with the Clan del Golfo's initials, a reminder to civilians and security forces of whose turf they are on. When armed groups

⁷⁵ Al Jazeera, "["Terrifying": Days of terror under Colombia's Gulf Clan cartel](#)", 12 May 2022

⁷⁶ BBC Monitoring, (accessed via a subscription), '[Media guide: Spain](#)', 13 March 2019

⁷⁷ El Pais International, '[... the illegal armed groups in Colombia's latest ceasefire](#)', 5 January 2023

⁷⁸ HRW, '[World Report 2023](#)' (p163), 12 January 2023

⁷⁹ ICG, '[Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable...](#)' (p12), 24 February 2023

⁸⁰ Reuters, '[Exclusive: Colombian armed groups and gangs have 17,600 members...](#)', 13 April 2023

⁸¹ ArcGIS StoryMaps, '[Discovering Columbia's Subregions](#)' ("Bajo Cauca"), 18 September 2023

give orders to civilians, they either obey and “shut up shop or you die”, Cuesta [a gold-panner from Zaragoza in northern Colombia] said.

‘... Clan del Golfo... is the largest armed group with an estimated 6,500 members, according to Danilo Rueda, Colombia’s [then] high peace commissioner.’⁸²

9.1.12 The Reuters May 2024 article stated: ‘... The Clan del Golfo, founded by former leaders of right-wing paramilitary groups, expanded by 23% last year, growing to 4,999 members. The group has 1,740 combatants and 3,259 support personnel, the report said... [T]he Clan del Golfo has so far rejected an offer of lower sentences for surrendering.’⁸³

9.1.13 For more information about the AGC/Gulf Clan, its succession of leaders, and its clashes with other armed groups in competition over former-FARC territory (after the FARC’s demobilisation in 2017), see InSight Crime’s December 2023 [‘Gaitanistas – Gulf Clan’](#) article and an article published on 25 October 2021 by Colombia Reports, a Colombian not-for-profit English-language online news website, reporting to a global audience⁸⁴, entitled [‘Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia \(AGC\) / Gulf Clan’](#).

See also [Overview](#) for general information on armed groups and gangs, including the AGC, and [Annex A: Quick reference guide for armed group/criminal gang aliases](#) for a list of aliases for this group.

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9.2 Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC) dissidents

a. Background – FARC and splinter groups

9.2.1 On 23 November 2023, InSight Crime published an article entitled ‘FARC’ which stated:

‘The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC) were Colombia’s largest irregular army. They operated in various regions of the country in search of resources to finance their nearly 50-year war against the State.

‘... [F]or a long time, they financed their political and military battle against the Colombian government through kidnapping, extortion, and participating in the drug trade on various levels.

‘... [A]fter several military defeats during the government of Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), the FARC began to weaken.

‘... In 2012, the group began peace negotiations with the government of then-President Juan Manuel Santos, which culminated in 2016 with the signing of a peace agreement between the guerrilla group and the Colombian government, marking the end of the organization. However, following their demobilization, several FARC commanders formed dissident

⁸² The Irish Times, [‘... Colombia’s struggle with armed groups’](#), 24 April 2023

⁸³ Reuters, [‘Colombia’s illegal armed groups grew in 2023 -secret security report’](#), 7 May 2024

⁸⁴ Colombia Reports, [‘About’](#), undated

groups collectively known as the ex-FARC mafia.⁸⁵

9.2.2 On 1 December 2021, The Independent published an article entitled 'Explainer: What are Colombia's ex-FARC splinter groups?' which stated:

'... The group formerly known as the FARC are now a political party in Colombia called the Common People's Party, which has 10 seats in the nation's congress. After being removed from the U.S terrorist list [on 30 November 2021⁸⁶] the group's members will be able to participate in U.S. funded activities such as programs to remove landmines in Colombia's countryside or rural development programs that benefit farmers in Colombia. 'The State Department... pointed out that former FARC leaders can still face charges in the United States for drug trafficking and other crimes.'⁸⁷

9.2.3 The same source stated:

'The FARC splinter groups are fragmented and lack a central command structure. Security analysts in Colombia also say they are not ideologically oriented and are mainly focused on controlling drug trafficking routes, illegal mines and other illicit economies.

'A report published in September [2021] by the Institute for Peace and Development Studies, a Colombian research group, estimates the splinter groups have around 5,000 members, most are new recruits, though there are also hundreds of former FARC fighters in their ranks.'⁸⁸

9.2.4 On 22 October 2020, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published an article which stated:

'Over 10,000 FARC members demobilized and handed in weapons [in 2017] in a process verified by a United Nations mission in the country. Nonetheless, some FARC fighters rejected the peace process or rearmed. Myriad armed groups, often called "FARC dissident groups," emerged.

'... Members of these groups include former FARC fighters who never demobilized, others who participated in the demobilization process but returned to arms, and new recruits.

'... Currently, 25 FARC dissident groups operate throughout the country, according to a survey by Conflict Responses, a Colombian think tank. The groups often operate in the same territory FARC units controlled before the demobilization process, at times using the units' names. Many of them engage in fighting with government forces, and are responsible for abuses, including killing civilians, forced displacement, and threatening violence to control daily life in numerous parts of the country.'⁸⁹

9.2.5 The HRW 2023 World Report stated: '... [O]ver 30 "dissident" groups... emerged from the 2017 demobilization of the FARC...'⁹⁰

9.2.6 The 2024 Freedom in the World country report stated: 'Indepaz estimated

⁸⁵ InSight Crime, '[FARC](#)', 23 November 2023

⁸⁶ The Independent, '[... What are Colombia's ex-FARC splinter groups?](#)', 1 December 2021

⁸⁷ The Independent, '[... What are Colombia's ex-FARC splinter groups?](#)', 1 December 2021

⁸⁸ The Independent, '[... What are Colombia's ex-FARC splinter groups?](#)', 1 December 2021

⁸⁹ HRW, '[Does the FARC still exist?...](#)', 22 October 2020

⁹⁰ HRW, '[World Report 2023](#)' (p162), 12 January 2023

the total number of “dissidents” at around 4,500 in September 2023.⁹¹

9.2.7 The USSD 2023 Country Report stated:

‘From the outset, an estimated 800 to 1,500 FARC dissidents did not participate in the peace process. As of October [2023], NGOs estimated there were approximately 5,500 FARC dissidents, including new recruits, combatants who refused to sign the peace accord, and former combatants who signed the accord but returned to arms. A significant percentage of FARC dissidents were unarmed members of support networks that facilitated illicit economies.’⁹²

9.2.8 For more information about the FARC, see the InSight Crime [‘FARC’](#) article published on 23 November 2023. See also [Annex A: Quick reference guide for armed group/criminal gang aliases](#) for a list of aliases for this group.

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b. Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – Army of the People (FARC-EP) / Central General Staff (Estado Mayor Central - EMC)

9.2.9 The Independent’s December 2021 article stated: ‘... [A] group of about 1,000 fighters led by commander Néstor Gregorio Vera [full name Néstor Gregorio Vera Fernández⁹³] refused to lay down their weapons [after the FARC signed the 2016 peace agreement] and continued to conduct attacks and kidnappings in southeastern Colombia. These fighters now use the acronym FARC-EP [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – Army of the People].’⁹⁴

9.2.10 On 28 December 2022, InSight Crime published an article which referred to this group as the ‘Southeastern Bloc’⁹⁵.

9.2.11 El Pais International’s January 2023 article stated:

‘An offshoot of disaffected FARC leaders and soldiers that coalesced under the leadership of Miguel Botache Santillana (alias Gentil Duarte) and Néstor Fernández (alias Iván Mordisco), this group is now calling itself the Central General Staff. Even though Colombian authorities reported that Iván Mordisco had been killed in July 2022, he reappeared in a video a few months later... During the Duque administration [2018 to 2022], the group was loosely referred to as the Residual Armed Groups (GAOR), but it has taken an increasingly political stance since Petro took office. “They change names and spout political ideology to portray themselves as the FARC-EP, but they are just criminal federations,” said Trejos [Analyst of the UNCaribe think tank].’⁹⁶

9.2.12 On 14 June 2024, InSight Crime published an article entitled ‘Central General Staff – Ex-FARC Mafia’ which stated:

‘The Central General Staff (Estado Mayor Central – EMC) is a federation of dissident fronts of the... FARC... that decided not to embrace the peace

⁹¹ Freedom House, [‘Freedom in the World 2024 - Colombia’](#) (Section F3), 29 February 2024

⁹² USSD, [‘2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia’](#) (p13), 25 March 2024

⁹³ InSight Crime, [‘Néstor Gregorio Vera Fernández, alias “Iván Mordisco”](#), 14 April 2023

⁹⁴ The Independent, [‘... What are Colombia's ex-FARC splinter groups?’](#), 1 December 2021

⁹⁵ InSight Crime, [‘... Disarmament of Colombia's Armed Groups?’](#), 28 December 2022

⁹⁶ El Pais International, [‘... the illegal armed groups in Colombia's latest ceasefire’](#), 5 January 2023

process signed in 2016 between that guerrilla group and the Colombian government.

'The EMC has significant armed power that allows it to maintain control of different criminal rents across the country. Depending on the region and the associated front, revenues vary, but its criminal portfolio is mainly based on drug trafficking revenues in the south of the country, illegal mining, and extortion.

'... [D]isputes between... [the EMC and the Second Marquetalia], plus pressure from the security forces in Colombia and Venezuela... resulted in the death of several of the EMC's most important commanders, among them Gentil Duarte, and caused the withdrawal of its members to Colombia.

'... Nestor Gregorio Vera Fernandez, alias "Ivan Mordisco," is the leader of the EMC.

'... The EMC is currently made up of four national blocs, grouping a total of 24 substructures or fronts.

'... The EMC's main rival is the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN).

'... Another enemy of the EMC is the Segunda Marquetalia and allied dissident structures.

'The dissident factions that respond to the EMC have a presence in the south, east and west of Colombia. The main strongholds of this dissidence are the departments of Guaviare, Meta, Caquetá, Vaupés and Guainía. From there the structure has expanded to Amazonas, on the border with Brazil and Peru; Putumayo, on the border with Ecuador; Casanare, Arauca and Norte de Santander, on the border with Venezuela.

'It also has a presence in the departments of Cauca, Valle del Cauca and Nariño, in the west of the country, on the Pacific coast.

'Thanks to the presence they have established in the Colombian departments that share a border with Venezuela, the EMC's territorial influence has expanded into that country. Following disputes with the ELN, it is unclear whether they still maintain a presence in the Venezuelan states of Apure and Zulia.

'... Due to its rapid growth, territorial control and use of violence, the EMC became the main ex-FARC mafia organization in Colombia.

'Although the EMC embraced the "Total Peace" policy of President Gustavo Petro's government [see [Government policies, legislation and approach](#)], only a fraction of its component fronts remain at the negotiating table.

'While a partial ceasefire agreement has halted operations by the Colombian armed forces against this group in some regions of the country, it has not stopped clashes with other rival criminal groups.

'The EMC's intentions with the Total Peace proposal are unclear. Given their history with the 2016 Peace Accords, it is possible that at least part of the network may not want to hand over their weapons and continue in hiding.

'This scenario became more feasible after in March 2024, Petro suspended

the ceasefire with the EMC in the departments of Cauca, Nariño and Valle del Cauca. This caused tensions within the EMC, with some blocs advocating for continued dialogue and others unwilling to participate until a nationwide ceasefire is re-established.⁹⁷

For more information about the EMC including its other important leaders, and its rivalries with the ELN and the Second Marquetalia, see the InSight Crime article, '[Central General Staff – Ex-FARC Mafia](#)'.

9.2.13 ICG's February 2023 report stated: 'The FARC-EP dissidents have... expanded their footprint, with their presence spreading from an estimated 79 municipalities in 2018 to 119 in 2022. Today, they are estimated to have at least 3,200 fighters, not including civilian support networks.'⁹⁸

9.2.14 Reuters' April 2023 article stated: 'The Estado Mayor Central [EMC], which never participated in the FARC negotiations, has some 3,530 members, including 2,180 combatants.'⁹⁹

9.2.15 On 26 July 2023, ACAPS (originally 'Assessment Capacities Project'), an independent organisation which provides humanitarian data and analysis to assist with disaster response¹⁰⁰, published a report which provided an overview of key humanitarian crises resulting from armed conflict in 3 of Colombia's 32 departments, Antioquia, Caquetá, and Chocó, through a secondary data review of various, cited, public sources. It stated:

'Frente Carolina Ramírez is part of the EMC. They were formerly known as Frente Armando Ríos or Frente Primero. Their main areas of influence are the departments of Guainía, Guaviare, and Putumayo. This front declared itself in dissidence in 2016, before the signing of the agreement between the Colombian Government and former FARC-EP guerrillas.

'... Dissidents of the FARC-EP's 18th and 36th Fronts claim to be attached to the EMC.

'... Although it calls itself a continuation of the FARC-EP, many of its members are new recruits'¹⁰¹

9.2.16 On 18 September 2023, HRW published an article entitled 'Colombia: Ensure Justice for Army Killings', which stated: 'Armed groups, including Comandos de la Frontera and the Carolina Ramírez Front, operate in large parts of Putumayo, impose their own rules on the civilian population, and commit serious abuses, including child recruitment, forced displacement, and killings. These groups are fueled by illegal economies, particularly production and trafficking of cocaine, which is prevalent in the region.'¹⁰²

9.2.17 ICG's October 2023 article stated:

'Before the ceasefire [a full bilateral ceasefire between the FARC-EMC and the Colombian government, agreed on 19 September 2023, to begin on 8 October 2023] was to take hold... the FARC-EMC carried out a string of car

⁹⁷ InSight Crime, '[Central General Staff – Ex-FARC Mafia](#)', 14 June 2024

⁹⁸ ICG, '[Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable...](#)' (p12), 24 February 2023

⁹⁹ Reuters, '[Exclusive: Colombian armed groups and gangs have 17,600 members...](#)', 13 April 2023

¹⁰⁰ ACAPS, '[Who we are](#)', undated

¹⁰¹ ACAPS, '[Colombia - Key crises to watch...](#)' (p2,8,14), 26 July 2023

¹⁰² HRW, '[Colombia: Ensure Justice for Army Killings](#)', 18 September 2023

bombings, including a particularly egregious assault on a police station in Cauca that left two civilians dead. Responding to public outrage, the guerrillas on 22 September [2023] told their fighters to stand down from all further offensive operations.

‘... FARC-EMC... has demonstrable influence over certain areas: in recent months, for example, they have enforced a modest reduction in clearing of land in the Amazon region. The Colombian state, by contrast, has little institutional presence in these remote territories.’¹⁰³

- 9.2.18 On 30 November 2023, the USSD published a report entitled ‘Country Reports on Terrorism 2022’, covering the year 2022, which stated, of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army (FARC-EP):

‘Aka [also known as] FARC-EP; Central General Staff; Estado Mayor Central (EMC).

‘... FARC-EP was designated as an FTO [Foreign Terrorist Organization] on November 30, 2021. Using the moniker of the former FARC, FARC-EP is responsible for the vast majority of armed attacks attributed to FARC dissident elements since 2019. The FARC-EP is led by Nestor Gregorio Vera Fernandez, alias Ivan Mordisco. In May 2022, former second-in-command Miguel Santanilla Botache, alias Gentil Duarte, was killed in Venezuela, allegedly during a confrontation with drug trafficking groups.

‘... ‘FARC-EP is estimated to have 2,700 to 3,000 members.

‘... FARC-EP is funded primarily by involvement in illicit activity, including extortion, international drug trade, and illegal mining.’¹⁰⁴

- 9.2.19 An article published by BBC News on 13 December 2023 stated: ‘The EMC... is the largest of the dissident rebel groups to have formed after the 2016 peace deal and has an estimated 3,000 members. It is most active in the provinces of Caquetá, Guaviare, Meta and Putumayo.’¹⁰⁵

- 9.2.20 The USSD 2023 Country Report stated: ‘On October 16 [2023], the government signed a three-month ceasefire agreement with the FARC dissident group Estado Mayor Central [EMC].’¹⁰⁶

- 9.2.21 The Reuters May 2024 article stated: ‘Of the two dissident groups of the now demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the EMC is the largest, with 3,859 members - of which 2,428 are combatants... A majority of the EMC has abandoned negotiations due to an internal division, though a partial bilateral ceasefire with the government continues to hold.’¹⁰⁷

- 9.2.22 For more information about the EMC (aka FARC-EP), see InSight Crime’s 16 February 2023 [‘Central General Staff – Ex-FARC Mafia’](#) article.

See also [Overview](#) for general information on armed groups and gangs, including FARC dissident groups and [Annex A: Quick reference guide for armed group/criminal gang aliases](#) for a list of aliases for this group.

¹⁰³ ICG, [‘...Colombia: Is “Total Peace” Back on Track?’](#) (p3,6), 4 October 2023

¹⁰⁴ USSD, [‘Country Reports on Terrorism 2022’](#) (p303), 30 November 2023

¹⁰⁵ BBC News, [‘Colombian EMC rebel group to stop kidnapping for ransom’](#), 13 December 2023

¹⁰⁶ USSD, [‘2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia’](#) (p13), 25 March 2024

¹⁰⁷ Reuters, [‘Colombia’s illegal armed groups grew in 2023 -secret security report’](#), 7 May 2024

c. **Second Marquetalia (Segunda Marquetalia) / Border Commandos-Bolivarian Army (CdF-EB)**

9.2.23 On 27 March 2022, Public Reason (Razón Pública in Spanish), a non-profit, non-partisan entity serving as an instrument of expression for Colombian analysts and academics¹⁰⁸, published a report entitled 'Armed conflicts in Colombia in 2021' which noted that the Commandos Bolivarian Army (CdF-EB) belong to the Second Marquetalia¹⁰⁹.

N.B. the above information, and all other COI quoted from Public Reason (Razón Pública in Spanish) throughout the rest of this CPIN, was originally published in Spanish. All COI from this source has been translated using a free online translation tool. As such 100% accuracy cannot be guaranteed.

9.2.24 In December 2022, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) published a Country of Origin Information (COI) report entitled 'Colombia: Country Focus', citing various sources, which defined the CdF-EB as: 'Comandos de la Frontera-Ejército-Bolivariano; sub-group of FARC dissidents connected to Segunda Marquetalia; also called Los Comandos de La Frontera (Border Command) (formerly La Mafia)¹¹⁰

9.2.25 El Pais International's January 2023 article stated:

'On August 29, 2019, Iván Márquez, former chief negotiator of the FARC, announced in a video that he was taking up arms again along with other former commanders such as Jesús Santrich. He named the new movement the Second Marquetalia, after the communist Marquetalia Republic guerrilla movement that battled the government for five years until it was defeated in 1964.

'... According to the Fundación Ideas para la Paz (or, Ideas for Peace Foundation), this group "is still far from having the strength and capability of the former FARC. Although it seeks to evoke its FARC origins, it is more of an eclectic combination of armed factions that aspire to greater levels of autonomy, and seek funding and ideological support... The Second Marquetalia consists of Colombian and Venezuelan recruits with little training and political indoctrination." According to the [then] High Commissioner for Peace, Danilo Rueda, the group claims to have 1,500 armed troops.¹¹¹

9.2.26 On 27 March 2023, Amnesty International (AI) published its 'The State of the World's Human Rights; Colombia 2022' report, covering events of 2022, which stated: 'The National Ombudsperson issued an alert over the presence of the paramilitary group Border Command in Caquetá region and the grave risk to the lives and physical integrity of civil society leaders and former FARC-EP combatants.'¹¹²

9.2.27 Reuters' April 2023 article stated: '... Another major FARC dissident group, Segunda Marquetalia, has 1,670 members. Most - 1,060 - are

¹⁰⁸ Public Reason, '[Who we are](#)', undated

¹⁰⁹ Public Reason, '[Armed conflicts in Colombia in 2021](#)', 27 March 2022

¹¹⁰ EUAA, '[Colombia: Country Focus](#)' (p9), December 2022

¹¹¹ El Pais International, '[... the illegal armed groups in Colombia's latest ceasefire](#)', 5 January 2023

¹¹² AI, '[The State of the World's Human Rights; Colombia 2022](#)' (p132), 27 March 2023

combatants.¹¹³

9.2.28 The July 2023 ACAPS report stated: ‘Comandos de la Frontera – Ejército Bolivariano are also known as La Mafia, the name they had before their rebranding between 2019–2020. This group was born as an alliance between dissidents from the 48th and 32nd Fronts of the FARC-EP and another group known as La Constru, which emerged after the demobilisation of the paramilitary group AUC. In 2021, they announced joining the Segunda Marquetalia.’¹¹⁴

9.2.29 The USSD report on terrorism in 2022, published in November 2023, stated:

‘Segunda Marquetalia (SM)

‘Aka [also known as] New Marquetalia; Second Marquetalia; La Nueva Marquetalia; FARC dissidents Segunda Marquetalia; Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia Dissidents Segunda Marquetalia; FARC-D Segunda Marquetalia; FARC-SM.

‘... Segunda Marquetalia was designated as an FTO [Foreign Terrorist Organisation] on November 30, 2021. In 2019, former FARC commanders, led by Luciano Marin Arango, alias Ivan Marquez, established Segunda Marquetalia after abandoning the 2016 Colombian Peace Accord.

‘... Segunda Marquetalia conducts armed assaults, assassination, extortion operations, and hostage-takings, including the kidnapping and holding for ransom of government employees and the attempted killings of political leaders.

‘... Segunda Marquetalia is estimated to have as many as 1,000 members.

‘Location/Area of Operation: Colombia and Venezuela

‘... Segunda Marquetalia is funded primarily by involvement in illicit activity, including extortion, international drug trade, and illegal mining.’¹¹⁵

9.2.30 The Reuters May 2024 article stated: ‘The Segunda Marquetalia numbers 1,751, including 1,162 combatants... [T]he government is... preparing to begin talks with the Segunda Marquetalia in the coming weeks...’¹¹⁶

9.2.31 InSight Crime’s June 2024 EMC article stated:

‘... [T]he Second Marquetalia, [is] another group composed of former FARC fighters, which also proclaimed itself the successor to the guerrilla project.

‘The Second Marquetalia tried to incorporate into its structure different fronts that were part of the EMC network. However, the EMC labeled them as traitors and they became enemies. The rivalry between both groups of ex-FARC mafia was evident in the border territory between Apure, Venezuela, and Arauca, Colombia.’¹¹⁷

9.2.32 For more information about the Segunda Marquetalia/ CdF-EB, see articles published by InSight Crime, [‘Second Marquetalia’](#) and [‘Border Command’](#)

¹¹³ Reuters, [‘Exclusive: Colombian armed groups and gangs have 17,600 members...’](#), 13 April 2023

¹¹⁴ ACAPS, [‘Colombia - Key crises to watch...’](#) (p2), 26 July 2023

¹¹⁵ USSD, [‘Country Reports on Terrorism 2022’](#) (p303-304), 30 November 2023

¹¹⁶ Reuters, [‘Colombia’s illegal armed groups grew in 2023 -secret security report’](#), 7 May 2024

¹¹⁷ InSight Crime, [‘Central General Staff – Ex-FARC Mafia’](#), 14 June 2024

which were published on 5 July 2022 and 11 June 2022 respectively. See also [Annex A: Quick reference guide for armed group/criminal gang aliases](#) for a list of aliases for these groups.

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9.3 National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN)

9.3.1 On 29 August 2013, BBC News published an article which provided profiles of some of Colombia's armed groups. In respect of the National Liberation Army (ELN), it stated:

'The left-wing group was formed in 1964 by intellectuals inspired by the Cuban revolution and Marxist ideology.

'It was long seen as more politically motivated than the Farc, staying out of the illegal drugs trade on ideological grounds.

'The ELN reached the height of its power in the late 1990s, carrying out hundreds of kidnappings and hitting infrastructure such as oil pipelines.

'... In recent years ELN units have become involved in the drugs trade, often forming alliance with criminal gangs.

'The group is on US and European lists of terrorist organisations.'¹¹⁸

9.3.2 On 28 March 2017, InSight Crime published an article entitled 'ELN'. The article, which was updated on 18 June 2024, stated: 'The ELN is made up of more than 6,000 members, including networks of militants infiltrating the civilian population... distributed between Colombia and Venezuela...'¹¹⁹

9.3.3 On 2 March 2022, InSight Crime published an article which stated:

'Between February 23 and 26 [2022], the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) orchestrated a so-called paro armado, or armed strike across Colombia that included violent attacks, according to the Institute for Peace and Development Studies (Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz – Indepaz).

'For 72 hours, the group blocked off national highways, set off explosions, burned vehicles, carried out targeted killings and hung the ELN's flag from public buildings. Additionally, armed members of the group patrolled the streets of villages and towns in parts of Colombia where they maintain a strong presence. Indepaz registered 65 separate incidents during the armed strike across the departments of Norte de Santander, Santander, Cesar, Cauca, Nariño, Casanare, Arauca, Valle del Cauca, Huila, Antioquia and Chocó.

'Prior to the start of the armed strike, the Colombian government insisted the ELN would not have the ability to carry it out... However, the ELN proved it could do so, both in its traditional strongholds and in areas where it has increased its power since the now-extinct... FARC... came to a peace agreement with the government in 2016.

'... [T]he ELN has taken on the mantle of being Colombia's prime security threat... And the escalation of its criminal control can be seen by comparing

¹¹⁸ BBC News, '[Profiles: Colombia's armed groups](#)', 29 August 2013

¹¹⁹ InSight Crime, '[ELN](#)', 28 March 2017, updated 18 June 2024

the location and number of events during a previous 72-hour armed strike in March 2020. That strike saw 27 incidents in nine departments. The latest one recorded 38 more incidents in 11 departments. Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace (... JEP), recorded actions in even more departments, saying that 17 of Colombia's 32 departments had been affected by the latest armed strike.

'... The armed strike showed the range of criminal governance the ELN enjoys in distinct parts of Colombia. Almost half of the incidents during this armed strike took place in Norte de Santander...

'... The armed strike also spread to areas of Colombia that had been spared in 2020... [such as the] northwest department of Antioquia and the southwest department of Nariño...

'... [Also] the eastern department of Arauca, right on the border with Venezuela...

'... The 2016 peace agreement between the government and the FARC left a major power vacuum, which the ELN has filled.

'In 2017, when the FARC demobilized, the ELN was estimated to have some 1,400 members. Its status as the country's remaining guerrilla force served to fill its ranks. By 2019, the force swelled to about 4,000 militants. Its current number of fighters is hard to estimate but it is likely to be even higher, due to its rapid territorial expansion and its strong presence in Venezuela, which has given the ELN more opportunities for recruitment.

'No longer playing second fiddle to the FARC, the ELN has strengthened significantly.

'...[W]hile arrests of ELN members and seizures of its drug shipments happen regularly, the group does not appear to have been significantly weakened...'¹²⁰

For more information about the activities of the ELN in different areas of Colombia during the armed strike see the InSight Crime article, entitled '[ELN Show of Force Confirms its Unmatched Criminal Presence in Colombia](#)'.

9.3.4 El Pais International's January 2023 article stated: 'The ELN is the last active guerrilla force in the country after the FARC demobilization and had 2,350 combatants as of 2021 according to Colombian Army reports.'¹²¹

9.3.5 Reuters' April 2023 article stated:

'... The leftist National Liberation Army (ELN) rebels - already in peace negotiations with the government - are the largest of the armed groups.

'Of the ELN's 5,850 members, 2,900 are combatants, while 2,950 are part of its support network, showed one report, marked as "secret" and compiled using information gathered through March 31 [2023].'¹²²

9.3.6 The Irish Times' April 2023 article stated: 'The Marxist-Leninist ELN, which also operates in and has received shelter from Venezuela, is the second-

¹²⁰ InSight Crime, '[ELN... Unmatched Criminal Presence in Colombia](#)', 2 March 2022

¹²¹ El Pais International, '[... the illegal armed groups in Colombia's latest ceasefire](#)', 5 January 2023

¹²² Reuters, '[Exclusive: Colombian armed groups and gangs have 17,600 members...](#)', 13 April 2023

biggest [in Colombia after the AGC] with 5,800 members.¹²³

- 9.3.7 On 18 July 2023, InSight Crime published an article entitled ‘Kidnappings Surge in Colombia Amid ELN Peace Negotiations’ which stated:

‘The National Liberation Army (... ELN), which is in preliminary peace talks with the government, committed at least 15 kidnappings this year [2023], according to Indepaz, a Colombian think tank. ELN-led kidnappings may be higher, however, as the departments with the largest ELN presence are the most affected.

‘Most recently, the ELN grabbed headlines after kidnapping a Colombian army sergeant and her two children in Arauca on July 3 [2023]. Days later, the group kidnapped 19 construction company employees in Norte de Santander, releasing them later that same day.

‘The rise in kidnappings has occurred amid discussions of a bilateral ceasefire between the ELN and the Colombian government. Both sides agreed to halt operations against one another starting on July 6 [2023]. But the guerrillas did not commit to ending their criminal activities affecting civilians, including extortion and kidnapping, which are important revenue streams for the group.’¹²⁴

- 9.3.8 The USSD 2022 terrorism report, published in November 2023, stated:

‘The National Liberation Army (ELN) was designated as an FTO [Foreign Terrorist Organisation] on October 8, 1997... It remains focused on attacking the security services and economic infrastructure - in particular oil and gas pipelines and electricity pylons - and on extorting foreign and local companies. ELN commits crimes and acts of terror throughout Colombia, including violence against civilian populations there and in Venezuela.

‘... ELN continued to target Colombia’s infrastructure. It has also launched mortar attacks on police stations and the military; placed explosive devices near roads; engaged in sniper attacks, roadblocks, and ambushes; and kidnapped civilians and members of Colombia’s security services.

‘... In 2022, ELN militants blew up a bridge in Caesar [sic] Department, Colombia, set fire to vehicles along the road connecting the Colombian cities of Popayán and Cali, and set off bombs between the Colombian municipalities of Socorro and San Gil, which injured eight persons.

‘... ELN consists of about 2,500 members.

‘... ELN draws its funding from its involvement in drug trafficking activities, extortion of oil and gas companies and landowners, and illegal mining in Colombia and Venezuela. Additional funds are derived from kidnapping-for-ransom payments.’¹²⁵

- 9.3.9 The USSD 2023 Country Report stated: ‘The National Liberation Army (ELN) committed crimes and acts of terror throughout the country, including bombings, violence against civilian populations, and violent attacks against military and police facilities. The government began a six-month ceasefire

¹²³ The Irish Times, ‘[... Colombia’s struggle with armed groups](#)’, 24 April 2023

¹²⁴ InSight Crime, ‘[Kidnappings Surge in Colombia Amid ELN Peace Negotiations](#)’, 18 July 2023

¹²⁵ USSD, ‘[Country Reports on Terrorism 2022](#)’ (p302), 30 November 2023

with the ELN on August 3 [2023], which the UN Verification Mission monitored.¹²⁶

- 9.3.10 The Reuters May 2024 article stated: ‘The ELN is the largest of the groups and increased its headcount in 2023 by 307 members, taking the total to 6,158. That number includes 3,305 combatants and 2,853 people who belong to support networks, according to the report, which was labeled “top secret.”... The government is holding talks with the ELN and both sides have agreed a bilateral ceasefire.’¹²⁷
- 9.3.11 For more information about the ELN, see an article published on 28 March 2017, updated on 21 February 2024, by InSight Crime entitled ‘[ELN](#)’. See also [Annex A: Quick reference guide for armed group/criminal gang aliases](#) for a list of aliases for this group.

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9.4 Other armed groups

- 9.4.1 On 29 July 2024, InSight Crime published an article entitled ‘EPL’ which stated:

‘What is known today as the Popular Liberation Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación – EPL), or the Pelusos, is a dissident faction of the original EPL’s Libardo Mora Front that refused to demobilize with the rest of that guerrilla group in 1991. Its main area of operation is located in the Catatumbo region of the Norte de Santander department, where it is involved in drug trafficking and extortion.

‘... The EPL was formed in 1967 as an armed wing of the Colombian Communist Party (Partido Comunista Colombiano Marxista Leninista – PC-ML), under the Maoist ideology of a protracted people’s war, which aimed to take it from rural to urban areas by setting up revolutionary governments or juntas patrióticas.

‘... [T]he EPL, which by then had about 2,556 members, demobilized in 1991 and created the Hope, Peace, and Liberty political movement.

‘However, a group of fighters did not demobilize. Among them was one of the EPL’s founders and top commanders, Francisco Caraballo. Confrontations with other more powerful guerrilla groups like the FARC and paramilitary groups like the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC), along with military operations and the arrest of Caraballo in 1994, impeded the consolidation of the dissident group.

‘The only faction that remains is the Libardo Mora Front in Catatumbo, in the municipalities of Teorama, Hacarí, Convención, San Calixto, and Ocaña. In 2015, the government troops killed the EPL’s leader, Víctor Navarro Serrano, alias “Megateo.” After his death, the EPL suffered from a lack of leadership, and the FARC’s demobilization in 2016 led the group into a territorial dispute with the ELN in 2018. By 2019, the EPL had fractured into two distinct factions: one along the border with Venezuela and another one

¹²⁶ USSD, ‘[2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)’ (p13), 25 March 2024

¹²⁷ Reuters, ‘[Colombia’s illegal armed groups grew in 2023 -secret security report](#)’, 7 May 2024

in the municipalities of Ábrego and Ocaña.

'In 2021, the Ministry of Defense reclassified the EPL as an Organized Criminal Group (Grupo Delictivo Organizado – GDO) of less significance.'¹²⁸

9.4.2 The same source also stated: 'After losing its war with the ELN, suffering internal divisions, and the arrest and deaths of its leaders, the EPL's capacity for action has become extremely limited. The future of its factions - both on the border with Venezuela and in the center of Norte de Santander - is uncertain.'¹²⁹

9.4.3 The July 2023 ACAPS report stated:

'Bloque Virgilio Peralta Arenas (BVPA) is also known as Los del Bajo, Los Caparros and previously as Los Caparrapos. This armed group is a dissident faction of the AGC. Although this group operated as an independent structure for some years, in 2009, they became part of the AGC and became the BVPA. At the beginning of 2017, they split from the AGC and started fighting them in the departments of Antioquia and Córdoba. Recently, they have been using the name Los del Bajo in reference to the Bajo Cauca subregion in Antioquia.'¹³⁰

9.4.4 GIGA's November 2023 report stated: 'Paramilitary groups there [Colombia] unified under the name of Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC, United Self-defence Forces of Colombia) in 1997. A process of demobilisation overseen between 2003 and 2006 aimed at their disarmament but many of the rank and file as well as middle tier formed new groups or joined others.'¹³¹

9.4.5 For more information about the EPL, see the article published by InSight Crime on 29 July 2024 entitled '[EPL](#)'. For more information about the BVPA/Los Caparros, see an article published on 15 January 2024 by InSight Crime entitled '[Caparros](#)'. For more information about the AUC, see an article published by BBC News on 29 August 2013, entitled '[Profiles: Colombia's armed groups](#)'. For information about other AUC faction groups, namely the Centauros Bloc and its splinter group, ERPAC, see articles published on 19 July 2012 and 10 March 2017 by InSight Crime, entitled '[New Leadership Drives Conflict in Colombia's Eastern Plains](#)' and '[ERPAC](#)', respectively. See also [Annex A: Quick reference guide for armed group/criminal gang aliases](#) for a list of aliases for these groups.

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10. Criminal gangs

10.1 Tren de Aragua

10.1.1 On 13 December 2023, InSight Crime published an article entitled 'Tren de Aragua' which stated:

'Tren de Aragua was born in the Tocarón prison in the state of Aragua [Venezuela].

¹²⁸ InSight Crime, '[EPL](#)', 29 July 2024

¹²⁹ InSight Crime, '[EPL](#)', 29 July 2024

¹³⁰ ACAPS, '[Colombia - Key crises to watch...](#)' (p2), 26 July 2023

¹³¹ GIGA, '[Coping with Complexity: Dealing with Non-State Armed Actors](#)' (p9), November 2023

‘... In the years that followed, the gang expanded its network to other states in Venezuela...

‘... Tren de Aragua’s expansion turned transnational around 2018, when the gang attempted to establish itself on the Venezuela-Colombia border between the Venezuelan state of Táchira and the Colombian department of Norte de Santander. There, it clashed with major Colombian criminal groups, including the... ELN... and the Gaitanistas (... AGC). The groups fought for control of clandestine border crossings, known as trochas, which are home to a variety of criminal economies, including the smuggling of drugs, contraband, and migrants.

‘Tren de Aragua carved out a niche for itself in the Colombian border town of La Parada, where many Venezuelan migrants fleeing their country first arrive in Colombia... Tren de Aragua began to exploit Venezuelan migrants systematically, charging them extortion fees, smuggling them into and throughout Colombia, and taking control of various nodes of the human trafficking for sexual exploitation market.

‘Between 2018 and 2023, Tren de Aragua built a transnational criminal network, setting up cells in Colombia... [and several nearby countries].’¹³²

10.1.2 On 30 November 2022, El Ciudadano, a publication that seeks to bring the demands of Chilean social organization to global attention¹³³ (N.B. this information was originally published in Spanish and has been translated using a free online translation tool. As such 100% accuracy cannot be guaranteed) published an article which stated: ‘Calculating the number of [transnational] members of the ‘Aragua Train’ is complicated, but Izquier [professor of Criminology at the Central University of Venezuela] calculates that it could be between 2,500 and 3,000 individuals, while [organized crime expert] Ronna Riquez’s estimate goes up to 5,000.’¹³⁴ The article did not specify how many of the group’s members were located in Colombia.

10.1.3 On 4 October 2023, Insight Crime published an article which stated:

‘In Colombia, it [Tren de Aragua’s expansion outside of Venezuela] began in and around La Parada but soon spread to the Colombian capital, Bogotá...

‘... Between 2020 and 2022... Tren de Aragua cells that had already been established along migration routes... identified local criminal economies unrelated to migration that they could exploit, and they attacked any competition or potential rivals.

‘The gang’s capacity to move into this... phase was determined by local conditions. These included not only the presence of criminal economies with low barriers to entry, but also factors such as relatively low murder rates. This increased the impact when the gang used highly publicized acts of brutality and murder to terrorize both the population and potential competitors into submission.

‘... Tren de Aragua capitalized on this fear to move into new criminal economies such as extorting local businesses and sex workers, loan

¹³² InSight Crime, [‘Tren de Aragua’](#), 13 December 2023

¹³³ El Ciudadano, [‘Who We Are The Citizen’](#), undated

¹³⁴ El Ciudadano, [‘This is how the ‘Aragua Train’ operates...’](#), 30 November 2022

sharking, and drug dealing... And they allegedly dumped dismembered bodies on street corners in Bogotá.

'... Tren de Aragua's expansion in the region around La Parada spurred violent clashes with the guerrillas of the... ELN.... While for now these clashes seem to have died down, it is clear the gang is not capable of militarily challenging the heavily armed, well-trained, and experienced ELN, limiting its expansion options in a region dominated by the rebels.

'In Bogotá too, Tren de Aragua has confronted entrenched local gangs, and while it has managed to carve out a space for itself, opposition and competition from local gangs has curbed its potential for growth.

'... Reports of new cells also continue to surface, with news stories and official investigations flagging potential cells in the cities of... Barranquilla, Ipiales, Cali, and Bucaramanga in Colombia.

'However, authorities suspect some of these may be copycat groups seeking to capitalize on Tren de Aragua's growing infamy. Even if these are genuine cells... the dizzying pace of the group's initial expansion appears to have slowed.

'Not only is Tren de Aragua now being confronted both by criminal rivals and the security forces, but at the same time the conditions that permitted its expansion are changing.

'... The ground has shifted beneath Tren de Aragua's feet, and now it remains to be seen whether it can establish another safe haven to run and plan operations, allowing its transnational criminal empire to continue to expand, or whether it will be forced into retrenchment and decline.'¹³⁵

10.1.4 On 9 November 2023, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), an investigative reporting platform for a worldwide network of independent media centers and journalists¹³⁶, published an article about the Tren de Aragua gang which stated:

'Wherever it has appeared, the gang has brought kidnapping, drug dealing, human trafficking, contract killings, and extortion along with it.

'Tren de Aragua's calling card is violence. It posts graphic videos on social media showing victims begging before being executed. Now, after a dispute with a local [Bogotá] building management board... the gang's members were threatening to poison the water supply and set fire to elevators.

'... "They use excessive violence to demonstrate their power. The murder of whoever betrays or does not obey orders sets an example to others," reads a police report detailing the gang's history, which was included in the trove of documents from the Colombian prosecutor's office.

'... The gang's tactics are reminiscent of those bad old days - bags of dismembered body parts and bodies buried under cement have turned up in Colombia... but members are now able to amplify their terror even further, using social media.

¹³⁵ InSight Crime, '[... the Construction of the Tren de Aragua's Transnational Empire](#)', 4 October 2023

¹³⁶ OCCRP, '[About Us](#)', 24 August 2007

‘... Tren de Aragua also used heavy weapons in Colombia in 2021. An army intelligence report included in the leaked documents from the Colombian prosecutor’s office says the gang used “assault rifles and fragmentation grenades” when it clashed with the... ELN.

‘The area around the city of Cucuta turned into what some locals called a “battle zone” as the groups fought for control over the La Parada border crossing with Venezuela. Eventually, the report said, Tren de Aragua “imposed its firepower, managing to establish itself in the place as the maximum controller of the illegal economy.”’¹³⁷

- 10.1.5 See also [Annex A: Quick reference guide for armed group/criminal gang aliases](#) for a list of aliases for this group.

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10.2 Other criminal gangs

- 10.2.1 On 26 December 2022, Al Jazeera published an article which stated: ‘... [M]ilitias had multiplied in a race to control the illegal economies abandoned by the FARC. According to researchers, there are now between 50 and 60 criminal groups operating throughout the country, cashing in on drug trafficking, illegal gold mining and illicit logging.’¹³⁸ It is unclear, however, whether the 50 to 60 groups include ‘armed groups’ and ‘criminal gangs’.

- 10.2.2 Reuters’ April 2023 article stated: ‘... Apart from the larger and more powerful armed groups, 23 urban gangs - the majority in cities like Medellin, Buenaventura and Quibdo - have a total of 2,500 members, according to one of the [security agency] reports... Just two groups in Buenaventura, a Pacific port city with drug trafficking routes, have a combined 830 members.’¹³⁹

- 10.2.3 The Irish Times’ April 2023 article stated the Colombian government estimated there to be about 20 gangs in the country¹⁴⁰.

- 10.2.4 On 2 April 2019, InSight Crime published an article entitled ‘Águilas Negras Threats Haunt Colombia’ which stated:

‘The name of a supposedly dismantled paramilitary group has appeared on pamphlets and other communiques threatening Colombian politicians, journalists and community leaders. But is the group truly behind the threats?’

‘Two Green Party congressmen and a Bogotá mayoral candidate have all received threatening messages claiming to be from the Águilas Negras, or Black Eagles...’

‘These threats are just the latest from the Águilas Negras, the name for an opaque death squad that had first been used by various paramilitary factions involved in drug trafficking and other crimes.’

‘... Though there is no evidence that the Águilas Negras continue to function as a criminal group, their history of extrajudicial killings and criminal acts provides cover for others using the name of the death squad to make

¹³⁷ OCCRP, [‘The Rapid Rise of Venezuela’s ‘Tren de Aragua’ Gang...’](#), 9 November 2023

¹³⁸ Al Jazeera, [‘... Colombia city becomes experiment in peace’](#), 26 December 2022

¹³⁹ Reuters, [‘Exclusive: Colombian armed groups and gangs have 17,600 members...’](#), 13 April 2023

¹⁴⁰ The Irish Times, [‘... Colombia’s struggle with armed groups’](#), 24 April 2023

threats.

'The name Águilas Negras first emerged in 2006 after the demobilization of the [AUC]...

'The group was officially dismantled between 2009 and 2011, according to El Colombiano [the principal printed newspaper in Medellín, the second most important city of Colombia¹⁴¹], though it's unclear what the dissolution of such a nebulous group means exactly. Authorities told the news outlet this month that there are currently no active armed groups with that name.

'The name Águilas Negras, however, has been used to make all types of death threats, some of which have been carried out.

'... Such widespread use of this name makes it difficult for authorities to track down the origin of these threats. For that reason alone, the specter of the Águilas Negras will continue to bring terror.'¹⁴²

10.2.5 On 20 July 2022, InSight Crime published an article entitled 'Rastrojos', which stated:

'The Rastrojos are a Colombian criminal group with influence in Norte de Santander, the border department between Colombia and Venezuela.

'... The Rastrojos first emerged in 2002...

'... By 2010, the Rastrojos had arguably risen to become Colombia's most powerful criminal group. However, the group collapsed in 2012 with the fall of three of its top leaders.

'... [D]espite having lost most of its territorial presence and armed capacity by 2013, small cells of the group remained in departments such as Nariño, Cauca, Valle del Cauca and Norte de Santander.

'This last cell in Norte de Santander managed to lift the Rastrojos from the ashes and regain strength...

'The resurgence of the Rastrojos... was short lived.

'... In 2021, in a desperate attempt to maintain its footing, the Rastrojos turned to their former enemies, the Urabeños, for support in the fight against the ELN in Norte de Santander.

'While they received the reinforcements, the Rastrojos did not fully recover. The group is believed to now only have 60 armed members...

'... The group's main leader is currently José Gregorio López Carvajal, alias "Becerro."

'... In Norte de Santander, Where [sic] they maintain their main criminal enclave, the group collects income from their participation in the drug trafficking chain, smuggling, extortion, and smuggling and trafficking in persons through the so-called trochas, located on the border with Venezuela.

'...However, its presence is getting weaker and weaker.

¹⁴¹ Media Ownership Monitor: Colombia 2017, '[El Colombiano](#)', undated

¹⁴² InSight Crime, '[Águilas Negras Threats Haunt Colombia](#)', 2 April 2019

‘... Despite this, the group has managed to maintain alliances with other criminal actors such as the Tren de Aragua. Both groups are involved in human trafficking on the Colombia-Venezuela border.

‘... After the intense blows suffered by the Rastrojos in recent years, the group has lost almost all its armed and territorial capacity.

‘It is a matter of time before the Rastrojos cease to exist as a criminal group. The remnants of the group could be absorbed by the Urabeños or remain as small franchises that acts under the group’s name without maintaining clear unity and a line of command.’¹⁴³

10.2.6 El Pais International’s January 2023 article stated, about the Sierra Nevada Self-Defense Forces:

‘This armed group has deep roots in the Sierra Nevada mountain range on the Atlantic coast. Unlike other groups, it’s a family clan linked to former paramilitary leader, Hernan Giraldo. It has been around for 40 years, and is the longest-lived organization in the negotiations, along with the ELN. Originally known as the Tayrona Resistance, it became the Caribbean arm of the Envigado sicario organization from Medellín. According to UNCaribe, the organization has only recently become politicized and now presents itself as a self-defense force.

‘The strength of the Sierra Nevada Self-Defense Forces is estimated at 150 permanent troops, a figure that does not account for all the people they hire for various criminal activities.

‘They provide drug trafficking logistical services and transportation route protection, and are the biggest extortionists of businesses in the far northern Caribbean region of Colombia, which is why they are engaged in a bloody battle with the Gulf Clan for control of the Santa Marta port [on the far north, Caribbean, coast of Colombia].’¹⁴⁴

10.2.7 On 24 February 2023, London Politica, a political risk advisory and think-tank for social impact¹⁴⁵, published an article entitled ‘Who are the Shottas [sic] and the Espartanos?’, citing various sources, which stated:

‘The Shottas and Espartanos are criminal groups in Colombia’s coastal seaport city, Buenaventura, located in the Pacific Region of the Valle del Cauca department. These groups are present in forty neighbourhoods and nine villages; hence, they can be considered as urban criminal groups. To talk about the origins of these groups, it is essential to first discuss the criminal group “La Local”. This group, which was born in 2016, managed the drug traffic in Buenaventura, the narcotraffic in the fluvial area, kidnapping and the extortion of the small companies in the city. However, the leaders of this group were captured by the Colombian national police in 2019. This created hierarchical problems in the criminal organisation which resulted in an internal division. This division led to ‘La Local’ becoming two separate groups: The Shottas and The Espartanos. However, these new groups were left fighting for control of the territory.

¹⁴³ InSight Crime, [‘Rastrojos’](#), 20 July 2022

¹⁴⁴ El Pais International, [‘... the illegal armed groups in Colombia’s latest ceasefire’](#), 5 January 2023

¹⁴⁵ London Politica, [‘About Us: Our Story’](#), undated

‘Currently, these two groups have more than 1,500 militants, composed of people aged between 19 and 20 years, most of whom are Afro-Colombian. The conflict between these two groups has affected more than 170,000 inhabitants due to the dynamics of the conflict.

‘... [D]epending on the territory they control, each group finances their criminal activities by extorting small local businesses, selling drugs and kidnapping people... [I]n 2021, the city [Buenaventura] registered more than 50 forced disappearances in a campaign of intimidation and extortion led by these two criminal groups. Currently, Buenaventura is named as the 13th most dangerous city in the world based on the homicide rate due to the extortions, kidnapping and the conflict between these groups.

‘Regarding their leaders, there is not much information about them because it is an urban criminal group, which is controlled remotely by prisoners in jail. For instance, Diren Piedraita Alegria also known as “el Cheo” is well known for being the leader of the Espartanos. He was captured on the 27th of February 2021. However, he controls the organization from the jail. On the other hand, the Shottas’ leader, Eloy Alberto Candelo Cuero, also known as Pepo, was captured on the 22nd of March 2021. Just like the Espartanos’ leader, Pepo controls the organization from the jail.

‘... [T]hese two groups signed a truce... [on] 2nd of October 2022. Since then, the homicide rates have decreased, with none being reported in an 87 day period. Unfortunately, two people were killed after 87 days in unclear circumstances; however, it did not break the ceasefire between these two groups, who did not accept responsibility for these crimes.’¹⁴⁶

10.2.8 Al Jazeera’s 26 December 2022 article stated: ‘... [T]he Shottas and the Espartanos... [comprised] up to 2,000 gang members, mainly youth from tough backgrounds...’¹⁴⁷

10.2.9 See also [Annex A: Quick reference guide for armed group/criminal gang aliases](#) for a list of aliases for these groups.

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11. Recruitment and leaving armed groups and criminal gangs

11.1 Recruitment of adults

11.1.1 On 2 February 2023, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a US non-profit research organisation which informs policy decision makers on political, economic, energy and security-related issues¹⁴⁸, published a report based on 26 interviews it conducted in Bogota and Medellin in October 2022 with government personnel, business persons, academics, and others¹⁴⁹. The report stated: ‘They [‘other armed groups’] are nourished by their ability to recruit desperate Venezuelans fleeing into Colombia, who would otherwise be without means to cross the border or sustain themselves.’¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ London Politica, [‘Who are the Shottas and the Espartanos?’](#), 24 February 2023

¹⁴⁷ Al Jazeera, [‘... Colombia city becomes experiment in peace’](#), 26 December 2022

¹⁴⁸ ecoinet, [‘Source Description: Center for Strategic and International Studies...’](#), 19 November 2020

¹⁴⁹ CSIS, [‘Colombia’s Security Challenges, the Government Response...’](#) (p1), 2 February 2023

¹⁵⁰ CSIS, [‘Colombia’s Security Challenges, the Government Response...’](#) (p6), 2 February 2023

11.1.2 ICG's February 2023 report stated the following, based on data from a Colombia military survey of people who had demobilised since 2018 (shared with ICG in January 2023):

'Fighters who have voluntarily demobilised over the last four years reported that lack of access to education, economic need, the chance to gain a position of power and family ties were their motivations for joining. In describing how they were recruited, the demobilised people cited intimidation, forced displacement, tricks and enticements, promises of material support, mistreatment or abuse in the home that pushed them to seek alternatives outside, and a gradual involvement in illicit activities.'¹⁵¹

11.1.3 On 20 March 2023, the USSD published its '2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia', covering events in 2022, (the USSD 2022 Country Report) which stated: '... [F]orced recruitment by armed persons, and domestic servitude, remained a serious problem.'¹⁵² It did not expand upon the scale and extent of this problem, however.

11.1.4 ICG's October 2023 article stated: 'Armed groups say that their prime recruitment population is aged sixteen to 24; the youths who join up often lack other opportunities and face reprisal if they refuse to enlist.'¹⁵³

11.1.5 On 9 October 2023, The Guardian published an article which stated:

'In May this year [2023], Colombia's ombudsman's office reported that the Farc dissidents had forcibly recruited 17 Indigenous young people in the departments of Amazonas and Vaupés.

'... Chavez [Alejandro Chavez, an adviser to Amazonian Indigenous governments] says the armed groups offer work to those with few economic opportunities and criminal gangs especially seek young Indigenous men, as they know the jungle and have the physical strength to carry heavy loads.'¹⁵⁴

11.1.6 On 24 October 2024, ACAPS published a briefing note which stated: 'There is a significant information gap regarding armed group recruitment, and no exact figures are available.'¹⁵⁵

11.1.7 In December 2023, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) jointly published a 'Climate, Peace and Security Research Paper...' which stated: 'In rural Colombia, recruitment into armed groups can offer a financial lifeline when viable alternative livelihoods are not available'¹⁵⁶

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11.2 Recruitment of children

11.2.1 ICG's February 2023 report stated:

'Colombia's child welfare agency has documented 1,166 cases of recruitment of children under age 18 since 2016, but this total is widely

¹⁵¹ ICG, '[Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable...](#)' (p15-16 & footnote 89), 24 February 2023

¹⁵² USSD, '[2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)' (p40), 20 March 2023

¹⁵³ ICG, '[...Colombia: Is "Total Peace" Back on Track?](#)' (p5), 4 October 2023

¹⁵⁴ The Guardian, '[Criminals without borders...](#)', 9 October 2023

¹⁵⁵ ACAPS, '[Colombia: Increased armed violence in Argelia, Cauca](#)' (p2), 24 October 2023

¹⁵⁶ NUPI & SIPRI, '[Climate, Peace and Security Research Paper...](#)' (p5), December 2023

believed to be an undercount. The military, for example, says it has recovered at least 70 minors in the first five months of the Petro presidency [which began in August 2022], or about 20 per cent of all fighters who have voluntarily handed themselves in. In northern Cauca, the region thought to yield the largest number of child recruits, the Indigenous Nasa community had tracked 206 young people recruited between January and October 2022 alone, surpassing the official annual estimate for the entire country.

‘... With the exception of the ELN, all armed groups in Colombia today are paying (or promising to pay) salaries, including to children.

‘... Recruitment of minors is effective at curbing resistance from a new member’s family and friends to the armed group in question. Out of fear, many families decline to report recruitment or to try recovering their children.

‘... Since the pandemic [2020/2021], armed and criminal groups have grown increasingly adept at painting themselves as an attractive option for children and adolescents... becoming in many cases the main sources of economic stability, recreational opportunities and even affection.

‘... Communities in southern Córdoba recount how the Gulf Clan will try to “look like good guys, giving gifts and food”... then later drawing in family members as recruits. Some cases of groups paying families whose children they take have been reported in Cauca. Children themselves are particularly vulnerable to enticements... [M]any... are at home alone after school... “The children look for other forms of affection, and they let themselves be taken and recruited”, said a young Indigenous official in northern Cauca.

‘... Members of several FARC dissident fronts in northern Cauca have located arms depots next to schools and invited children to see them... Teachers who protested have been intimidated into silence or forced to move away. Meanwhile, Indigenous communities in rural Tumaco, in the department of Nariño, reported that FARC dissident factions have planted landmines around schools and set up checkpoints along routes to school... These mechanisms... endanger children... deterred them from attending classes... [and] have pushed some... into joining the armed groups.

‘... Children often begin working for the armed and criminal groups gradually, for example by running errands in exchange for food. Bit by bit, they become part of the group’s intelligence network... In some areas, the process is reported to start with those as young as 8 or 9, while children are brought directly into the ranks of fighters from around age 12.

‘... Armed groups also manoeuvre their way into the social lives of adolescents... Recruitment of teenagers often happens in groups, with several friends leaving home to join at the same time.... They offer alcohol, mobile phones, and the promise of motorcycles and guns... are reported to have posted idyllic pictures of life inside the ranks on social media... or to have offered the chance to play free video games. Demobilised combatants also report that children are being used to recruit other children...

‘For children aged roughly 15 to 18 who have either finished or stopped studying, armed and criminal groups portray themselves as the only viable route to earning a living, as well as a chance to have power and prestige in the community.

‘... Recruitment is not limited to boys; girls are also increasingly drawn in with promises... At times, girls facing abuse or sexual violence in their homes see the armed groups as a safe haven. They are enlisted to be lookouts, or when they are older, to join groups directly. Some fight in the ranks.

‘... In general, young recruits are relocated – in part so that they cannot escape and their families cannot reclaim them. This tactic magnifies the group’s social control...

‘Once inside armed groups, child recruits discover a reality very different from the ideal that had been painted for them... [W]ages are often lower or more infrequent than had been promised. Conditions are difficult, and there is often little training. In rural Tumaco... Segunda Marquetalia, has reportedly deployed new, untrained recruits (including children) at the heart of battles... driving up casualties among both fighters and civilians.’¹⁵⁷

11.2.2 The same source also stated: ‘Displaced and forcibly confined children without access to school are particularly prone to recruitment.’¹⁵⁸

11.2.3 On 24 February 2023, Reuters published an article which stated: ‘The ICBF [Colombia’s child welfare agency] said in response to the [ICG’s February 2023] report that it is aware of a sustained increase in the recruitment of minors in recent years and saw a 141% uptick between 2021 and 2022 in the need for its recruitment intervention program.’¹⁵⁹

11.2.4 On 5 June 2023, the UN General Assembly and UN Security Council published a report of the Secretary-General, covering the period from January to December 2022, which stated:

‘The United Nations verified the recruitment and use of 130 children (77 boys, 53 girls), between the ages of 11 and 17. Perpetrators were the... (FARC-EP) dissident groups (87)... ELN... (18), Clan del Golfo... (AGC) (15) and unidentified perpetrators (10). Fifty children were used in a combat role.

‘... A total of 23 children (18 boys, 5 girls), between the ages of 12 and 17, were abducted by FARC-EP dissident groups (11), ELN (5), AGC (4) and unidentified perpetrators (3), and in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, in areas at the border with Colombia (2), mostly for recruitment and use purposes. A total of 3 children were killed, 15 escaped or were released and the status of 5 is unknown’¹⁶⁰

11.2.5 While it did not define scale or extent, the HRW 2024 World Report stated: ‘Reports of child recruitment and kidnappings increased in 2023.’¹⁶¹

11.2.6 The OHCHR’s 14 February 2024 report stated:

‘The Office verified 134 cases of recruitment or use of children in the armed conflict by non-State armed groups and criminal organizations (86 boys, 42 girls and 6 children of unconfirmed gender). There continues to be high underreporting of these violations, therefore these figures are a sample of a phenomena of greater magnitude. It is particularly concerning that, in 75

¹⁵⁷ ICG, [‘Protecting Colombia’s Most Vulnerable...’](#) (p12-16), 24 February 2023

¹⁵⁸ ICG, [‘Protecting Colombia’s Most Vulnerable...’](#) (p30), 24 February 2023

¹⁵⁹ Reuters, [‘Colombia must do more to stop child recruitment by armed groups...’](#), 24 February 2023

¹⁶⁰ UN General Assembly & Security Council, [‘Children and armed...’](#) (paras 41,46), 5 June 2023

¹⁶¹ HRW, [‘World Report 2024’](#) (p161), 11 January 2024

cases, the victims were members of ethnic peoples (71 indigenous and 4 persons of African descent)...

'The majority of the cases of recruitment or use of children documented occurred in Antioquia, Arauca, Cauca and Nariño. At least 11 victims were recruited by non-State armed groups in educational centres or their vicinities, or by using other children to recruit them. Furthermore, regular recruitment routes have been identified, and places where victims are subjected to instruction within the group and even medical examinations. In 16 cases, threats against victims, their family members or traditional authorities were reported. Five children were prosecuted for belonging to a non-State armed group, instead of re-establishing their rights and recognising them as a victim.'¹⁶²

11.2.7 The USSD 2024 Trafficking in Persons report stated:

'Illegal armed groups and criminal organizations continued to forcibly recruit or use child soldiers in armed conflict and exploit children in forced labor and sex trafficking.

'... These groups [several illegal armed groups], particularly in the departments of Cauca, Chocó, Córdoba, Nariño, and Norte de Santander forcibly recruit or use children, including Venezuelan, Indigenous, and Afro-Colombian youth, to serve as combatants and informants, harvest illicit crops, and exploit them in sex trafficking. In 2022, an international organization reported 77 percent of municipalities in Chocó department and 33 percent of municipalities in Nariño department were at high risk for child soldier recruitment, particularly Indigenous and Afro-Colombian children.'¹⁶³

11.2.8 On 23 April 2024, Amnesty International (AI) published a report, 'The State of the World's Human Rights; Colombia 2023', covering events of 2023, which stated: 'In May [2023], the Ombudsperson's Office called on the various armed groups to stop the illegal recruitment of children. The Coalition against the Recruitment of Children in the Colombian Armed Conflict registered 112 cases in the first semester of 2023.'¹⁶⁴

11.2.9 For examples of children recruited by armed groups, and the surrounding circumstances, see a 5 August 2022 BBC News article entitled '[Colombia peace deal failing as violent gangs recruit vulnerable children](#)'.

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11.3 Leaving armed groups

11.3.1 The EUAA December 2022 COI report, citing various sources, stated:

'The UN reported in July 2022, that since the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016, a total of 327 homicides of former combatants have been documented by the UN Verification Mission in Colombia. During 2022, Indepaz reported that as of 11 November 2022, 36 ex-combatants have been assassinated, while the UN reported as of July 2022, that 22 ex-FARC combatants had been killed during the year to date. A 2020 study mapping

¹⁶² OHCHR, '[Situation of human rights in Colombia...](#)' (paras 16-17), 14 February 2024

¹⁶³ USSD, '[2024 Trafficking in Persons...](#)' (sections: Prevention, Trafficking Profile), 25 June 2024

¹⁶⁴ AI, '[The State of the World's Human Rights; Colombia 2023](#)' (p136), 23 April 2024

the targeting of ex-FARC-EP combatants found that the majority of victims were male and most were of low rank and less than 10 % being commanders. Many of those murdered had been released from prison or were active in local politics promoting re-integration of former combatants. Former FARC-EP members who declined to re-take up arms have been killed and displaced often by FARC dissident groups. It has been difficult to assess who is responsible for the killings with some attributed to ELN and others to other dissident and criminal structures, while the JEP [Special Jurisdiction for Peace] stated that paramilitary successor groups have been largely responsible. Together illegal armed groups and criminal groups perpetrate 78% of attacks on former combatants. Sources indicate the highest numbers of ex-FARC-EP killings occurred in Cauca, Caquetá, Nariño, Antioquia, and Meta, as well as Valle del Cauca.¹⁶⁵

11.3.2 ICG's February 2023 report stated:

'Some children disillusioned with their roles [once recruited into armed or criminal gangs] have tried to get away, but escape is rare and dangerous. "The only exits from these groups are death or prison", as a female Afro-Colombian leader [in Arauquita in November 2022] put it. In areas overseen by the Gulf Clan, residents reported that recruits who try to leave are killed. If a recruit does manage to flee, they and their families often face retaliation later, and many families abandon their homes to avoid being threatened or killed. Meanwhile, in cases where parents or community leaders are able to rescue recruited children, re-incidence is a risk: the young person can be drawn back either by threats of violence or by the same lack of opportunity that first lured them to the organisation.

'Families of child recruits are often left paralysed and powerless to recover their loved ones. At least some recruits leave for conflict zones without announcing where they are going. "Sometimes a family only learns where their child has gone when they come back in a body bag", a female leader [from an Indigenous authority in Santander de Quilichao] explained [in October 2022]... Some parents in northern Cauca who have tried to recoup their children from FARC dissident fronts have been told they can visit monthly, but that the youngsters are staying put.'¹⁶⁶

11.3.3 The USSD 2022 Country Report stated: 'The United Nations reported the collective security of former combatants was threatened by the actions of illegal armed groups. The UNVM [UN Verification Mission¹⁶⁷] reported that emergency protection requests had increased from 144 requests in 2021 to 150 from January [2022] through August [2022].'¹⁶⁸

11.3.4 On 5 June 2023, the UN General Assembly and UN Security Council published a report of the Secretary-General, covering the period from January to December 2022, which stated that of the 130 children verified by the UN as having been recruited and used by armed groups in 2022: 'Most of the children were released (100), while 18 were killed and 12 remain

¹⁶⁵ EUAA, '[Colombia: Country Focus](#)' (p109-110), December 2022

¹⁶⁶ ICG, '[Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable...](#)' (p16-17), 24 February 2023

¹⁶⁷ UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, '[UN Verification Mission...](#)', undated

¹⁶⁸ USSD, '[2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)' (p15), 20 March 2023

associated.¹⁶⁹

- 11.3.5 On 11 August 2023, the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) published a response to an information request based on a range of sources. Citing an interview the IRB carried out with the Head of Colombia Programmes in the Research Directorate at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) in July 2023, it noted that ‘... [F]ormer FARC-EP combatants are “common[ly]” targeted as military objectives.’¹⁷⁰ See [Group oppositionists](#) for information about ‘military objectives’.
- 11.3.6 The USSD report on terrorism in 2022, published in November 2023, stated: ‘Segunda Marquetalia has been responsible for the killings of former FARC members and community leaders... [although] Segunda Marquetalia did not claim responsibility for any attacks in 2022.’¹⁷¹
- 11.3.7 BBC News’ 13 December 2023 article stated: ‘In May [2023], President Petro suspended a ceasefire with the rebel group [the EMC] after it had killed four indigenous teenagers who had tried to flee after being forcibly recruited by the group.’¹⁷²
- 11.3.8 The OHCHR 14 February 2024 report stated: ‘The United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia verified the homicides of 48 former FARC-EP members in 2023. This represents a reduction of 5.9 per cent compared with 2022. Since the signing of the Peace Agreement, 408 former FARC-EP members have been killed, including 11 women.’¹⁷³
- 11.3.9 The USSD 2023 Country Report stated:
‘According to the UN Verification Mission, the violence against demobilized former FARC combatants continued in several regions in which illegal armed groups exercised social and territorial control. Since the signing of the 2016 peace accord, observers verified a total of 375 killings of former combatants (including 11 women, 54 Afro-Colombians, and 35 Indigenous persons), 129 attempted homicides (including 10 women), and 32 cases of former combatants deemed missing (all men). INDEPAZ reported 315 killings of former combatants since 2017.’¹⁷⁴ The report, however, did not provide further comment on when specifically these killings and other targetings were verified as having taken place.

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12. Targets of non-state group violence

12.1 Group oppositionists

- 12.1.1 The EUAA December 2022 COI report defined a ‘Military target’ as: ‘... [A] term used by armed groups or the state to demarcate a person deemed to be an opponent’¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁹ UN General Assembly & Security Council, ‘[Children and armed conflict...](#)’ (para 41), 5 June 2023

¹⁷⁰ IRB, ‘[Colombia: Individuals declared a military objective...](#)’ (section 2), 11 August 2023

¹⁷¹ USSD, ‘[Country Reports on Terrorism 2022](#)’ (p303), 30 November 2023

¹⁷² BBC News, ‘[Colombian EMC rebel group to stop kidnapping for ransom](#)’, 13 December 2023

¹⁷³ OHCHR, ‘[Situation of human rights in Colombia...](#)’ (para 13), 14 February 2024

¹⁷⁴ USSD, ‘[2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)’ (p17), 25 March 2024

¹⁷⁵ EUAA, ‘[Colombia: Country Focus](#)’ (p11), December 2022

12.1.2 The IRB August 2023 response, citing interviews it carried out in July and August 2023 with the Head of Colombia Programmes at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, a senior analyst at the International Crisis Group, and a Colombia-based independent researcher who focuses on security and organized crime, stated:

‘... [A] declaration as a military objective is a “threat to life”... there is “very real” danger that comes from receiving such a threat... [it] is the “highest informal threat” that someone can receive, and the threat is “very serious” and “time sensitive,” usually with a deadline between 24 and 72 hours.

‘... Sources indicated that a criminal or armed group declares a person a military objective to instill fear and to send a message to the broader area or community that they are in power. According to sources, a military objective declaration is a threat to an individual and their family because a threat to the life of family members is an “effective” tactic to ensure the person of interest will take the declaration seriously. Sources reported that individuals declared military objectives have been killed. The independent researcher stated that “most” military objective threats [translation] “end with people being murdered”.

‘Sources report that all criminal and armed groups use military objective declarations to threaten targets.

‘Sources indicated that people who are declared military objectives are those who “threaten the power” of criminal and armed groups in the local community or who have “gotten on the wrong side” of the organization who has power in the area. The Head of Colombia Programmes reported that a military objective declaration is a “warning” to the concerned person to leave the area and stop being vocal against the criminal group. According to sources, this type of threat forces individuals to leave the community.

‘... The independent researcher reported... multiple ways to declare someone a military objective, including a face-to-face threats, distributing and publicly posting pamphlets, and communicating through WhatsApp.

‘... The Head of Colombia Programmes indicated that the families of people declared military objectives “live in fear”.

‘According to the Head of Colombia Programmes, this type of threat is “very common” in rural areas but has started to become common in urban areas too... [and] the areas of Pacífico Sur (Valle del Cauca, Cauca and Nariño departments), Bajo Cauca, Urabá (Nudo de Paramillo region), and Catatumbo (on the border with Venezuela) are “very affected” by violence and are therefore “very affected” by the use of military objectives.’¹⁷⁶

12.1.3 For some examples of armed groups having made military declarations, see section 2.1 of the [IRB August 2023 response](#).

12.1.4 The OCCRP’s November 2023 Tren de Aragua article stated:

‘... [A] report in the leak of Colombian prosecutors’ documents details the brutality meted out on those who betray the gang, such as Yonathan Zabalza Palencia, a Tren de Aragua member the gang had “marked” as a

¹⁷⁶ IRB, [‘Colombia: Individuals declared a military objective...’](#) (sections 1-2), 11 August 2023

“guerrillero” [guerrilla]. Police found his dismembered body inside a sack that had been tossed into a canal.

‘... “They want to show it, make it public, visible, to intimidate society as a whole,” said Naranjo, the retired police general.’¹⁷⁷

12.1.5 On 10 July 2024, the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) published a response to an information request based on a range of sources. Citing a June 2024 interview the IRB carried out with an Assistant Professor in the Research Directorate of the Security Studies Department at New Jersey City University, whose research focuses on drug trafficking, organised crime, and security in Latin America, including Colombia¹⁷⁸, it stated:

‘The Assistant Professor stated that while the ELN targets “multiple actors,” people living in rural areas “where institutions are weaker” tend to “suffer more,” and Indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations “have been devastated by the armed conflict”. The same source noted that these groups target those who “owe them money” or those who “they want to extort,” including landholders and journalists, and added that union leaders are also at risk in Colombia.’¹⁷⁹

12.1.6 For information on the pamphlets used by criminal groups, as one method for making declarations, including their appearance and distribution, see the IRB 9 February 2022 response to an information request entitled: [‘Colombia: Pamphlets produced by criminal groups...’](#).

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12.2 Human rights defenders, social leaders and trade unionists

12.2.1 Al Jazeera’s May 2022 article stated: ‘... [An] official told Al Jazeera that three social leaders – a term used in Colombia to describe activists, community representatives and rights defenders – were among those killed [of between 6 and 24 recorded deaths (depending on the source) in a days-long AGC siege responding to their then-leader’s, Otoniel’s, extradition].’¹⁸⁰

12.2.2 The EUAA December 2022 COI report stated: ‘... [F]or female social leaders... aggressions against them frequently include threats to their children and family.’¹⁸¹

12.2.3 ICG’s February 2023 report stated: ‘... [K]illings of social leaders have... touched new heights [in 2022]... Social leaders are particularly vulnerable during such fighting [clashes between rival armed groups]. As prominent figures in their communities, they can be singled out by groups aiming to establish or demonstrate their authority or to silence potential critics.’¹⁸²

12.2.4 On 9 March 2023, Freedom House published the 2023 Freedom in the World country report, covering events of 2022, which stated:

‘... [I]llegal armed groups remained active, and the country was still one of

¹⁷⁷ OCCRP, [‘The Rapid Rise of Venezuela’s ‘Tren de Aragua’ Gang...’](#), 9 November 2023

¹⁷⁸ IRB, [‘Colombia: National Liberation Army... ability to track individuals...’](#) (section 3.1), 10 July 2024

¹⁷⁹ IRB, [‘Colombia: National Liberation Army... ability to track individuals...’](#) (section 4), 10 July 2024

¹⁸⁰ Al Jazeera, [“‘Terrifying’: Days of terror under Colombia’s Gulf Clan cartel’](#), 12 May 2022

¹⁸¹ EUAA, [‘Colombia: Country Focus’](#) (p136), December 2022

¹⁸² ICG, [‘Protecting Colombia’s Most Vulnerable...’](#) (p7), 24 February 2023

the deadliest in the world for human rights defenders.

‘... Though Colombia’s illegal armed groups have killed thousands of union activists and leaders over the past three decades, killings declined substantially from their peak in the early 2000s. Between April 2021 and March 2022, 13 trade unionists were murdered, down from 22 in the previous year, according to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC).’¹⁸³

12.2.5 The USSD 2022 Country Report stated:

‘On September 10 [2022], armed actors killed Sibares Lamprea Vargas, secretary of administrative affairs of the Oil Workers Union (Union Sindical Obrera) in Barrancabermeja. Labor groups stated more needed to be done to address impunity for perpetrators of violence and threats against trade unionists. The National Union School (ENS), a labor rights NGO and think tank, reported 10 trade unionists were killed through August [2022], seven of whom were members of the Colombian Federation of Educators. The ENS and other labor groups stated that focusing on killings alone masked the true nature and scope of the violence against labor activists. Labor groups noted that in some regions, nonlethal violations continued to increase. Through August [2022], the ENS reported 55 death threats, three abductions, and two cases of harassment.’¹⁸⁴

12.2.6 AI’s March 2023 report stated: ‘In February [2022], several human rights defenders in the Magdalena Medio region were targeted in a pamphlet circulated by an armed group calling itself the United Self-defence Forces of Colombia. The pamphlet referred to human rights defenders as military targets and gave them and their families 48 hours to leave the area or face the consequences.’¹⁸⁵

12.2.7 On 4 April 2023, Front Line Defenders (FLD), an international human rights organisation founded in Dublin in 2001 with the aim of protecting human rights defenders at risk (HRDs)¹⁸⁶, published a report which stated:

‘Limited state presence in remote territories continued to leave HRDs exposed to violence, especially members of local civic structures and social organisations. In the absence of the state, these HRDs have taken on a very visible role in the promotion of the 2016 Peace Accords in their territories... In 2022 alone, 72 defenders working with Community Action Boards (Juntas de Acción Comunal [a local association of civic representation forming a non-profit entity, with legal status, that is voluntarily integrated by the residents at a community level]) were killed.

‘The long-standing practice of criminalisation combined with smear campaigns and trumped-up charges against defenders in Colombia, contributes to sustaining a general climate of violence against defenders, including a high number of killings.’¹⁸⁷

12.2.8 The IRB August 2023 response stated: ‘... Sources mentioned human rights

¹⁸³ Freedom House, [‘Freedom in the World 2023 - Colombia’](#) (‘Status Change’, E3), 9 March 2023

¹⁸⁴ USSD, [‘2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia’](#) (p39), 20 March 2023

¹⁸⁵ AI, [‘The State of the World’s Human Rights: Colombia 2022’](#) (p132), 27 March 2023

¹⁸⁶ FLD, [‘About Front Line Defenders’](#), undated

¹⁸⁷ FLD, [‘Global Analysis 2022’](#) (p38-39), 4 April 2023

defenders as well as social and political leaders as... targets of the military objective designation.’¹⁸⁸ See [Group oppositionists](#) for information about ‘military objective designation’.

12.2.9 On 19 October 2023, EFE, a Spanish-language news agency¹⁸⁹, published an article which stated:

‘At least 85 human rights defenders were murdered in Colombia during the first half of 2023, according to the [NGO] Somos Defensores [We are defenders] program, which represents a 14% decrease compared to the same period in 2022 (14 cases less).

‘However, the program says it continues to be “the manifestation of a terrifying reality.”

‘For the same period, Somos Defensores information system recorded 466 violent attacks committed against 438 people, “a worrying 6% increase,” the organization’s semi-annual report revealed Thursday [19 October 2023].

‘In 25% of the attacks and 18% of the murders, the victims were women. According to Somos Defensores, which underscored that murders of women have increased by 50%.

‘The paramilitary Clan del Golfo, also known as Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC), is the main perpetrator of the attacks, with 31 attributed to them, followed by the Central General Staff (EMC), the main dissidents of the FARC.

‘... The number of forced displacements also increased, from 14 to 21.

‘Somos Defensores began counting kidnappings, with five in the first half of the year.

‘Cauca, in the southwest, is the most violent department for defenders, with 127 attacks, followed by Santander (northeast, with 45) and Antioquia (northwest, with 44).’¹⁹⁰

12.2.10 On 9 November 2023, Amnesty International published a report entitled ‘Colombia: Hope at risk: The lack of a safe space to defend human rights in Colombia continues’, citing various sources, which stated:

‘Between 2020 and 2023 the crisis of violence against human rights defenders continued, and at times intensified.

‘... [A]ccording to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) 2022 was “the most violent year for (human rights) defenders [in Colombia] since 2012, the year from which... it has records”. During 2022, the Somos Defensores programme recorded the killing of 197 defenders, the Institute for Development and Peace Studies (INDEPAZ) 189, the Ombudsperson’s Office 215 and the OHCHR 116. Despite the differences in the figures, which is to be expected when dealing with a problem of such magnitude and complexity, all of these records show one

¹⁸⁸ IRB, [‘Colombia: Individuals declared a military objective...’](#) (section 2), 11 August 2023

¹⁸⁹ EFE, [‘About us’](#), undated

¹⁹⁰ EFE, [‘85 human rights defenders murdered in Colombia in the first half of 2023’](#), 19 October 2023

thing in common: homicidal violence increased compared to 2021.¹⁹¹

12.2.11 The same source stated:

‘... CREDHOS [The Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (Corporación Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos), ‘... a non-governmental social organization created in 1987 for the purpose of carrying out actions for the defence, promotion and protection of human rights in the Magdalena Medio.’¹⁹²]... faced attacks and threats in recent years... in their work accompanying people, groups, movements and organizations to defend their rights.’

‘... In the recent past one of its members was assassinated, the organization was declared a “military objective” by armed groups operating in the Magdalena Medio, and a leaflet bomb was found a mere five metres from its headquarters.

‘... Violence in general was characterized by non-state armed groups as the main aggressors, and the profound vulnerability of defenders of land, territory and the environment, members of community action committees, and Indigenous, Black, Afro-descendant, Raizal, Palenquero and campesino leaders.’¹⁹³

12.2.12 The HRW 2024 World Report stated: ‘More than 1,200 human rights defenders and social leaders have been killed in Colombia since 2016, according to the Human Rights Ombudsperson’s Office. Human Rights Watch documented 150 killings of human rights defenders and other social leaders committed between January and the end of November 2023.’¹⁹⁴

12.2.13 The OHCHR’s 14 February 2024 report stated:

‘OHCHR received 233 allegations of killings of human rights defenders. In 105 cases, the Office verified that there was a connection between their death and their work in defence of human rights, and 128 were inconclusive. Of the verified cases, 14 were women, 87 men, one non-binary person, two gay men and one transsexual woman. Although a reduction of 9.5 per cent in verified killings of human rights defenders was recorded in comparison with 2022, the violence against them remains intolerable. With 25 verified cases, the department with the highest level of violence was Cauca, followed by Nariño (14), Valle del Cauca (10), Putumayo (9), Norte de Santander (6) and Arauca (6). Puerto Asís was the municipality with the highest number of cases (five), followed by Caldon, Tame and Tumaco (four each). Different non-State armed groups were the alleged perpetrators of 74 per cent of the verified killings.

‘OHCHR received allegations of 763 cases of threats and other affectations to the human rights of human rights defenders, constituting only a sample of the cases in the whole country. Of the total cases, 546 were against men, 186 against women, nine against LBGTIQ+ persons and 22 were collective threats. In 26 cases, the threats and attacks may constitute gender-based

¹⁹¹ AI, [‘Colombia: Hope at risk...’](#) (p4,10-11), 9 November 2023

¹⁹² AI, [‘Colombia: Hope at risk...’](#) (p5), 9 November 2023

¹⁹³ AI, [‘Colombia: Hope at risk...’](#) (p13,22), 9 November 2023

¹⁹⁴ HRW, [‘World Report 2024’](#) (p164), 11 January 2024

violence. Among the 763 cases, there were 65 cases of attempted killings and 23 cases of kidnapping or disappearance. The case of William Castro Muñoz, a defender of African descent from Nariño, is illustrative of the human rights abuses that defenders have faced. Despite possessing measures from the National Protection Unit, from November 2022 to August 2023 he was disappeared by a non-State armed group and subjected to torture, ill-treatment and forced labour.

‘One of the main patterns OHCHR has identified is that human rights defenders are killed when they speak out or become an obstacle to the social control dynamics exercised by non-State armed actors in the territories. The killings also seek to fragment social processes for the defence of human rights and generate fear among communities.

‘Leaders linked to the Juntas de Acción Comunal (JACs) continued to be the main victims as a result of the violence, representing 33% of the cases of verified killings. Additionally, OHCHR documented allegations of cases of threats, stigmatization and forced displacement of community leaders, particularly peasant leaders. Testimonies collected in various regions of the country indicate an intention to weaken community movements due to co-opting attempts by armed actors, forced resignations and fear of exercising the position.’¹⁹⁵

12.2.14 The USSD 2023 Country Report stated:

‘On August 1 [2023], the ombudsman announced 92 homicides of social leaders occurred through the end of June [2023, compared with 157 to the end of September 2022¹⁹⁶]. NGOs using different methodologies and definitions reported higher numbers of homicides of social leaders and human rights defenders. The NGO Institute for the Study of Development and Peace (INDEPAZ) reported 151 homicides of social leaders through November 25 [2023, compared with 144 homicides of social leaders through October 12 2022¹⁹⁷].

‘... The motives for the killings varied, and it was often difficult to determine the primary motive in individual cases.

‘... As of August [2023], the OHCHR reported the homicide of 11 Indigenous human rights defenders...’¹⁹⁸

12.2.15 The same source stated: ‘Violence, threats, harassment, and other practices against trade unionists affected the exercise of the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining.’¹⁹⁹ Unlike the previous year (see paragraph 12.2.5 above), the report provided neither numbers nor examples of trade unionists having been killed during the year.

12.2.16 AI’s April 2024 report stated: ‘According to the We Are Defenders Programme [a translation from the Spanish, Somos Defensores, an NGO working for the protection of human rights activists in Colombia²⁰⁰], there

¹⁹⁵ OHCHR, ‘[Situation of human rights in Colombia...](#)’ (paras 56-59), 14 February 2024

¹⁹⁶ USSD, ‘[2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)’ (p5), 20 March 2023

¹⁹⁷ USSD, ‘[2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)’ (p5), 20 March 2023

¹⁹⁸ USSD, ‘[2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)’ (p4,33), 25 March 2024

¹⁹⁹ USSD, ‘[2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)’ (p46), 25 March 2024

²⁰⁰ COHA, ‘[... An Interview with the NGO, Somos Defensores](#)’, 6 June 2017

were 632 aggressions against human rights defenders up to September [2023], of which 123 resulted in death.²⁰¹

12.2.17 For information on the treatment of indigenous human rights defenders, also see [Indigenous and afro-descendant persons](#).

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12.3 Environmental activists and landowners

12.3.1 In September 2022, Global Witness, a British NGO which investigates and exposes environmental and human rights abuses in the oil, gas, mining, and timber sectors²⁰², published a report which stated:

‘At least 33 Land and Environmental Defenders were killed there [in Colombia] last year [in 2021]... Land disputes are a driving force behind the killings of Land and Environmental Defenders... [A]nd the consequences of ongoing violence are particularly felt by the most vulnerable groups, including small-scale farmers...’

‘... [T]en years of gathering data on the killings of Land and Environmental Defenders have placed Colombia as the country with the second highest number of killings.’²⁰³

12.3.2 The same source quoted Óscar Sampayo, an anti-fracking activist and community leader in Barrancabermeja, Colombia: ‘Since November 2020, the threats, intimidation and pressure that I have experienced from groups such as the Aguilas Negras (the ‘Black Eagles’: far-right drug trafficking, counter-revolutionary, paramilitary organisations) and other groups, due to my work in defence of human rights and nature in the Magdalena Medio region of Colombia, is similar to that experienced by dozens of leaders living in the region. A female leader has had to flee to France in 2022. I have lived through the assassinations of three friends and environmental leaders: two were assassinated in February [2022] and one at the end of July [2022].’²⁰⁴

12.3.3 ICG’s February 2023 report stated: ‘Armed groups have repeatedly sought to control these [ethnic] communities [of landowners in areas rich in minerals and featuring abundant fluvial transport routes] in order to gain access to mines, fertile farmland, gas siphons and trafficking corridors. According to a former Colombian official, “The same thing that makes these communities rich in some ways is what condemns them to be the targets of violence in the conflict”.’²⁰⁵

12.3.4 The 2023 Global Organized Crime Index: Colombia report stated:

‘Colombia’s criminal organizations engage in deforestation primarily through extortion practices... Illegal armed groups control certain areas, with dissidents from FARC... and the... [ELN] being the major players in deforestation. They clear land for other illegal economies such as mining, coca cultivation and cattle raising, which is used as a modality for money laundering. As a result, Colombia is the most dangerous place in which to be

²⁰¹ AI, [‘The State of the World’s Human Rights; Colombia 2023’](#) (p136), 23 April 2024

²⁰² Global Witness, [‘About us’](#), undated

²⁰³ Global Witness, [‘Decade of defiance...’](#) (p13,19), September 2022

²⁰⁴ Global Witness, [‘Decade of defiance...’](#) (p31), September 2022

²⁰⁵ ICG, [‘Protecting Colombia’s Most Vulnerable...’](#) (p8), 24 February 2023

an environmental activist, with the assassination of civil society leaders who dedicate themselves to environmentalist activities not being uncommon.

‘Colombia... is plagued by wildlife trafficking, particularly of reptiles, which are traded for food and skins. Although efforts have been made to counter animal trafficking... [t]he illegal trade is maintained by recruiting poor farmers to capture animals and resell them to organized-crime groups, which then take over the shipment and commercialization of the species. Environmental leaders, particularly those from indigenous communities who live in and protect their territories, are vulnerable due to impunity and lack of interest in prosecuting criminal organizations that control different territories.’²⁰⁶

12.3.5 On 13 September 2023, Global Witness published a report, citing various sources, which stated:

‘Colombia tops the global ranking with 60 [land/environment defender] murders in [2022] yet another dire year for the country. This is almost double the number of killings compared to 2021, when 33 [land/environment] defenders lost their lives [65 in 2020²⁰⁷]. Once again... small-scale farmers and environmental activists have been viciously targeted.

‘... In some cases, criminalisation precedes murders of defenders. Take the case of Teófilo Acuña, a renowned Colombian social leader and the voice of thousands of small-scale peasants who depend on agriculture and gold mining. He was murdered in February 2022 alongside fellow defender Jorge Alberto Tafur. Both had reported threats only days before their deaths.’²⁰⁸

12.3.6 AI’s November 2023 report stated:

‘... FEDEPESAN [The Federation of Artisanal, Environmental and Tourist Fishermen of the Department of Santander (Federación de Pescadores Artesanales Ambientalistas y Turísticos del Departamento de Santander), ‘... a group of 37 fisherfolk organizations working to defend the environment in Santander, particularly in the Magdalena Medio region.’²⁰⁹]... faced attacks and threats in recent years... in connection with their work to defend the marshes...

‘... The intensity of violence... is extremely high. Yuly Velásquez, president of FEDEPESAN, has been attacked by armed individuals on at least two occasions, her artisanal fisherfolk colleagues have had the engines of their boats stolen and, in general, have received direct and indirect threats to stop their demands for protection of the bodies of water surrounding Barrancabermeja.’²¹⁰

12.3.7 The HRW 2024 World Report stated: ‘... FARC dissident groups are major drivers of deforestation, pressuring residents to fell trees, extorting farmers, promoting coca crops to produce cocaine, or threatening people who defend conservation.’²¹¹

²⁰⁶ GI-TOC, ‘Colombia’ (p4), September 2023

²⁰⁷ Global Witness, ‘Decade of defiance... land and environmental activism...’ (p10), September 2022

²⁰⁸ Global Witness, ‘Standing firm...’ (p10,44), 13 September 2023

²⁰⁹ AI, ‘Colombia: Hope at risk...’ (p5), 9 November 2023

²¹⁰ AI, ‘Colombia: Hope at risk...’ (p13), 9 November 2023

²¹¹ HRW, ‘World Report 2024’ (p168), 11 January 2024

12.3.8 The OHCHR's 14 February 2024 report stated:

'OHCHR verified allegations on 31 cases of killings of environmental, land and territory defenders. Two illustrative cases are the case of Edilsan Andrade, defender of the Integration Committee of the Colombian Massif (Comité de Integración del Macizo Colombiano) who was killed on 31 January in Rosas (Cauca) due to her defence of peasants' ways of life in the territory, and Diana Rodriguez, killed on 11 April, who had denounced the negative impacts of coal extraction activity in San Cayetano in Norte de Santander.'²¹²

12.3.9 The 2024 Freedom in the World country report stated: 'Land rights... advocates are frequently targeted by illegal armed groups and other powerful interests seeking to control local illicit economies or halt the implementation of rural development plans, especially coca substitution programs.'²¹³

12.3.10 The USSD 2023 Country Report stated: 'NGOs considered the country as highly dangerous for environmental activists... Activists and political analysts noted increasing killings of and threats to Indigenous leaders, many of whom were environmental activists.'²¹⁴

12.3.11 For information on the treatment of indigenous landowners, also see [Indigenous and afro-descendant persons](#).

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12.4 Indigenous and afro-descendant persons

12.4.1 ICG's February 2023 report stated:

'Afro-Colombian and Indigenous populations, women and children have become the prime targets of armed group coercion. As Vice President Francia Márquez told the UN Security Council in January [2023], "these populations tend to live in historically excluded territories" and suffered heightened discrimination during the armed conflict. Economic need has also made these communities particularly vulnerable to adopting the illicit livelihoods that Colombia's armed groups offer.

'... Moreover, constitutional mechanisms intended to safeguard ethnic communities' culture and autonomy also make them targets for infiltration and intimidation by armed groups. Ethnic communities have the right to control their territory, as well as provide justice, education and security. Coca eradication is also prohibited in ethnic territories without community consent, while the military must liaise with traditional authorities to carry out security operations. Armed groups have exploited these protections to plant coca and find safe havens.

'As a result, Afro-Colombian and Indigenous populations consistently bear the brunt of today's clashes among armed groups. In 2021, they represented 57 per cent and 27 per cent, respectively, of the victims of combat violence among illegal groups nationwide. Meanwhile, Afro-Colombians, who make

²¹² OHCHR, '[Situation of human rights in Colombia...](#)' (para 60), 14 February 2024

²¹³ Freedom House, '[Freedom in the World 2024 - Colombia](#)' (Section E2), 29 February 2024

²¹⁴ USSD, '[2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)' (p4,33-34), 25 March 2024

up between 10 to 20 per cent of the population, represented 53 per cent of all forcibly displaced people in 2022. At just under 5 per cent of the population, Indigenous communities account for more than half of those living in forced confinement.

‘... Indigenous groups in Chocó and southern Córdoba report rising rates of suicide among young people who are trapped for periods that sometimes last months.

‘... [I]n a growing number of instances, these [ethnic] communities are self-confining as a means of defence, where no other options exist. Indigenous Awá communities, for example, repeatedly self-confined in Nariño in January [2023], staying in their homes and keeping their children out of school in order to avoid being caught in crossfire between rival FARC dissident fronts. These confinements lasted from a few days to more than a month, during which little or no aid reached these areas.’²¹⁵

12.4.2 UNMAS’ November 2023 report stated: ‘... [I]ndigenous and Afro-descendant Communities... continue to be disproportionately affected by confinement. OCHA estimates that 62% of the total number of people confined nationwide belong to indigenous and Afro-descendant communities...’²¹⁶

12.4.3 The OHCHR’s 14 February 2024 report stated:

‘OHCHR documented allegations of attacks against authorities and leaders of indigenous peoples and of peoples of African descent, which negatively affected their self-governing and physical and cultural survival, including 23 cases of killings of traditional authorities, indigenous guards or Cimarrona guards, particularly against the Barí people (Norte de Santander), the Hitnü people (Arauca), the Nasa people, the Awá people and Community Councils (Nariño and Cauca). Illustrative cases include the Awá indigenous authority, Raúl Antonio Nastacuas, killed on 24 March [2023] in Ricaurte (Nariño), in a meeting convened by a non-State armed group to dictate orders to the community; Nasa indigenous ex-governor Freddy Campo Bomba, killed on 26 July [2023] after participating in a commission of authorities to demand respect for their rights to non-State armed actors in Caldono (Cauca); Luis Quiñones Cortés, legal representative of the Community council “La Voz de los Negros”, killed in Cali on 9 April [2023] after having been displaced from Nariño in 2022 due to threats from a non-State armed group; and Phanor Guazaquillo, Governor of a Nasa indigenous reservation in Puerto Asís, Putumayo, killed on 3 December [2023] after leaving the funeral of a traditional authority of the Siona people. The killings of four traditional doctors and ancestral elders affected the Nasa people given the roles these people carry out in the community, putting their physical and cultural survival at risk.’²¹⁷

12.4.4 The 2024 Freedom in the World country report stated:

‘Afro-Colombians, who account for as much as 25 percent of the population, make up the largest segment of the more than 7 million people who have

²¹⁵ ICG, [‘Protecting Colombia’s Most Vulnerable...’](#) (p8-9,23), 24 February 2023

²¹⁶ UNMAS, [‘... Mine Action Sector in Colombia’](#) (p6), 29 November 2023

²¹⁷ OHCHR, [‘Situation of human rights in Colombia...’](#) (para 54), 14 February 2024

been displaced by violence. Areas with concentrated Afro-Colombian populations continue to suffer vastly disproportionate levels of abuse by guerrillas... and criminal groups...

'... Most of Colombia's Indigenous inhabitants, who make up more than 3 percent of the population, live on approximately 34 million hectares granted to them by the government, often in resource-rich, strategic regions that are highly contested by armed groups. Indigenous people have been targeted by all sides in the country's various conflicts. In 2023, Indigenous communities in the departments of Chocó, Cauca, Valle de Cauca, and Nariño continued to suffer widespread violence and displacement perpetrated by former FARC members, paramilitary successors, and criminal groups.'²¹⁸ Freedom House did not define what it meant by 'widespread', however.

12.4.5 The USSD 2023 Country Report stated:

'Killings of members and leaders of Indigenous groups continued. In the first half of the year [2023], INDEPAZ reported more than 20 deaths of Indigenous social leaders, constituting nearly 20 percent of all social leaders killed... The United Nations received reports of an increasing number of Indigenous children and adolescents, including many girls, being recruited by illegal armed groups. Of the 48 cases of child recruitment by illegal armed groups verified by the OHCHR, 25 included Indigenous children.

'... Armed groups often violently contested Indigenous land ownership and recruited Indigenous children to join their ranks.'²¹⁹

12.4.6 For information on the treatment of indigenous human rights defenders, also see [Human rights defenders, social leaders and trade unionists](#), and for information on the treatment of indigenous landowners, also see [Environmental activists and landowners](#).

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12.5 Witnesses and informants

12.5.1 The EUAA December 2022 COI report, citing various sources, stated:

'People who provide information to the state have been subjected to reprisals from armed groups, including killings. Also after security operations there are often reprisals against the community who are perceived to be informants. There have been cases where social leaders have been prevented from leaving their territory because armed groups think they will pass information to the security forces, so they impose confinements.

'... Intimidation of... witnesses hindered judicial functioning.

'... Some communities are not willing to cooperate with state authorities because illegal mining or coca growing are their only source of income, while others have been victims of forced eradication, disappearances, extrajudicial killings, or human rights violations by public security forces.

'... Cooperation with authorities puts social leaders and human rights defenders at 'major risk' of becoming victims of post-war crime and violence

²¹⁸ Freedom House, '[Freedom in the World 2024 - Colombia](#)' (Section F4), 29 February 2024

²¹⁹ USSD, '[2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)' (p33-34), 25 March 2024

for reporting actions of armed groups to police in areas where there are armed groups present, as well as in the absence of territorial disputes. Doing so may result in the person being declared a ‘military target’ or a ‘sapo’ (informant).²²⁰ See [Group oppositionists](#) for information about ‘military objectives’.

- 12.5.2 The July 2023 ACAPS report stated: ‘Threats from armed groups who suspect them of supporting a rival result in communities suffering from confinement. In N6vita, this has resulted in the confinement of around 3,700 people from the Tigre Montería community after an armed group accused a civilian of being an informant for a rival armed group. The community members reported their fear of being attacked as the reason behind confinement.’²²¹

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12.6 Politicians and public workers

- 12.6.1 The EUAA December 2022 COI report, citing correspondence of 2 September 2022 it received from Dejusticia, a Colombia-based research and advocacy organization working to promote social justice and human rights and strengthen the rule of law²²², stated: ‘Violence against justice sector workers, crime witnesses, victims of violence [sic] crimes being prosecuted in the justice system and public servants has not decreased with the peace accords and it continues to the ongoing presence of criminal organisations and armed groups... Dejusticia reported that there were 1145 victims of attacks against judicial workers between 2019-2022, mostly in Cundinamarca.’²²³ The report did not state how many of the said attacks were perpetrated by members of armed groups and criminal gangs.

- 12.6.2 ICG’s October 2023 article stated:

‘At the start of campaign season [for the 2023 local elections], the FARC-EMC had declared that it would allow only friendly candidates to campaign in areas under its control, and these security threats had prevented some members of traditional parties from registering their candidacies. Government negotiators have since secured a commitment from FARC-EMC to allow elections to go ahead without meddling by the armed group. Contenders along the Atlantic coast, meanwhile, have told Crisis Group that channels of communication with the Gaitanistas [AGC] are essential in order to run for office safely, though the group has said publicly it will not intervene in the vote. “It is impossible to campaign for fear that they will make an attempt on your life”, an independent candidate said. A prospective mayoral aspirant in an ELN stronghold said the guerrillas “do not put forward candidates, but they do eliminate candidates”, preventing their political foes from standing for office.’²²⁴

- 12.6.3 The USSD report on terrorism in 2022, published in November 2023, stated: ‘FARC-EP has been responsible for the killing of political candidates and

²²⁰ EUAA, ‘[Colombia: Country Focus](#)’ (p79,121,128,135), December 2022

²²¹ ACAPS, ‘[Colombia - Key crises to watch...](#)’ (p17), 26 July 2023

²²² Dejusticia, ‘[About Us](#)’, undated

²²³ EUAA, ‘[Colombia: Country Focus](#)’ (p121-122), December 2022

²²⁴ ICG, ‘[...Colombia: Is “Total Peace” Back on Track?](#)’ (p4), 4 October 2023

former FARC members, and the kidnapping of a political operative. In 2021, FARC-EP claimed responsibility for a car bomb attack at the mayor's office in Corinto, Colombia, which injured 43 people, among them several public officials; and for a June [2021] attack against a Colombian Army base, which wounded 44 people, including two U.S. military advisers. Also in June 2021, FARC-EP shot at a helicopter carrying then Colombian President Ivan Duque. In 2022, FARC-EP conducted an ambush of a Colombian Army patrol in Cauca, killing six soldiers.²²⁵

- 12.6.4 The USSD 2023 Country Report stated: 'Criminal gangs, FARC dissidents, and the ELN threatened and killed government officials. The ELN, for example, threatened to attack some local political candidates who did not support the ELN.'²²⁶

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12.7 Journalists

- 12.7.1 The EUAA December 2022 COI report, citing various sources, stated:

'Colombia is described as one of the western hemisphere's most dangerous countries for journalists. Journalists continue to experience threats, murder attempts, targeted killings, harassment, assaults, and attacks. Human Rights Watch described the death threats and violence faced by journalists, HRDs, social leaders and activists as 'pervasive'. Coverages of subjects such as the 2021 national protests, gender-based violence, drug-trafficking, armed groups, the environment, armed conflict, corruption or collusion of authorities and armed groups cause "systemic harassment, intimidation, and violence." Slander and libel laws also caused self-censorship and the Ministry of Defence implemented a policy to monitor social media. In 2021, Fundación Para La Libertad de Prensa (FLIP) recorded 117 journalists affected by threats, and 158 journalists affected by incidents of violence and harassment. For 2022, the FLIP recorded 365 violations of freedom of the press and 417 victims as of 28 September 2022. Three journalists have been killed so far in 2022.'²²⁷ However, the source did not specify how many of the violations/victims were due to armed conflict/non-state armed groups.

- 12.7.2 AI's March 2023 report stated: 'In May [2022], media outlets in Antioquia and Córdoba departments received death threats in the context of an armed strike declared by the paramilitary group the Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AGC – also known as the Gulf Clan).'²²⁸
- 12.7.3 The USSD 2023 Country Report stated: 'Members of armed groups inhibited freedom of expression by intimidating, threatening, kidnapping, and killing journalists. National and international NGOs reported media regularly practiced self-censorship because of threats of violence from armed groups. The journalist Yamir Jhan Pico, director of the digital media organization Caribe Noticias 24/7, left the country due to death threats he received, despite receiving government protection.'²²⁹

²²⁵ USSD, '[Country Reports on Terrorism 2022](#)' (p303), 30 November 2023

²²⁶ USSD, '[2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)' (p26), 25 March 2024

²²⁷ EUAA, '[Colombia: Country Focus](#)' (p116-117), December 2022

²²⁸ AI, '[The State of the World's Human Rights; Colombia 2022](#)' (p130), 27 March 2023

²²⁹ USSD, '[2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)' (p21), 25 March 2024

12.8 Healthcare workers

12.8.1 The ICRC March 2023 report stated:

‘Attacks on health workers were particularly serious last year [2022] in the areas hardest hit by the armed conflicts and add to the many hardships generated already by the violence endured by the civilian population in those areas.

‘Our presence and our dialogue with health workers in these areas enabled us to identify acts of violence committed against health care that had not been recorded in the official system. The violence affected in particular the departments of Arauca, Nariño, Cauca, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, Chocó and Antioquia.

‘In 2022, we recorded the killing of at least seven patients and health workers. This is more than the total number of killings (six) that took place between 2018 and 2021. In addition, we received information about other types of violence against the health-care sector, such as sexual violence, armed actors holding up ambulances at checkpoints, forced removal of patients from ambulances, as well as threats and blackmail.

‘... In addition, there were cases of health workers being taken against their will to treat wounded or sick people. In such instances, health workers are at risk of being caught in the crossfire and of being tried for giving medical treatment to those who were taking part in hostilities.’²³⁰

12.8.2 The same source stated that of 426 attacks on health-care workers, facilities and vehicles in 2022, 38% of them were carried out within the context of armed conflicts²³¹.

12.8.3 The October 2023 ACAPS briefing note stated: ‘Among the actions that the EMC has carried out against the civilian population are threats directed at healthcare personnel in El Plateado village who have chosen to resign from their medical duties.’²³²

12.9 Vulnerable groups

a. Overview

12.9.1 The USSD 2023 Country Report stated that of the 3,290 cases of enforced disappearances registered by the National Institute of Forensic and Legal Medicine between 1 January and 31 August 2023: ‘... 124 involved Afro-Colombians, 29 involved Indigenous persons, 1,316 involved women, and 19 involved members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) community.’²³³

12.9.2 The USSD 2024 Trafficking in Persons report stated:

‘Several illegal armed groups, including U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist

²³⁰ ICRC, [‘Humanitarian Challenges 2023: Colombia’](#) (p8), 8 March 2023

²³¹ ICRC, [‘Humanitarian Challenges 2023: Colombia’](#) (p8), 8 March 2023

²³² ACAPS, [‘Colombia: Increased armed violence in Argelia, Cauca’](#) (p3), 24 October 2023

²³³ USSD, [‘2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia’](#) (p5), 25 March 2024

Organizations (FTOs) like the National Liberation Army (ELN), Segunda Marquetalia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army (FARC-EP), a dissident group of the now demobilized FARC, and Clan del Golfo, are known to operate in areas where vulnerable people may be exploited in human trafficking and other illicit activities... According to an investigative report released in 2023, El Tren de Aragua - a transnational criminal organization originating in Venezuela - and the U.S.-designated FTO ELN operate sex trafficking networks in the border town of Villa del Rosario in the Norte de Santander department. These groups exploit Venezuelan migrants and internally displaced Colombians in sex trafficking and take advantage of economic vulnerabilities to subject them to debt bondage. Women, children, and adolescents who demilitarized and separated from illegal armed groups are vulnerable to trafficking.²³⁴

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b. Women, girls, and gender-based violence

12.9.3 ICG’s February 2023 report stated:

‘The lives of women and girls in Colombia’s conflict-affected areas are marked by violence perpetrated by armed groups seeking to exert tighter control over social and family life... [S]exual and gender-based violence are calibrated to subjugate the community, by terrorising victims and emasculating family members who are aware of the crimes. Assaulting a woman or girl is a way to demonstrate control of every aspect of community life, including the most intimate.

‘... Deep taboos around the issue, together with the threat of retaliation by perpetrators, conspire to prevent many reports from reaching authorities.

‘... [S]heer economic need has traditionally rendered women and girls vulnerable to violence. Female heads of household who have children to provide for have become targets for exploitation by armed and criminal groups, as well as their members acting alone... In some cases, a woman will allow herself to become an armed group member’s romantic partner, exposing herself to the risk of abuse, as a means of assuring the economic security of her children.

‘... This sort of relationship is so common in some areas that young women increasingly regard it as a normal way to get ahead.

‘... Girlfriends or partners of armed group members, as well as their families, become subject to the organisation’s rules and edicts; they are often forced to collaborate with the group in providing intelligence or serving as lookouts. In some cases, communities report that women are employed as sexual partners specifically in order to compel them to provide information afterward to the armed group member with whom they had relations.

‘... The Colombian military has recruited the girlfriends of armed group members as intelligence sources, putting these women at enormous risk of retaliatory violence. Women who are accused of or discovered to have passed information to the military face assassination, a risk they are not necessarily made aware of when asked by security officers to cooperate. In

²³⁴ USSD, [‘2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Colombia’](#) (section: Trafficking profile), 25 June 2024

Tibú, the rumour that a number of women had passed information to the military was enough to set off a string of femicides - over a dozen in the span of a few months - in the summer of 2021.

'In some regions where armed groups operate, communities report a growing phenomenon of women and girls recruited into prostitution networks managed by and serving the armed group. In a Gulf Clan area, "young women are recruited for sex - it is common to hear now about women leaving for these prostitution networks as a way to earn money" for their children, a female humanitarian official explained. According to reports, these recruits are often as young as 8 or 9. Brothel owners "are part of the drug trafficking networks" in rural Nariño, and are reported to trick sex workers from elsewhere in Colombia into moving to deeply isolated rural areas with the promise of higher earnings. They may force the women into debt for the same purpose. "Once they enter these places, it is just like for members of the group - there is no exit", a security official said.

'... Women who denounce cases of sexual violence or seek support face further risks of violence. Victims have reported cases in which the perpetrator explicitly tells the person to stay quiet. "The armed groups rape and then say, "If anyone finds out, you die"". In other cases, the community simply assumes such a threat exists. Silence is thus a means of self-protection, for the victim and her family. Still, it comes at a high cost. Women in rural areas under the control of FARC dissident groups and the ELN say they have seen rising rates of anxiety and even suicide among victims of sexual assault.'²³⁵

12.9.4 The USSD 2022 Country Report stated: 'Members of armed groups continued to rape and sexually abuse women and children... The Truth Commission's final report released on June 28 [2022] acknowledged that the internal armed conflict involved "reproductive violence." This included forced contraception and abortions for adult women combatants and minor girls illegally recruited into armed groups.'²³⁶

12.9.5 The UN Secretary-General's 5 June 2023 report stated: 'Sexual violence perpetrated against 18 girls by FARC-EP dissident groups (8), AGC (5), ELN (4)... was verified.'²³⁷

12.9.6 The OCCRP's November 2023 Tren de Aragua article stated: 'One young woman told CNN español she had been forced into prostitution in Colombia by Tren de Aragua members, who tied her to a bed, drugged her, and starved her for two months. She said she was repeatedly raped by five men, and then forced to have sex with clients.'²³⁸

12.9.7 The OHCHR 14 February 2024 report stated:

'The Office received 100 allegations of gender-based violence, including sexual violence, in the context of the armed conflict... the Office documented some cases of trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation of girls by non-State armed groups, who had been transported to their camps to be

²³⁵ ICG, '[Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable...](#)' (p18-20), 24 February 2023

²³⁶ USSD, '[2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)' (p26-28), 20 March 2023

²³⁷ UN General Assembly & Security Council, '[Children and armed conflict...](#)' (para 43), 5 June 2023

²³⁸ OCCRP, '[The Rapid Rise of Venezuela's 'Tren de Aragua' Gang...](#)', 9 November 2023

sexually exploited by members of their group in Chocó and Nariño. The Office also documented some cases of rape of women and girls in the context of social control exercised by these groups, including cases that took place in the presence of family members.

‘OHCHR continued to document feminicides, sexual violence and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment by non-State armed groups against women accused of being the partner of members of rival groups or members of the security forces.’²³⁹

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c. Children

12.9.8 The UN Secretary-General’s 5 June 2023 report stated:

‘The United Nations verified 290 grave violations against 209 children (122 boys, 83 girls, 4 sex unknown), including 12 Venezuelan and 4 Ecuadorian children, and 44 children who were victims of multiple violations. In addition, the United Nations verified in 2022 four grave violations that had occurred in previous years.

‘... A total of 84 children (53 boys, 27 girls, 4 sex unknown) were killed (50) and maimed (34) by FARC-EP dissident groups (32), unidentified perpetrators (29)... ELN (7) and AGC (4). Child casualties resulted from gunshots (52), explosive ordnance (22), air strikes (9) and torture (1).

‘... A total of 25 attacks on schools (22), hospitals (3) and protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals were verified and attributed to FARC-EP dissident groups (14), unidentified perpetrators (5), ELN (4) and AGC (2). Incidents involved threats and attacks against protected personnel (20), damages to schools (4) and attacks on an ambulance (1).

‘A total of 10 schools were militarily used by FARC-EP dissident groups (6)... AGC (1), ELN (1) and unidentified perpetrators (1). All schools were vacated.’²⁴⁰

12.9.9 The October 2023 ACAPS briefing note stated:

‘When the clashes ceased and attempts were made to have children return to school [on an unspecified date between August and September 2023²⁴¹], the armed groups prevented them. Community members have reported instances of armed groups exerting control over the specific hours and days when children can attend school.

‘The municipality [Argelia, Cauca] faces three types of threats regarding education access: threats to educational staff, landmines and confrontations occurring near educational centres, and direct threats against children attempting to attend classes. There is an information gap regarding the number of children affected by the suspension of classes. While the decision to suspend classes is intended to safeguard children at home, it may inadvertently expose them to an increased risk of forced recruitment by armed groups. Schools, aside from being places of learning, also provide a

²³⁹ OHCHR, ‘[Situation of human rights in Colombia...](#)’ (paras 14-15), 14 February 2024

²⁴⁰ UN General Assembly & Security Council, ‘[Children and...](#)’ (paras 40,42,44,45), 5 June 2023

²⁴¹ ACAPS, ‘[Colombia: Increased armed violence in Argelia, Cauca](#)’ (p3), 24 October 2023

secure environment where children can spend a portion of their day. This duality underscores the vulnerability of children in both situations – attending school presents threats, but not having them engaged in educational activities also poses risks.²⁴²

12.9.10 For more information about the recruitment of children by armed groups, see [Recruitment of children](#).

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d. LGBTI community

12.9.11 On 3 February 2022, The Guardian published an article which stated:

‘... For nearly 30 years, the town and surrounding region of Montes de María were infamous for violence perpetrated against LGBTQ+ individuals, targeted at one time or another over the country’s long civil war by rightwing paramilitaries, leftwing guerrillas, government soldiers and the police.

‘... Many of the armed groups in the region - publicly aligned with the country’s conservative elite - began persecuting the LGBTQ+ community. While such brutality was widespread in Colombia, in El Carmen de Bolívar and the surrounding region of Montes de María, it was made particularly public - including with forced boxing matches between gay men and transgender women.

‘Sexual violence was rampant and meted out as a punishment. Those who resisted risked being taken in a van known as the “final tear”, as the people it picked up never returned.’²⁴³

12.9.12 The IRB August 2023 response stated: ‘The independent researcher... [commented] that someone can be declared a military objective for being a member of the LGBT community. Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.’²⁴⁴ See [Group oppositionists](#) for information about ‘military objectives’.

12.9.13 The OHCHR’s 14 February 2024 report stated: ‘... [The OHCHR was] informed of situations of threats, displacement or violence against LGBTIQ+ persons because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The majority of these cases were not reported...’²⁴⁵ The report did not expand upon the scale and extent of the said threats, displacement and violence, however.

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13. Protection

13.1 Government policies, legislation and approach

13.1.1 On 29 September 2023, the OHCHR published the ‘Preliminary Observations of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Guarantees of Non-recurrence in his Official Visit to Colombia’, pending a detailed report in 2024, which stated:

²⁴² ACAPS, ‘[Colombia: Increased armed violence in Argelia, Cauca](#)’ (p3), 24 October 2023

²⁴³ The Guardian, ‘[... \[T\]he LGBT Colombians embracing visibility...](#)’, 3 February 2022

²⁴⁴ IRB, ‘[Colombia: Individuals declared a military objective...](#)’ (section 2), 11 August 2023

²⁴⁵ OHCHR, ‘[Situation of human rights in Colombia...](#)’ (para 15), 14 February 2024

'The justice and peace process [Law 975 of 2005, which sought to facilitate paramilitary demobilisation/reintegration with reduced sentences], the Victims Law [Law 1448 of 2011 which established truth-seeking mechanisms and land restitution procedures for armed conflict victims], and the Final Peace Agreement [AFP of 2016] include measures to favor the reincorporation of former paramilitary and FARC-EP combatants into civilian life, along with measures aimed at preventing a return to armed violence by these or other actors.'²⁴⁶

13.1.2 AI's November 2023 report noted other relevant policies/decrees:

'CONPES [National Council for Economic and Social Policy] Document 4063 containing the Public Policy on Guarantees and Respect for Human Rights Work and Social Leadership was published in December 2021 [CONPES policies are not legally binding].

'... Decree 2078 of 2017 mandated the UNP [National Protection Unit], in conjunction with the Ministry of Interior, to adopt a Collective Protection Road Map for providing comprehensive protection measures to communities at risk.

'... The early warning system (EWS) [Decree 2124 of 2017, Article 6] is a set of tools administered by the Ombudsperson's Office to collect, verify and technically analyze information on situations of vulnerability and risk of the Colombian population related to the armed conflict or violence.

'... [T]he National Commission on Security Guarantees had the mandate to develop and monitor public criminal policy for dismantling armed groups that, among other things, targeted human rights defenders (Decree 154 of 2017).

'... [T]he Timely Action Plan (PAO), which aims to "pool efforts to respond to the need to generate greater security and support for those who have taken the lead in promoting and safeguarding human rights".

'... Decree 660 of 2018... provided institutions with tools for addressing the structural causes of violence against human rights defenders and the communities to which they belong.'²⁴⁷

13.1.3 InSight Crime's 28 December 2022 article stated:

'Each president of Colombia must lay out their vision for peace. Upon coming to power in August 2022, he [Petro] revealed the Paz Total (Total Peace) plan, which seeks to negotiate with around two dozen armed groups or criminal gangs of different sizes.

'To date, more than 25 armed groups, criminals or criminal gangs have expressed their willingness to join Total Peace, among them the... ELN... the Urabeños [aka Gulf Clan/Clan del Golfo/AGC]... and several FARC dissident groups that form part of a group of actors known collectively as the ex-FARC mafia.

'Should these dialogues be carried out simultaneously, Colombia will be in uncharted territory.

²⁴⁶ OHCHR, '[Preliminary Observations of the Special Rapporteur...](#)' (p7), 29 September 2023

²⁴⁷ AI, '[Colombia: Hope at risk...](#)' (p23,24,26,27,28), 9 November 2023

‘... Successful or not, Total Peace will unquestionably impact organized crime dynamics in Colombia over the next four years and beyond.’²⁴⁸

13.1.4 The OHCHR’s 6 March 2023 report stated:

‘... [T]he “total peace” policy... includes a commitment to strengthen the implementation of the Peace Agreement; the initiation of dialogues with all armed groups present in the territories; and the development of a new approach to human security.

‘... On November 4 [2022], President Petro approved Law 2272 of 2022, which defines the legal framework of the “total peace” policy as State policy and ratifies the new approach to human security.

‘... Law 2272 states that the peace policy must ensure the effective participation of women and civil society by incorporating differential approaches in an intersectional and territorial manner as well as a focus on the centrality of victims.’²⁴⁹

13.1.5 Reuters’ April 2023 article stated: ‘... [S]urrender agreements... would see criminal groups receive reduced jail sentences in exchange for information and disarmament.’²⁵⁰

13.1.6 AI’s March 2023 report stated:

‘In August [2022], authorities recognized the competence of the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances to receive and examine individual complaints regarding victims of enforced disappearance. In September [2022], Colombia also ratified the Inter-American Convention on the Protection of Human Rights of Older Persons. In October [2022], Congress approved the Escazú Agreement [which, among other things, ‘requires States to prevent and investigate attacks against those who protect and defend environmental rights’²⁵¹].

‘... In October [2022], President Petro reinstated and reinitiated meetings of the National Commission for Security Guarantees, established by the Peace Agreement to create a public policy for dismantling armed groups.

‘In October [2022], the Colombian government and the National Liberation Army (ELN) recommenced peace talks and proposed a “multilateral ceasefire”. The government also explored negotiations with other armed actors in the context of a “total peace” policy.

‘In August [2022], the minister of the interior installed the first Unified Command Point for Life in Caldono municipality, Cauca department. The aim of this space, and similar spaces that followed in other regions, was to listen to the demands and concerns of communities and protect the lives of social leaders, human rights defenders and others at risk.’²⁵²

13.1.7 El Pais International’s January 2023 article stated: ‘What’s different this time around, says political analyst Luis Fernando Trejos, is the number and

²⁴⁸ InSight Crime, ‘... [Disarmament of Colombia’s Armed Groups?](#)’, 28 December 2022

²⁴⁹ OHCHR, ‘[Situation of human rights in Colombia...](#)’ (paras 12,14,15), 6 March 2023

²⁵⁰ Reuters, ‘[Exclusive: Colombian armed groups and gangs have 17,600 members...](#)’, 13 April 2023

²⁵¹ Universal Rights Group (URG), ‘[The Escazú Agreement...](#)’, 10 February 2021

²⁵² AI, ‘[The State of the World's Human Rights: Colombia 2022](#)’ (p129,132), 27 March 2023

diversity of the participating groups. “While we’ve had unilateral and bilateral ceasefires in the past, this is the first attempt at a multilateral ceasefire,” said Trejos. But that may be the biggest obstacle to success.’²⁵³

- 13.1.8 ICG’s February 2023 report stated: ‘In the absence of a policy aimed at preventing recruitment, the main state response focuses on providing rescued children with eighteen months of assistance from the Family Welfare Institute.’²⁵⁴
- 13.1.9 On 2 March 2023, the UN International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) published a Colombia report, covering 2022, which stated: ‘Noteworthy developments impacting children include: peace talks with armed groups; an announcement made by the Ministry of Defence that armed forces would not conduct airstrikes in areas where children are likely to be present; the adherence to the Safe Schools Declaration (following years of advocacy by non-governmental organizations, international partners and United Nations agencies, including UNICEF); and the proactive approach of the Ministry of Education (MoE) to disseminating the Truth Commission’s findings related to the impact of the armed conflict on children in school settings.’²⁵⁵
- 13.1.10 On 26 September 2023, the US Department of Labor (USDOL) published a report entitled ‘2022 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Colombia’, citing various sources. The report noted that the Colombian government established a ‘National Policy for the Prevention of Recruitment, Use, and Sexual Violence Against Children and Adolescents by Illegal Armed Groups or Organized Criminal Groups (2018–2028)’ which ‘Directs government actions to prevent the recruitment and use of children by armed groups, address violence against children, and improve interagency coordination. The government also has a roadmap that establishes protocols to assist child survivors of armed conflict.’²⁵⁶
- 13.1.11 ICG’s October 2023 article stated: ‘Having previously designated just a handful of officials to manage an array of complex peace processes, the government announced in late August [2023] that it would decentralise peace efforts through eight regional offices, with a commissioner assigned to each.’²⁵⁷
- 13.1.12 The HRW 2024 World Report stated:
- ‘In September [2023], authorities announced a new policy to “dismantle” armed groups that attack human rights defenders, as required under the 2016 peace accord.
- ‘... Defendants who fully cooperate with the JEP [Special Jurisdiction for Peace] and confess to their crimes are subject to up to eight years of “special sanctions,” including restrictions on liberty but no prison time. It

²⁵³ El Pais International, ‘... the illegal armed groups in Colombia’s latest ceasefire’, 5 January 2023

²⁵⁴ ICG, ‘Protecting Colombia’s Most Vulnerable...’ (p30-31), 24 February 2023

²⁵⁵ UNICEF, ‘Country Office Annual Report 2022: Colombia’ (p1), 2 March 2023

²⁵⁶ USDOL, ‘2022 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Colombia’ (p6), 26 September 2023

²⁵⁷ ICG, ‘...Colombia: Is “Total Peace” Back on Track?’ (p3), 4 October 2023

remains unclear how the “special sanctions” will operate in practice.’²⁵⁸

13.1.13 AI’s April 2024 report stated:

‘Peace talks between the government and the National Liberation Army [ELN] advanced and a six-month ceasefire was implemented in August [2023]. In May [2023], a ceasefire between the government and the Central General Staff [EMC] armed group was partially suspended following the latter group’s killing of four Indigenous teenagers. In September [2023], negotiations between the government and the... [EMC] resumed and a three-month ceasefire was implemented. The government tried to open negotiations with six other armed groups, among them urban armed groups in Medellín, Quibdó and Buenaventura cities, and the Colombian Gaitanist Self-Defence Forces [AGC].

‘... The Ministry of the Interior announced the strengthening of the collective protection programme for human rights defenders from grassroots organizations and communities, who are often defending land and territory, increasing the target for the number of applicants to be covered by collective protection measures by the end of the year. The collective protection programme aims to prevent human rights violations and abuses against grassroots organizations and communities, identifying risk factors and adopting measures to prevent them from materializing or mitigate their effects. The programme coexists with individual protection programmes.

‘In August [2023], the National Commission on Security Guarantees approved a national policy for dismantling criminal organizations that, among other human rights abuses, have attacked human rights defenders.’²⁵⁹

13.1.14 The USSD 2024 Trafficking in Persons report stated: ‘In 2023, for the first time, senior-level officials acknowledged forcible recruitment or use of children by illegal armed groups are forms of human trafficking.’²⁶⁰

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13.2 Security forces

13.2.1 The CIA World Factbook stated:

‘... [T]he Colombian National Army is one of the largest and most experienced ground forces in the Western Hemisphere, having spent decades conducting operations against insurgents and terrorist groups... the Army’s primary focus is ongoing operations against the ELN, FARC dissidents, and other illegal armed groups... the National Police works with the Army against illegal armed groups and has a variety of specialized forces...’²⁶¹

13.2.2 The same source stated that while information varies, the personnel strength in 2023 of Colombia’s National Police is approximately 180,000, and approximately 225,000 for its Army²⁶².

²⁵⁸ HRW, ‘[World Report 2024](#)’ (p164,165), 11 January 2024

²⁵⁹ AI, ‘[The State of the World’s Human Rights: Colombia 2023](#)’ (p134,136), 23 April 2024

²⁶⁰ USSD, ‘[2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Colombia](#)’ (section: Prevention), 25 June 2024

²⁶¹ CIA World Factbook, ‘[Colombia](#)’ (Military and Security), last updated 29 February 2024

²⁶² CIA World Factbook, ‘[Colombia](#)’ (Military and Security), last updated 29 February 2024

- 13.2.3 ICG's February 2023 report stated: 'Cases of conflict-related sexual violence... fall under the jurisdiction of the Family Welfare Institute, as well as the Attorney General's Office. If their cases are documented, survivors of this crime can also seek accreditation with the National Victims Unit.'²⁶³
- 13.2.4 On 10 February 2021, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published an article entitled 'Colombia: Protection Gaps Endanger Rights Defenders' which stated: 'The National Protection Unit, under the Interior Ministry, has been charged since 2011 with protecting people at risk... The unit also provides collective protection measures for communities or groups.'²⁶⁴

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13.3 Witness protection

- 13.3.1 The EUAA December 2022 COI report, citing various sources, stated:
'There is a lack of effective witness protection in Colombia... Communities are often unwilling to report crimes by armed groups or participate in cooperation with authorities for fear of retaliation and lack of protection... In some areas, armed groups have corrupted local state institutions, including law enforcement, local mayors and civil servants, making it "high risk" for crime witnesses to cooperate and causing distrust in the state due to lack of protection.'²⁶⁵
- 13.3.2 The 2023 Global Organized Crime Index: Colombia report stated: 'Witness protection is... a concern, with individuals facing threats, especially from organized-crime networks. Rural and indigenous communities, as well as activists, lack sufficient protection from the government, making it difficult for them to seek justice through formal channels.'²⁶⁶

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13.4 Judicial system

- 13.4.1 The 2023 Global Organized Crime Index: Colombia report stated:
'The judicial system in Colombia is considered stable and diverse, but it suffers from weak due process and a lack of adequate protection. Although the attorney general's office has specialized divisions for dealing with organized crime, corruption and insufficient resources have been a persistent challenge in the judiciary, making it difficult for many Colombians to access the judicial system. The Supreme Court, the country's highest court, has also been embroiled in corruption scandals. In addition, the system is often criticized for its high recidivism rate and inability to effectively punish criminals. Currently, a different judicial system is operating transitional justice as part of peace agreements with FARC guerrillas.'²⁶⁷
- 13.4.2 On 12 September 2023, the Harvard Law School Library published a webpage entitled 'Colombian Legal Research' which stated:
'Special Jurisdiction for Peace (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz) are special

²⁶³ ICG, '[Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable...](#)' (p31), 24 February 2023

²⁶⁴ HRW, '[Colombia: Protection Gaps Endanger Rights Defenders](#)', 10 February 2021

²⁶⁵ EUAA, '[Colombia: Country Focus](#)' (p121,128), December 2022

²⁶⁶ GI-TOC, '[Colombia](#)' (p7), September 2023

²⁶⁷ GI-TOC, '[Colombia](#)' (p6), September 2023

tribunals created by an agreement between the national government and FARC... This jurisdiction is responsible for administering justice for crimes committed before December 1, 2016, during the internal armed conflict.

'The Judicial Chambers for Justice and Peace (Salas de Justicia y Paz) were created to try those paramilitaries and guerrilla members who may have been guilty of crimes, according to the terms of Statute 975 of 2005.'²⁶⁸

13.4.3 The same source also stated: 'The authorities of indigenous peoples may also exercise their jurisdictional functions within their territory following their laws as long as they are not contrary to the Constitution and other existing laws.'²⁶⁹

13.4.4 The Special Rapporteur's September 2023 preliminary observations stated:

'The 2016 signature of the Final Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP led to the creation of a holistic transitional justice system in Colombia, with the creation of the Comprehensive System for Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Recurrence (SIVJRNR) [which] comprised of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), the Search Unit for Presumably Disappeared Persons (UBPD), and the Commission for the Clarification of the Truth (Truth Commission-CEV), all of which have a temporary status...

'The Commission for the Clarification of the Truth [Truth Commission – CEV] was created for an initial three-year period, which was extended to four years, to seek the truth about what happened in the context of the internal armed conflict. The Commission ended its mandate in June 2022 with the presentation of its final report...

'... The Search Unit for Persons Presumed to be Disappeared in the Context of and Due to the Armed Conflict (UBPD), which has an extrajudicial and humanitarian character, directs, coordinates, and contributes to the implementation of humanitarian search and location actions. The Unit has an extendable 20-year mandate.

'In 2021, the Unit adopted strategies to strengthen the search for disappeared persons, including the signing of ten Regional Search Plans that seek inter-institutional coordination

'... [T]he Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) was established in 2017 for a 15-year period, renewable for an additional five years, to investigate, try, and punish members of the FARC-EP and members of State Security Forces who committed crimes in the context of the armed conflict prior to 1 December 2016.'²⁷⁰

13.4.5 ICG's February 2023 report stated: '... [T]he inefficient judicial system means that impunity for these crimes [sexual and gender-based crimes against women and girls in conflict-affected areas] is near complete, as is the silencing effect on women and their families.'²⁷¹

13.4.6 The 2023 Freedom in the World country report stated: '... The Constitutional

²⁶⁸ Harvard Law School Library, '[Colombian Legal Research](#)', 12 September 2023

²⁶⁹ Harvard Law School Library, '[Colombian Legal Research](#)', 12 September 2023

²⁷⁰ OHCHR, '[Preliminary Observations of the Special Rapporteur...](#)' (p2-4), 29 September 2023

²⁷¹ ICG, '[Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable...](#)' (p18), 24 February 2023

Court has repeatedly been asked to mediate polarizing political disputes, especially with respect to the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP)... Though critics of the peace accord... have repeatedly called for shutting down the JEP, it was able to fulfill its mandate without undue interference in 2022.²⁷²

- 13.4.7 The same source stated: ‘The justice system remains compromised by corruption and extortion. The Constitutional Court... and the Supreme Court have consistently exhibited independence from the executive, though corruption allegations involving members of the courts have damaged their credibility in recent years.’²⁷³

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13.5 Effectiveness of state protection mechanisms

- 13.5.1 The HRW 2023 World Report stated: ‘The 2016 peace accord between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the government ended a five-decade-long conflict and brought an initial decline in violence. But violence took new forms and abuses by armed groups increased in many remote areas in later years, reaching similar levels in 2022 to those that existed immediately before the peace process.’²⁷⁴

- 13.5.2 The CSIS February 2023 report stated:

‘The armed criminal and insurgent groups operating at least partly in Colombia have become increasingly fragmented in recent years, in part reflecting accelerated operations against their leadership by the Colombian state at the end of the Duque administration [in 2022].

‘... One of the most notable evolutions at the end of the Duque administration has been the substantial weakening of several once-dominant groups, including the Rastrojos, although the status of others such as the Caparros is a subject of debate.’²⁷⁵

- 13.5.3 ICG’s October 2023 article stated: ‘... Iván Duque (2018-2022) was the first Colombian president in two decades to leave office with the country plagued by higher levels of insecurity than when his term began.’²⁷⁶

- 13.5.4 The same source also stated:

‘Despite progress [under Petro’s government, beginning in August 2022] in reaching ceasefires and entering serious negotiations, testimonies from the public as well as available data suggest that, so far, there has been no clear-cut improvement in security in either cities or the countryside. Although murder rates have dropped slightly, several armed and criminal groups have tightened their grip on areas they control. The number of clashes among groups engaged in turf wars has climbed, while cases of extortion, kidnapping, recruitment and meddling in politics ahead of the October [2023] local elections all appear to be on the rise.

‘... Initial missteps in rolling out the “total peace” strategy help account for

²⁷² Freedom House, [‘Freedom in the World 2023 - Colombia’](#) (Section F1), 9 March 2023

²⁷³ Freedom House, [‘Freedom in the World 2023 - Colombia’](#) (Section F1), 9 March 2023

²⁷⁴ HRW, [‘World Report 2023’](#) (p162), 12 January 2023

²⁷⁵ CSIS, [‘Colombia’s Security Challenges, the Government Response...’](#) (p3,6), 2 February 2023

²⁷⁶ ICG, [‘...Colombia: Is “Total Peace” Back on Track?’](#) (p2), 4 October 2023

the contrast between the high-level advances in talks and worsening insecurity at the grassroots. Uni-lateral six-month ceasefires announced by the authorities in the first half of 2023 amounted to tactical gifts to armed and criminal groups, which grew stronger during the respite from military operations.

‘... State security forces admit they are only now starting to recover their ability to apply pressure on armed groups after the hiatus.

‘The good news is that the government appears committed to learning from its early mistakes as it seeks to bring greater security to all Colombians.

‘... The government wisely chose not to renew the ceasefires when they expired on 31 June [2023], but the damage had been done [as the AGC, FARC-EMC, and the ELN had by then already expanded or become more deeply entrenched in their respective areas].

‘... Just 28.5 per cent of Colombians in one recent survey said they believe “total peace” is working well, while nearly 67 per cent felt that public security had deteriorated.’²⁷⁷

13.5.5 The 2023 Freedom in the World country report stated: ‘After Petro took office in August [2022], a number of criminal organizations expressed willingness to accept an offer of more lenient terms of surrender to the state, resulting in a fragile truce that temporarily improved safety for citizens in some areas.’²⁷⁸

13.5.6 ICG’s February 2023 report stated:

‘The first months of the total peace policy have seen a slower tempo of hostilities involving these [insurgent and armed criminal] groups, and a fall in homicides perpetrated by them in some regions. Yet rural residents report that other types of violence have become more frequent.

‘... The office of the Colombian High Commissioner for Peace, the government agency responsible for approaching these groups, secured several early successes in convincing criminal organisations to reduce homicides, notably in the Pacific port city of Buenaventura, which had previously suffered one of Colombia’s highest murder rates.

‘... [O]bstacles have since emerged... On 13 January [2023]... the Attorney General’s Office refused to lift warrants for members of criminal groups, in effect freezing plans for reaching deals with these organisations.

‘... Today, no armed group in Colombia feels a threat of such magnitude from the military or police that it would be inclined to offer real concessions. The Petro government urgently needs to complement its plans for dialogue with a more rigorous security approach.

‘... Despite many disappointments, negotiations have proven to be one of the few reliable means of achieving the demobilisation of armed groups. In its efforts so far, the Petro government has demonstrated that it can open channels of communication and secure tentative initial concessions from armed and criminal groups, though officials are quickly coming to understand that they will need to surmount major hurdles to convert those gains into

²⁷⁷ ICG, ‘...Colombia: Is “Total Peace” Back on Track?’ (p1-2,3,5), 4 October 2023

²⁷⁸ Freedom House, ‘Freedom in the World 2023 - Colombia’ (Sections F3), 9 March 2023

permanent reductions in violence.’²⁷⁹

13.5.7 The same source stated:

‘While this program supports many victims, not all children and their families know about it or want to join it [220 demobilised children and adolescents entered the Specialised Care Program for the Restoration of Rights in 2022, the highest number since 2018, according to the Colombian Family Welfare Institute. Children who did not join the program often said they did not know it existed, according to the United Nations University in November 2022²⁸⁰]. Indigenous authorities, for example, say many prefer not to join because of a requirement that the child submit a declaration on his or her role in the armed group in question to institutions, including the Attorney General’s Office [according to ICG interviews held in Santander de Quilichao in October 2022]. Whether the state will take adequate steps to safeguard the children entering the program is another concern. Many are returned to their closest relative during the program, since there are not enough spaces in safehouses...’²⁸¹

13.5.8 The IRB August 2023 response stated:

‘Sources report that the National Protection Unit (... UNP) is “overwhelmed” or “overburdened and deeply corrupt”.... [T]he UNP cannot provide a bodyguard for everyone who has received a threat... [T]he government does not have the means to provide “guaranteed protection” to everyone who has been declared a military objective.... [and] environmental features in rural areas inhibit the protection system from working properly; for example, some rural communities are accessible only by water, meaning that an armoured car is not a feasible protection mechanism in those areas.

‘... [M]ilitary objectives require immediate safety due to the 24-hour timeline of the threat; however, the UNP response time is between six to nine months... [A]s they are waiting, military objectives will “disappear, be killed, receive more threats or be forced to leave their community or the country because the danger is too high”.

‘... [R]eporting the threat to the prosecutor’s office (Fiscalía) or the police may put the military objective at more risk, as it makes the declaration public. Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.’²⁸² See [Group oppositionists](#) for information about ‘military objectives’.

13.5.9 On 21 August 2023, BAMF published briefing notes which stated: ‘A study presented by the representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia on 15.08.23 shows that while there has been progress in the area of human rights under the government of President Gustavo Petro, parts of the population continue to be affected by violence, disproportionately so, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities as well as peasant families in rural areas.’²⁸³

²⁷⁹ ICG, [‘Protecting Colombia’s Most Vulnerable...’](#) (pii,3,5,26,33), 24 February 2023

²⁸⁰ ICG, [‘Protecting Colombia’s Most Vulnerable...’](#) (footnote 179 (p31)), 24 February 2023

²⁸¹ ICG, [‘Protecting Colombia’s Most Vulnerable...’](#) (footnote 180 (p31)), 24 February 2023

²⁸² IRB, [‘Colombia: Individuals declared a military objective...’](#) (section 4), 11 August 2023

²⁸³ BAMF, [‘Briefing Notes \(KW34/2023\)’](#) (p3), 21 August 2023

13.5.10 The 2023 Global Organized Crime Index: Colombia report stated:

‘While the country has the necessary resources and infrastructure to fight organized crime, it falls short on implementation. Police reform has become a major political issue following protests in response to police killings, but it is unlikely that legislation proposals will pass.

‘Colombia’s borders with Venezuela and Ecuador are problematic and porous, allowing illegal armed groups to carry out operations and escape. The state has not been able to establish an effective presence for its law-enforcement bodies and state institutions and services in many areas, allowing criminal groups to exert territorial, social, economic and political control, especially in remote rural regions. In some areas, armed actors have taken over state responsibilities, such as imparting justice and territorial vigilance and control. This situation has led to the recycling of armed groups and the entry of new criminal organizations after the demobilization of FARC, although the Colombian state has made some marginal gains in regaining control of different regions.

‘However, non-police prevention strategies such as deploying units in a preventative manner and hotspot policing are being implemented.’²⁸⁴

13.5.11 The Special Rapporteur’s September 2023 preliminary observations stated:

‘The processes resulting from the adoption of the Justice and Peace Law of 2005, the Victims Law of 2011, and the Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Recurrence (SIVJRNR) created by the 2016 Peace Agreement, gave rise to an institutional framework that seeks, and in many cases succeeds, to respond to the needs of the Colombian society in its transition to peace.

‘... The holistic, impartial, and skilled work of the Commission for the Clarification of the Truth, which resulted in its final report presented in 2022, should be highlighted and has my highest esteem.

‘... I applaud the establishment of the Search Unit for Disappeared Persons and the creation of the National Search System. However, I express my concern regarding the insufficient results achieved to date by the Forensic Institute of Legal Medicine, the National Attorney General’s Office, and the Search Unit itself...

‘... I have noted with concern the marked delays in advancing the cases before the Justice and Peace Tribunal, and difficulties in implementing the reparation measures contained in its rulings.

‘... [T]he work being carried out by the Special Jurisdiction for Peace... The prosecution of very high-ranking military commanders is also noteworthy, the ordinary justice system did not reach these levels.

‘... I would like to note that the insufficient implementation of essential aspects of non-recurrence contained in these regulations are generating serious human rights violations against Indigenous, Afro-Colombian and peasant populations, human rights defenders, as well as former combatants. I understand the difficulties of implementing some aspects of this agenda,

²⁸⁴ GI-TOC, ‘Colombia’ (p6,7), September 2023

and the delays inherited from the previous administration. I note this administration's renewed efforts to advance in peace negotiations with armed and criminal groups...

'... However, these responses cannot fail to include strategies for an effective State presence in the territories most affected by the conflict, immediate and effective implementation of early warnings, providing comprehensive reparations to victims, which includes land restitution, and guarantees sustainable conditions for the return of victims, the reincorporation of former combatants, and the work of human rights defenders, including social leaders. The urgent reform of the State Security Forces, especially the military, which has seen less progress, must also be prioritized.'²⁸⁵

13.5.12 The October 2023 ACAPS briefing note stated: 'The most recent ceasefire between the Colombian Government and the EMC began on 8 October [2023], but confrontations and harm to the civilian population have not ceased.'²⁸⁶

13.5.13 AI's November 2023 report stated:

'... [T]he state's response to the crisis [is] excessively regulatory and without a real and significant impact on the structural causes of the violence against human rights defenders in the country.

'... The first attempt at resolving the crisis of violence against human rights defenders in the country does not appear to have been very successful. In the absence of a comprehensive, transparent and participatory evaluation, various human rights organizations and think tanks agree that the emergency plan has not achieved the desired results and that the violence is not only continuing but seems to be increasing. Nevertheless... the government continues to work on the design and implementation of a comprehensive public policy of protection and guarantees for human rights defenders, including the strengthening of the collective approach.

'... [R]ecords from various organizations monitoring the situation [including the Foundation for Peace and Reconciliation, INDEPAZ, and the Ideas for Peace Foundation] show that there has been no reduction in the number of attacks, at least at the macro level...

'... [A]s in the case of homicides... the failure to address the structural causes of violence means that threats continue to be made.'²⁸⁷

13.5.14 The HRW 2024 World Report stated:

'A year and a half since President Gustavo Petro took office, his "total peace" strategy has achieved limited results in curbing abuses against civilians.

'... Security forces and judicial authorities have often failed to effectively protect the population, ensure victims' access to justice, and prosecute and dismantle criminal groups.

²⁸⁵ OHCHR, '[Preliminary Observations of the Special Rapporteur...](#)' (p8), 29 September 2023

²⁸⁶ ACAPS, '[Colombia: Increased armed violence in Argelia, Cauca](#)' (p2), 24 October 2023

²⁸⁷ AI, '[Colombia: Hope at risk...](#)' (p19,32,35,40), 9 November 2023

‘... Colombia has a broad range of policies, mechanisms, and laws to prevent abuses against human rights defenders and protect former FARC fighters. But implementation has often been poor.

‘... In a case brought by Colombian human rights groups, the Constitutional Court... found that government action fell short of addressing these “persistent, grave and widespread” violations and described the situation as an “unconstitutional state of affairs.”

‘... The JEP has made significant strides in investigating and prosecuting war crimes and crimes against humanity, charging top former FARC commanders and several army officers.

‘... In July [2023] and September [2023], the government agreed to new ceasefires with the ELN and the EMC, respectively.

‘A government-supported truce between two gangs in the port city of Buenaventura led to a decrease in killings between September 2022 and March 2023, followed by an increase between April [2023] and July [2023].

‘... Less than 15 percent of more than 9 million registered victims of the armed conflict had received reparations as of August 2023 [compared with <14% as of October 2022²⁸⁸]. In September [2023], the Petro administration sent a bill to Congress to renew and expand the Victims’ Law.’²⁸⁹

13.5.15 The 2024 Freedom in the World country report stated: ‘The police lack necessary resources, some units are prone to abuse, and police are largely absent from many rural areas where the most dangerous groups are active... UN officials have reported that impunity is nearly absolute for killers of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous ex-combatants and social leaders.’²⁹⁰

13.5.16 The USSD 2023 Country Report stated: ‘The government generally investigated and prosecuted such actions [various human rights abuses and violent crimes of nonstate armed groups, including US-designated terrorist organizations such as dissidents of the former FARC and the ELN, drug-trafficking organizations, and small criminal gangs] when reported.’²⁹¹

13.5.17 The same source also stated:

‘Some NGOs raised concerns regarding perceived shortcomings in the NPU [National Protection Unit], such as delays in granting protection and the appropriateness of measures for addressing specific threats.

‘... As of May 31 [2023], the NPU, under the Ministry of Interior, was providing protection to 335 mayors, 18 governors, and 867 other persons, including members of departmental assemblies, council members, and judges.

‘... As of May 31 [2023], the NPU provided protection to a total of 9,444 persons, including 197 leaders or representatives of human rights organizations, 420 leaders or representatives of community organizations, 160 leaders or representatives of peasant organizations, 78 activists from

²⁸⁸ HRW, [‘World Report 2023’](#) (p167), 12 January 2023

²⁸⁹ HRW, [‘World Report 2024’](#) (p161,164,165-166), 11 January 2024

²⁹⁰ Freedom House, [‘Freedom in the World 2024 - Colombia’](#) (Section F3,F4), 29 February 2024

²⁹¹ USSD, [‘2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia’](#) (p2), 25 March 2024

human rights organizations, 204 persons from victims' organizations, and 117 leaders or representatives of social organizations.

'... As of May 31 [2023], the NPU was providing protection to 244 trade union leaders or members, a decrease from the prior year. Between January 1 and August 3 [2023], the NPU processed 44 new risk assessments of union leaders or members and developed 90 work plans of protective measures for the same population, all of which were active as of August 24 [2023]. The NPU provided protection in 40 cases which were assessed as facing an "extraordinary threat." The NPU reported the average time needed to implement protection measures upon completion of a risk analysis was 78 days in regular cases.'²⁹² The report did not specify the numbers protected by the NPU against armed groups/criminal gangs versus other perpetrators.

13.5.18 AI's April 2024 report stated: 'During 2023, the first year of Gustavo Petro's presidency, armed groups strengthened and conflicts between them increased, while confrontations between the Colombian Armed Forces and armed groups decreased, according to the Ideas for Peace Foundation.'²⁹³

13.5.19 The same source also stated:

'The UN Secretary General reported to the UN Security Council that the Unit for the Search of Persons Deemed as Missing [in the context of the armed conflict – the UBPD] had recovered 86 bodies of missing persons between March and June [2023], and had handed over the remains of seven to the relatives between June and September [2023]. Since 2018, the unit had recovered 929 bodies and handed over 196. In October, the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies [one of the world's leading centers for the study of the causes of violent conflict and strategies for sustainable peace²⁹⁴] reported the start of the implementation of 28 regional search plans.

'... In February [2023], the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) charged 10 former FARC-EP members with war crimes and crimes against humanity for their involvement in attacks against Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendants and peasant communities in Cauca and Valle del Cauca provinces.

'... In July [2023], the JEP charged 10 former FARC-EP members with war crimes and crimes against humanity regarding 349 kidnappings committed in Tolima, Huila and Quindío provinces. The JEP also charged 15 former FARC-EP members with war crimes and crimes against humanity regarding the implementation of a social and territorial control policy in Nariño province affecting Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendants, peasant communities, urban and rural populations, women and girls, LGBTI people, nature, and ancestral and collective territories.'²⁹⁵

13.5.20 The UN Secretary-General's 5 June 2023 report stated: 'According to the Colombian Family Welfare Institute [ICBF], 220 children formerly associated with armed groups entered its protection programme.'²⁹⁶

13.5.21 The USSD 2024 Trafficking in Persons report stated: 'According to

²⁹² USSD, '[2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices...](#)' (p20,26,29,46-47), 25 March 2024

²⁹³ AI, '[The State of the World's Human Rights; Colombia 2023](#)' (p134), 23 April 2024

²⁹⁴ Kroc Institute, '[About](#)', undated

²⁹⁵ AI, '[The State of the World's Human Rights; Colombia 2023](#)' (p137), 23 April 2024

²⁹⁶ UN General Assembly & Security Council, '[Children and armed conflict...](#)' (para 41), 5 June 2023

government reports, ICBF [the Colombian Institute for Family Wellbeing] officials assisted 134 children who in 2023 demobilized between January and October.²⁹⁷

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13.6 Corruption / collusion with armed groups

13.6.1 El Pais International's January 2023 article stated: 'Before he was extradited to the United States, Otoniel testified that his group [the Gulf Clan] had ties to security forces and local politicians.'²⁹⁸

13.6.2 The USSD 2022 Country Report stated: 'According to the Attorney General's Office, between January and August 31 [2022], four police officials were formally accused of having ties with illegal armed groups.'²⁹⁹

13.6.3 The 2023 Global Organized Crime Index: Colombia report stated:

'Corruption is rampant in Colombia at all levels of the state, but it is considered less systemic and violent than in other Latin American countries. However, corruption has grown in recent years, extending to sectors previously considered technical, and involving high-level public officials. The police and military have also been involved in various scandals, including collaboration with criminal networks and violent repression of social mobilizations, resulting in missing persons, deaths and impunity. Corruption scandals involving state actors have been exposed in exploitation around the Amazon, with complex networks including armed networks, private actors and state representatives acting against environmental leaders' efforts. Despite efforts to address corruption and violence by transitional justice and truth commissions, state-embedded actors continue to undermine progress.

'... Colombia has... shown significant progress in anti-corruption efforts, with the attorney general's office prosecuting several high-profile corruption cases.'³⁰⁰

13.6.4 InSight Crime's October 2023 Tren de Aragua article stated:

'There are indications that the gang [Tren de Aragua] may have entered the consolidation phase in Colombian cities... primarily through corrupting police officials.

'As early as October 2022, there were reports of police working with Tren de Aragua in Bogotá's Kennedy neighborhood. Months later in early 2023, officials arrested several police officers allegedly working with the gang in Villa del Rosario, the municipality where La Parada is located in the border department of Norte de Santander.

'Residents of La Parada, who spoke to InSight Crime on the condition of anonymity, said they could not be sure whether the police stationed in the area were corrupt or whether they were just outgunned by Tren de Aragua.'³⁰¹

²⁹⁷ USSD, '[2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Colombia](#)' (section: Prevention), 25 June 2024

²⁹⁸ El Pais International, '[... the illegal armed groups in Colombia's latest ceasefire](#)', 5 January 2023

²⁹⁹ USSD, '[2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)' (p5), 20 March 2023

³⁰⁰ GI-TOC, '[Colombia](#)' (p5,7), September 2023

³⁰¹ InSight Crime, '[... the Construction of the Tren de Aragua's Transnational Empire](#)', 4 October 2023

13.6.5 AI's November 2023 report noted:

'... [T]he National Protection Unit (UNP)... has been the target of serious accusations of alleged corruption and possible involvement of officials in illicit schemes, among other serious incidents... the[re were] accusations made in recent years of possible collusion between state security forces, which are often involved in the protection of defenders, and armed groups or other powerful actors whose interests are at odds with the exercise of the right to defend human rights.

'... In May 2023, Amnesty International asked the Attorney General's Office what steps it had taken... [since] 2020... to investigate possible crimes committed by public officials who violate their duty to protect human rights defenders at risk. The reply was that the UEI [Special Investigation Unit] was considering assessing the links of state actors in later stages of the investigation of cases, and that they were seeking not only to attribute criminal responsibility to members of criminal organizations "but also to link public officials and third parties when the investigation yields material evidence of their criminal responsibility in crimes against human rights defenders..."³⁰²

13.6.6 GIGA's November 2023 report, which cited various sources, stated: 'An example of NSAAs' [non-State armed actors'] co-optation of formal institutions is Colombian para-politics. From the very beginning of drug-trafficking operations in the country, there were high levels of collusion and cooperation between NSAAs and the state. This was not limited to the local level but spread to national politics.'³⁰³

13.6.7 The OHCHR's 14 February 2024 report stated: 'The Office... continued to receive information on cases of corruption and/or collusion between members of the security forces and criminal organizations or non-State armed groups, as well as cases of omission of the duty to protect communities and/or victims.'³⁰⁴

13.6.8 The 2024 Freedom in the World country report stated:

'The March 2022 legislative elections were peaceful, though observers reported some irregularities and officials from multiple parties accused the electoral authorities of... allowing candidacies by people with connections to organized crime figures.

'... Collaboration between security forces and illegal armed groups has declined, but rights groups report official toleration of paramilitary successor groups in some regions.'³⁰⁵

13.6.9 The USSD 2023 Country Report stated: 'Human rights organizations, victims, and government investigators accused some members of government security forces of collaborating with or tolerating the activities of criminal gangs, which included some former paramilitary members.'³⁰⁶

³⁰² AI, '[Colombia: Hope at risk...](#)' (p12,40), 9 November 2023

³⁰³ GIGA, '[Coping with Complexity: Dealing with Non-State Armed Actors](#)' (p21-22), November 2023

³⁰⁴ OHCHR, '[Situation of human rights in Colombia...](#)' (para 22), 14 February 2024

³⁰⁵ Freedom House, '[Freedom in the World 2024 - Colombia](#)' (Sections A2,F3), 29 February 2024

³⁰⁶ USSD, '[2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)' (p3), 25 March 2024

13.6.10 For more detailed information on the criminal justice system, law enforcement agencies and guidance on protection, see the Country Policy and Information Note, [Colombia: Actors of Protection](#).

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13.7 Non-state protection mechanisms

13.7.1 The February 2022 Guardian article stated:

‘Despite ongoing insecurity from drug trafficking groups like the Clan del Golfo, LGBTQ+ people in El Carmen de Bolívar say they feel more secure now than ever before.

‘Corey, a gay 46-year-old, says he has experienced a huge change over the years.

“I feel very happy because we can go out without any problems. Before we were afraid to go out, and if armed groups found us on the street at midnight, they could take us away, torture us, or send us home.” He says he has LGBTQ+ friends who “fled from El Carmen de Bolívar out of fear”.

“We’re conscious that armed groups are returning to the territory, but at this moment, there haven’t been any threats directly against the LGBT community,” says Tito, 30.

‘This new perceived security and acceptance is in part the result of a campaign by Caribe Afirmativo, an organisation which runs a community centre in the town. Services include a soup kitchen and job training, as well as outreach work to support understanding of the LGBTQ+ population.

‘Dr Wilson Castañeda Castro, director of Caribe Afirmativo, says that alongside advocacy, training, and research, the group provides safe spaces for LGBTQ+ people in “periphery territories”, areas with limited government attention.

‘Nawar, 26, a trans woman, is grateful to Caribe Afirmativo, saying the organisation taught her “to defend the human rights of the LGBT population”.

“One of the things that makes me happy in El Carmen de Bolívar is that my advocacy work has been heard, that we have made progress, and that we have changed society,” she says.

‘Castañeda warns that this sense of security in El Carmen de Bolívar is fragile - given the increasing violence in Colombia’s war-ravaged regions. He cautions that the increased visibility of LGBTQ+ people in national politics can reinforce discrimination, as the flames of homophobia are fanned for political gain.

‘People in El Carmen de Bolívar still often face employment discrimination because of their sexual or gender identity, but say that they appreciate the current security as a time to flourish.

‘... In one of the most dramatic departures from the past, the LGBTQ+ community is actively engaged with the town’s police and has developed a training and awareness programme for officers.’³⁰⁷

³⁰⁷ The Guardian, [‘... \[T\]he LGBT Colombians embracing visibility...’](#), 3 February 2022

- 13.7.2 The HRW 2023 World Report stated: ‘In 2016, the UN Security Council established a political mission to monitor and verify implementation of the FARC peace accord, which was succeeded in 2017 by the UN Verification Mission in Colombia. In 2022, the Security Council extended the mission’s mandate until October 2023, including the verification of compliance with JEP sanctions.’³⁰⁸
- 13.7.3 ICG’s February 2023 report stated:
 ‘The provision of rough justice is a particularly striking feature of armed group control. Years of handing down summary verdicts have made them the arbiters of punishment for crimes such as robbery and domestic violence. In both ELN and FARC dissident areas of Arauca, for example, “people take their problems to the groups to solve”, an Afro-Colombian community leader explained. “This has become highly legitimate within the community, because the state doesn’t show up and because the group’s decisions are more likely to be respected”. Penalties for robbery, for example, can range from fines to labour in service of the community. More serious offences, including misuse of land belonging to others, might result in forced displacement. Alleged collaboration with the military or rival armed bands is punishable by death. While draconian, this system yields “results”, community representatives said, with almost no theft reported in ELN areas.’³⁰⁹
- 13.7.4 The ICRC March 2023 report stated: ‘In 2022, we handled the release of 63 people who had been in the hands of various armed actors. This is one of the highest figures in recent years... In 2023, we shall continue our endeavours as neutral intermediaries to facilitate this type of humanitarian operation whenever and wherever possible.’³¹⁰
- 13.7.5 The same source stated that in 2022 the ICRC’s humanitarian work benefited 334,000 people (some may have received more than one service). Further, the ICRC stated that in collaboration with the Colombian Red Cross, it provided technical, financial, or logistical support to 421,314 victims of armed conflict and other violence across 27 departments. The ICRC’s said work was delivered by a team of 504 humanitarian workers via a budget of 162,427 million Colombian pesos [just under £32 million GBP³¹¹]³¹².
- 13.7.6 On 10 July 2023, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), a Swiss foundation providing access to independent expertise and information on Security Sector Governance and Reform (SSG/R)³¹³, published a report, citing various sources, which stated:
 ‘Most indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in Cauca rely on what they call an “ancestral guard” for protection of the community and territory. These include the Guardia Indígena (Indigenous Guard), Guardia Cimarrona (Afro-descendant Guard), and Guardia Campesina (Peasant Guard). Generally speaking, the ancestral guards are un-armed (or claim to be) and

³⁰⁸ HRW, [‘World Report 2023’](#) (p170), 12 January 2023

³⁰⁹ ICG, [‘Protecting Colombia’s Most Vulnerable...’](#) (p9-10), 24 February 2023

³¹⁰ ICRC, [‘Humanitarian Challenges 2023: Colombia’](#) (p9), 8 March 2023

³¹¹ XE.com, [‘Currency Converter – Colombian Pesos to British Pounds’](#), 26 October 2023

³¹² ICRC, [‘Humanitarian Challenges 2023: Colombia’](#) (p11,13), 8 March 2023

³¹³ DCAF, [‘About’](#), undated

seek to maintain order within their territories by non-violent means. They have jurisdiction to act within their delimited territories, answer to the traditional authorities of their communities, and intervene in many aspects of people's everyday lives. In security affairs, their involvement emphasizes dialogue-based conflict resolution. These guards are empowered to patrol, inspect, confiscate, expel, and detain people within their jurisdiction and in accordance with their own justice systems, provided these are not contrary to the Colombian constitution or legislation. The traditional authorities of Afro-descendent and indigenous communities are also allowed to judge and punish individuals for violations committed within their territory, as a result of their constitutionally protected legal status. The police have no right to intervene in territory under this jurisdiction without permission from its custodians.³¹⁴ The report did not provide any detail on how successful the ancestral guard have been at protecting their communities against abuses committed by armed groups and criminal gangs, though see also [Indigenous and afro-descendant persons](#).

- 13.7.7 On 31 August 2023, UNICEF's Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office (LACRO) published a report, covering the reporting period 1 January 2023 to 30 June 2023, which stated: 'In the framework of its armed groups recruitment prevention and humanitarian response, UNICEF supported 9,671 children and adolescents (57 per cent girls; 43 per cent boys) and their families in Arauca, Norte de Santander, Nariño, Chocó, Vichada by providing psychosocial support, delivering humanitarian kits, and addressing individual child protection cases.'³¹⁵
- 13.7.8 The 2023 Global Organized Crime Index: Colombia report stated: 'Colombia's civil society plays a vital role in analyzing and preventing organized-crime activities in the country. There are several crime-related observatories and NGOs working to help vulnerable youths escape gangs. Despite threats and violence against civil-society organizations and leaders, non-state actors continue to implement projects and initiatives to benefit vulnerable populations.'³¹⁶
- 13.7.9 ICG's October 2023 article stated: 'Social leaders and communities report that visits and statements from international diplomats confer a level of protection. Armed groups are less likely to attack social leaders whose external ties are readily apparent, particularly when the groups are polishing their image in preparation for peace talks. The EU's Defend Life program has so far given dozens of leaders this extra layer of security.'³¹⁷
- 13.7.10 On 6 December 2023, the UNHCR published a report entitled '... [The] UNHCR complements the State in the protection of conflict-affected communities...'³¹⁸
- 13.7.11 Al Jazeera's 25 December 2023 article stated: 'Fearing government inaction, families [of kidnapped persons] have... taken it upon themselves to organise

³¹⁴ DCAF, '[Hybrid Security... Insights from Burkina Faso, Colombia & DRC](#)' (p13), 20 July 2023

³¹⁵ UNICEF, LACRO, '[Humanitarian Situation Report No. 1...](#)' (p9), 31 August 2023

³¹⁶ GI-TOC, '[Colombia](#)' (p7), September 2023

³¹⁷ ICG, '[...Colombia: Is "Total Peace" Back on Track?](#)' (p6), 4 October 2023

³¹⁸ UNHCR, '[IDPs in Colombia, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras and Mexico](#)' (p2), 6 December 2023

grassroots campaigns to bring their loved ones home.’³¹⁹

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14. Freedom of movement

14.1 Within Colombia

14.1.1 Al Jazeera’s May 2022 article stated:

‘... [A] days-long siege [was] imposed earlier this month [May 2022] by... the... AGC...

‘Several towns ran out of basic supplies such as food and gas, while local hospitals faced staff shortages. Elsewhere, families were stranded at transport terminals, unable to get home due to blocked roads, local media reported.

“You live with the concern that it could happen again tomorrow,” said... [a] resident of Tierralta, Raul, who also asked to use a pseudonym because of security concerns. “Because the Gulf Clan are showing that they have the power to create fear,” he told Al Jazeera.

‘... JEP... registered the forced closure of 26 roads, the destruction of at least 118 vehicles and the disruption of 54 transport terminals.’³²⁰

14.1.2 ICG’s February 2023 report stated:

‘FARC dissident fronts in parts of Cauca require residents to acquire an identity card, and they check this document, including when individuals enter and leave an area under their control. Here, as well as in parts of Guaviare, Putumayo, Caquetá and other areas marked by a strong dissident presence, the groups wielding control ban tinted windows from cars in order to ensure that they can identify passengers.

‘... In 2017, just over 1,400 people experienced confinement, meaning they were not able to leave their homes or neighbourhoods. At the end of 2022, at least 119,000 people were forcibly confined – the highest number ever recorded in the country.

‘... Confinement disproportionately affects Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, which together account for an estimated 10 to 20 per cent of the population but... more than 80 per cent of the victims... in 2022.

‘Chocó, a department on the Pacific coast, has experienced among the largest number of cases of confinement in Colombia... The ELN often tells residents that they cannot leave... at least during certain hours; it blocks most supplies from entering the area as well... [T]he armed group can assume that anyone it sees attempting to enter or leave is an enemy.

‘... [T]he Gulf Clan has also confined residents as a way to understand who lives in the community and prevent the ELN from returning... At times, armed groups convey orders restricting movement through pamphlets or word of mouth; on other occasions, they plant landmines. Transgressors thus risk punishment ranging from harassment and the seizure of

³¹⁹ Al Jazeera, ‘... [U]ptick in kidnappings...’, 25 December 2023

³²⁰ Al Jazeera, ‘“Terrifying”: Days of terror under Colombia’s Gulf Clan cartel’, 12 May 2022

motorcycles or cars to death.

‘Dissident groups engage in similar practices... [like] in the Telembí Triangle region, in... Nariño... [T]o safeguard their land and livelihoods, many inhabitants remained confined rather than relocating, even as clashes broke out in their neighbourhoods. The same dissident factions, meanwhile, used force to try to stop people from moving away... Victims said they suspected that the armed groups... shot at the displaced people so they would not be able to flee and report the groups’ presence to the authorities.

‘On the other side of the country, the ELN has confined several Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities living in remote parts of the department of Arauca... [where] confinement is largely enforced through checkpoints.

‘... [M]any Colombians today are living in areas with de facto partial movement restrictions. In areas under the Gulf Clan’s thumb, in Montes de María and southern Córdoba in the north of the country, for example, few residents venture out after dark and there are explicit restrictions from 5pm onward along some roads.

‘... Confinement is... often under-reported or invisible. Unlike in cases of forced displacement, victims do not journey to big cities, register with state authorities or speak with the press. Moreover, the Colombian state only recognises... a case of confinement after having visited the area, which requires the military to agree that security conditions are suitable for civilian authorities to enter.’³²¹

14.1.3 London Política’s February 2023 article stated:

‘... [I]n neighbourhoods [in Buenaventura, Valle del Cauca] there are “invisible borders, which means that people cannot cross from one place to another because, depending on the neighbourhood, it belongs to The Shottas or The Espartanos. Therefore, even though citizens are not part of the conflict, they cannot move freely around Buenaventura. Moreover, these groups have imposed a curfew of 7:00 pm in their territories and have created terror with shootings at night. Even though these groups never gave the order to the citizens to be at home after 7:00 pm, people knew they started the shootings between them after this time. Therefore, people preferred to come home early and not leave their homes after this time.

‘... Since the ceasefire was signed [on 2 October 2022]... The invisible borders disappeared, which allowed people to meet on Christmas in 2022, something that did not happen since the war between these two groups started in 2019. Furthermore, the shootings that took place after 7:00 pm disappeared hence people could move freely after this time between neighbourhoods. Finally, Many [sic] artistic and cultural activities such as football matches, concerts and festivals started to take place in scenarios where the Shottas and the Espartanos shot between them.’³²²

14.1.4 ICG’s October 2023 article stated: ‘Armed groups have forcibly limited the movement of entire communities along the Pacific coast - a practice known as confinement, cases of which are up 18 per cent in the first six months of

³²¹ ICG, [‘Protecting Colombia’s Most Vulnerable...’](#) (p10,21-22,23), 24 February 2023

³²² London Política, [‘Who are the Shottas and the Espartanos?’](#), 24 February 2023

2023. They have also planted landmines, and mandated that people carry locally issued ID cards to keep intruders out.³²³

14.1.5 UNMAS' November 2023 report stated:

'... [T]he contamination of the territory with EO [explosive ordnance] and armed actions by different actors has... caused indirect impacts such as forced displacement and confinement.

'According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), this trend is based on the change in strategy by non-state armed groups (NSAGs), which seek to impose codes of conduct and mobility restrictions (at the risk of encountering an EO accident) to increase social control in the regions.

'... The installation of new EOs and their indiscriminate nature instills fear in the population, leading them to prefer displacement or declare themselves confined.

'Confinement is particularly severe because communities cannot access health or education services, sources of water, or their hunting, fishing, or farming areas, increasing the risks of food insecurity. Likewise, EO prevents access for humanitarian workers, who face serious difficulties in assisting communities in the most remote areas of the country.'³²⁴

14.1.6 The HRW 2024 World Report stated:

'Fears of antipersonnel landmines, threats by armed groups, and the hazards of crossfire prevented 64,000 mostly Indigenous people from leaving their communities between January [2023] and October [2023] [compared with a reported 96,000 people for the same period in 2022³²⁵], a situation known as "confinement."

'... Fighting by armed groups... in Argelia municipality [in Valle del Cauca], has left more than 6,500 people displaced and confined [compared with a reported 2,600 people in the same area in 2022 (plus an additional 12,000 people forced into displacement or confinement due to fighting between the ELN and a coalition of FARC dissident groups in Arauca)³²⁶].'³²⁷

14.1.7 The 2024 Freedom in the World country report stated: 'Freedom of movement improved substantially in tandem with the peace process, but it remains restricted by ongoing violence in certain regions, many of which are home to marginalized groups... Travel in some remote areas is further limited by illegal checkpoints operated by criminal and guerrilla groups.'³²⁸

14.1.8 The USSD 2023 Country Report stated:

'International and civil society organizations reported armed groups restricted movement of rural communities through roadblocks, curfews, car bombs along egress routes, and improvised explosive devices in areas

³²³ ICG, '[...Colombia: Is "Total Peace" Back on Track?](#)' (p4), 4 October 2023

³²⁴ UNMAS, '[... Mine Action Sector in Colombia](#)' (p5-6), 29 November 2023

³²⁵ HRW, '[World Report 2023](#)' (p163), 12 January 2023

³²⁶ HRW, '[World Report 2023](#)' (p163), 12 January 2023

³²⁷ HRW, '[World Report 2024](#)' (p161,163), 11 January 2024

³²⁸ Freedom House, '[Freedom in the World 2024 - Colombia](#)' (Section G1), 29 February 2024

where illicit crop cultivation and narcotics trafficking persisted.

'... During the... period [January to June 2023], the United Nations registered a 2 percent increase in incidents where armed groups confined communities. Communities that suffered restricted movement due to armed incidents and geographical factors had limited access to essential goods and services.'³²⁹

14.1.9 AI's April 2024 report stated:

'Armed curfews and community confinements continued, mainly because of fighting between armed groups in rural areas. In June [2023], the Ombudsperson's Office warned of an armed curfew enforced by the National Liberation Army in Chocó province, affecting nearly 5,000 people in the Nóvita municipality. UNHCR reported that as of November, 72,389 people had been forcibly confined in Colombia during 2023. In September [2023], citing OCHA, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights said that Afro-descendant people made up 37% of all confinement victims in 2023 and Indigenous Peoples represented 25%.'³³⁰

14.1.10 For information on internal relocation, see the Country Policy and Information Note, [Colombia: International Relocation](#).

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14.2 Displacements

14.2.1 The EUAA December 2022 COI report, which cited various sources, stated: '... [C]ivil society organisations report that individual and family level displacements due to threats from armed groups affect a greater number of people than most displacement, but due to its nature is more difficult to record.'³³¹

14.2.2 ICG's February 2023 report stated: '[In the years since the 2016 peace agreement,] [f]orced displacement has risen from just over 10,000 cases per year to more than 85,000 in 2022... In Nariño, a fierce fight broke out between rival FARC dissident factions in 2021, making this southerly department the site of the most forced displacement that year.'³³²

14.2.3 On 17 May 2023, The New Humanitarian (formerly IRIN News), an independent non-profit news organisation that covers crises and disasters³³³, published an article which stated: 'In Colombia, the splintering of armed groups and their rivalry over drug trafficking routes saw new conflict displacements rise in 2022 to a decade high of 339,000...'³³⁴

14.2.4 BAMF's 21 August 2023 briefing notes stated: 'Recently, several days of clashes between the... EMC... and the... ELN... have caused more than a thousand people in the department of Nariño, in the extreme southwest, to leave their villages. According to media reports, the people sought shelter in

³²⁹ USSD, '2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia' (p23), 25 March 2024

³³⁰ AI, 'The State of the World's Human Rights; Colombia 2023' (p136-137), 23 April 2024

³³¹ EUAA, 'Colombia: Country Focus' (p94-95), December 2022

³³² ICG, 'Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable...' (p7), 24 February 2023

³³³ The New Humanitarian, 'About us', undated

³³⁴ The New Humanitarian, 'Surging gang violence across Latin America challenges aid', 17 May 2023

the centre of the town of Samaniego in the same department.³³⁵

14.2.5 The HRW 2024 World Report stated: 'In the southern state of Nariño, fighting among FARC dissident groups has displaced thousands, mainly Afro-descendants and Awá Indigenous people, who also suffer threats, confinement, kidnappings, and killings.'³³⁶

14.2.6 The 2024 Freedom in the World country report stated:

'Almost 19,000 individuals were displaced during the first six months of 2023, mostly due to threats from armed groups [compared with more than 35,000 individuals in the first six months of 2022³³⁷].

'... [T]he resettlement of those who were displaced during the conflict moved slowly during the Duque administration. In 2022, the newly elected Petro administration promised to accelerate the process, and that October [2022], the government agreed to a series of land purchases, which will be distributed at a subsidized price to those displaced by the conflict.'³³⁸

14.2.7 The USSD 2023 Country Report stated:

'In August [2023], the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported a 33 percent decrease in the number of persons displaced between January and June [2023], compared with the same period in 2022.

'... There were approximately 6.7 million IDPs [internally displaced persons] living in the country, largely because of the armed conflict and violence in rural areas. Threats posed by armed groups created internal displacement in both remote areas and urban settings. Many IDPs lived in poverty in unhygienic conditions and with limited access to health care, education, shelter, and employment.

'The government, international organizations, and civil society groups identified various factors causing displacement and confinements, including threats, extortion, and physical, psychological, and sexual violence by armed groups against civilian populations, particularly against women and girls. Other causes included competition and armed confrontation among and within armed groups for resources and territorial control; confrontations among security forces, guerrillas, and criminal gangs; and forced recruitment of children or threats of forced recruitment by illegal armed groups. Drug trafficking, illegal mining, and large-scale commercial ventures in rural areas also contributed to displacement.

'The NGO National Association of Displaced Afro-descendants stated threats and violence against Afro-Colombian leaders and communities caused high levels of forced displacement, especially in the Pacific coast region.

'Local institutions in many areas lacked the capacity to protect the rights of and provide public services to IDPs and communities at risk of displacement. Consequently, the government struggled to provide adequate protection and

³³⁵ BAMF, '[Briefing Notes \(KW34/2023\)](#)' (p3), 21 August 2023

³³⁶ HRW, '[World Report 2024](#)' (p163), 11 January 2024

³³⁷ Freedom House, '[Freedom in the World 2023 - Colombia](#)' (Sections G1), 9 March 2023

³³⁸ Freedom House, '[Freedom in the World 2024 - Colombia](#)' (Sections G1,G2), 29 February 2024

humanitarian assistance to newly displaced populations.³³⁹

14.2.8 AI's April 2024 report stated:

'In May [2023], 300 families, comprising approximately 1,500 people, most of them Afro-descendants or Indigenous Peoples, were forcibly displaced in the context of confrontations between the National Liberation Army [ELN] and the Colombian Gaitanist Self-Defence Forces [AGC] armed groups in Sipí municipality, Chocó province. In July [2023], authorities in Antioquia province reported that at least 53 families had been forcibly displaced from their homes in the municipalities of Segovia and Remedios because of confrontations between the same armed groups.'³⁴⁰

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14.3 Tracking of persons by groups or gangs

14.3.1 The EUAA December 2022 COI report, citing various sources, stated:

'Sources indicate that illegal armed groups expand their presence and influence through sub-contracting to smaller groups and criminal outfits... Regarding whether there was variation in the capacity of various armed actors to conduct... tracking, such as larger versus smaller groups, two sources [namely a Colombia-based Conflict Analyst who monitors and reports on conflict and political developments (in February 2022 correspondence with the EUAA) and Dr. Max Yuri Gil Ramírez, a professor at the Institute of Political Studies of the University of Antioquia who specialises in citizenship, immigration, human rights and armed conflict (during a November 2022 interview with the EUAA)³⁴¹] gave similar views that while almost all armed groups and dissident groups can (track and trace targets), generally, the more national the group, the more likely it is for them to trace someone. Hence a FARC dissident faction, the ELN, or the AGC would be better able to do so than a local delinquent organisation. It does however not rule out that a small group could track someone, particularly because many of these smaller gangs are contracted by larger organisations and hence have access to the extended national networks. Similarly... [A] Political Analyst [based in Colombia who monitors and publishes on issues of security, political, and economic developments and risks in Colombia (in September 2022 correspondence with the EUAA)³⁴²] remarked that the AGC or ELN are more likely to be able to carry out coordinated actions, while smaller groups in remote communities would have a more limited scope. However, the source stated that if a group has identified a specific individual as a target, they have the capacity within their criminal networks to effectively carry out a threat. The source stated that "it is very difficult to know the extent to which armed groups are capable of scaling up their targeting capacity from a local area to an urban centre."

'... the Conflict Analyst interviewed by EUAA remarked that "penetration of local institutions does happen" and although the analyst did not know of specific cases, indicated that this is a possible strategy that armed groups

³³⁹ USSD, '[2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Colombia](#)' (p23,24-25), 25 March 2024

³⁴⁰ AI, '[The State of the World's Human Rights: Colombia 2023](#)' (p136), 23 April 2024

³⁴¹ EUAA, '[Colombia: Country Focus](#)' (footnote 531 on p80 & p140), December 2022

³⁴² EUAA, '[Colombia: Country Focus](#)' (footnote 542 on p81 & p141), December 2022

could use.

‘On the issue of factors that influence whether an armed group tracks or traces a person across different regions, the Political Analyst remarked that “it is very difficult to generalise.” Professor Gil Ramírez remarked similarly that there is no generalised logic to locate/target someone; the criminal world does not follow established patterns of violence, and a person threatened by a local gang in one place may be attacked again, while another person may move away from an AGC threat without problems. It is highly dependent on local factors, and the effectiveness of protection and ability to relocate depend to a large extent on the nature of the group issuing threats, and the motivations for doing so. The analyst stated that it is necessary to analyse the specific profile of the targeted person’s local and political situation, threats faced, cases they’ve been involved in or reported on, potential linkages to criminal, armed groups, or the state itself, as well as whether the person comes from an at-risk geographic area, and the local dynamics of the area where they experienced threats. The Conflict Analyst stated similarly that a criminal or armed group may or may not necessarily track an individual target if “the annoyance is removed”. Jeremy McDermott [a Colombian criminality and armed groups expert, co-founder and co-directors of InSight Crime, and external reviewer for the EUAA report, in comments made on 14 November 2022 during his review of the report³⁴³] commented that each targeting situation can be different, depending on the group, the location, the profile, including in relation to large cities such as Medellín, Cali, and Bogota, where the dynamics of armed structures are each distinct.’³⁴⁴

14.3.2 The same source also stated:

‘The Political Analyst stated that factors influencing the tracking of a target stem from the person’s material or operational impediment to the group’s ability to carry out its intended objectives. For example, someone who could provide information to the authorities that would make the group’s operations less effective. Similarly, the Conflict Analyst stated that, “Usually the more serious the threat [to the person] locally, the more likely the person is to be pursued in other cities. Some frequent examples of “serious” offenses, according to an armed group, would be if a leader or threatened person is accused of being an informant (either to the military or to another armed group), trying to avoid recruitment into a group (for example a child or youth and his or her family), or someone perceived to have a debt with an armed group. [...] economic elites sometimes threaten people, or have [sic] powerful political and military contacts, who would have even more means to follow someone”.

‘Similarly, Jeremy McDermott remarked that: “Regarding reaching a person who is considered by an armed group as high value or high profile, if a hit is out on that individual, there are local “oficinas” in most cities, so if there is enough interest or money to pay for it, the group can find someone almost anywhere; but they must want to kill them. In most cases, the group just want the problematic person out of their business. If the target is sitting on

³⁴³ EUAA, [‘Colombia: Country Focus’](#) (p17, footnote 544 on p82 & p140-141), December 2022

³⁴⁴ EUAA, [‘Colombia: Country Focus’](#) (p80-81), December 2022

strategic or tactical intelligence about a group, they might be prepared to shell out a lot of money to have them murdered. They can often find people by tracking their social media and pressuring friends and family in the area in order to find someone they wish to target.”³⁴⁵

14.3.3 The IRB August 2023 response stated:

‘The information in the following paragraph was provided by the Head of Colombia Programmes:

‘Whether an armed group will track a military objective after the person relocates to a different city will “depen[d]” on the group and the profile of the military objective, but a group “will keep track” of someone. Most people who receive this threat will go to a major urban centre because big cities make it easier to hide. In other cases, the group will not track the individual, because they only wanted to instill fear or to force the person out of the community. The Gulf Clan and ELN have the “widest scope of control in the country,” and the Gulf Clan will hire someone in their “criminal network” to find and kill an individual in a different part of the country. However, no groups have a “full national presence”

‘The information in the following paragraph was provided by the Senior Analyst regarding tracking and the relocation of military objectives:

‘Being designated a military objective “means immediate displacement” for an individual and their family. Sometimes the person can safely relocate to a city, such as Bogotá or Medellín, and sometimes not. It depends on “how angry the group is.” Every group in Colombia can “probably” track someone in any city.

‘The information in the following paragraph was provided by the independent researcher:

‘The motivation and ability to track a military objective who has relocated to another city is dependent on the size of the group, their connections, and the profile of the military objective. If the group only wants the military objective to leave the area, they will not track them to another city. However, the group will track their target if motivated by “personal vengeance” or if their target is “causing a problem.” Relocating within Colombia does not “guarantee” safety.

‘... The Head of Colombia Programmes gave the example of a municipality whose mayor and city councillors all relocated to their department’s capital because they were declared military objectives; they now run the government from the capital, and “one or two” councillors “have been killed”’.³⁴⁶

14.3.4 The 10 July 2024 IRB response to an information request, citing the June 2024 interview that the IRB held with a New Jersey City University Assistant Professor (see paragraph 12.1.5 for further details), stated:

‘... [A]lthough it “mainly” operates in jungle and rural areas of Colombia, the ELN is not concentrated in a single zone and there is no region in Colombia

³⁴⁵ EUAA, [‘Colombia: Country Focus’](#) (p81-82), December 2022

³⁴⁶ IRB, [‘Colombia: Individuals declared a military objective...’](#) (section 3), 11 August 2023

“beyond the reach” of armed groups, including the ELN. The Assistant Professor added that for those targeted by this group, relocating to large urban cities, such as Bogotá or Medellín, “does not necessarily mean one is safe”... the ELN uses its “cells and connections,” as well as intelligence gathered from “corrupt” authorities, obtained “by paying (them) the right price,” to locate its targets.³⁴⁷

14.3.5 The same source, citing June 2024 interviews the IRB carried out with a Professor in the Research Directorate of Antioquia University, whose research focuses on the armed conflict, including post-conflict events, and peace negotiations³⁴⁸, stated:

‘... [A]n armed group's ability to track their target depends on whether they have (translation) “territorial dominance” in the area where the target is located; in such areas, the armed group has access to resources such as weapons, businesses, and “men”. However... information is (translation) “costly and difficult” to collect in areas where armed groups have “shared” control with other armed groups or state authorities, or where they have little to no presence, such as in large urban cities like Bogotá, which are “heavily monitored by authorities”.³⁴⁹

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³⁴⁷ IRB, [‘Colombia: National Liberation Army... ability to track individuals...’](#) (section. 4), 10 July 2024

³⁴⁸ IRB, [‘Colombia: National Liberation Army... ability to track individuals...’](#) (section 2), 10 July 2024

³⁴⁹ IRB, [‘Colombia: National Liberation Army... ability to track individuals...’](#) (section 4), 10 July 2024

Annex A: Quick reference guide for armed group/criminal gang aliases

<u>Main group/gang name (in English unless English name not known)</u>	<u>Spanish name and alias(es)</u>
Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia³⁵⁰ (AGC³⁵¹) • the Gaitanistas³⁵² • Gulf Clan³⁵³ (Clan del Golfo³⁵⁴) • Urabeños³⁵⁵ • Plan Pistola³⁵⁶
Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia³⁵⁷ (FARC³⁵⁸) • Common People's Party³⁵⁹
FARC dissidents (Note: this is not a single group, but refers collectively to all FARC dissidents ³⁶⁰)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ex-FARC mafia³⁶¹
Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – Army of the People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FARC-EP³⁶² • Central General Staff³⁶³ • Estado Mayor Central³⁶⁴ (EMC³⁶⁵) • Residual Armed Groups³⁶⁶ (GAOR³⁶⁷) • Southeastern Bloc³⁶⁸
Second Marquetalia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Segunda Marquetalia³⁶⁹ (SM³⁷⁰) • New Marquetalia³⁷¹

³⁵⁰ InSight Crime, [‘Gaitanistas – Gulf Clan’](#), 5 December 2023

³⁵¹ InSight Crime, [‘Gaitanistas – Gulf Clan’](#), 5 December 2023

³⁵² InSight Crime, [‘Gaitanistas – Gulf Clan’](#), 5 December 2023

³⁵³ InSight Crime, [‘Gaitanistas – Gulf Clan’](#), 5 December 2023

³⁵⁴ GIGA, [‘Coping with Complexity: Dealing with Non-State Armed Actors’](#) (p23), November 2023

³⁵⁵ InSight Crime, [‘Gaitanistas – Gulf Clan’](#), 5 December 2023

³⁵⁶ GIGA, [‘Coping with Complexity: Dealing with Non-State Armed Actors’](#) (p26), November 2023

³⁵⁷ InSight Crime, [‘FARC’](#), 23 November 2023

³⁵⁸ InSight Crime, [‘FARC’](#), 23 November 2023

³⁵⁹ The Independent, [‘... What are Colombia's ex-FARC splinter groups?’](#), 1 December 2021

³⁶⁰ InSight Crime, [‘FARC’](#), 23 November 2023

³⁶¹ InSight Crime, [‘FARC’](#), 23 November 2023

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • La Nueva Marquetalia³⁷² • FARC dissidents Segunda Marquetalia³⁷³ • Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia Dissidents Segunda Marquetalia³⁷⁴ • FARC-D Segunda Marquetalia³⁷⁵ • FARC-SM³⁷⁶
Border Command	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comandos de la Frontera-Ejército-Bolivariano³⁷⁷ (CdF-EB³⁷⁸) • Comandos Bolivarian Army³⁷⁹ • Los Comandos de La Frontera³⁸⁰ • La Mafia³⁸¹
National Liberation Army	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ejército de Liberación Nacional³⁸² (ELN³⁸³)
Popular Liberation Army	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ejército Popular de Liberación³⁸⁴ (EPL³⁸⁵) • Los Pelusos³⁸⁶
Los Caparros	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bloque Virgilio Peralta Arenas³⁸⁷ (BVPA³⁸⁸) • Los del Bajo³⁸⁹ • Los Caparrapos³⁹⁰
United Self-defence Forces of Colombia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia³⁹¹ (AUC³⁹²)
Aragua Train	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tren de Aragua³⁹³
Black Eagles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Águilas Negras³⁹⁴

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Research methodology

The country of origin information (COI) in this note has been carefully selected in accordance with the general principles of COI research as set out in the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#), April 2008, and the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation's (ACCORD), [Researching Country Origin Information – Training Manual](#), 2024. Namely, taking into account the COI's relevance, reliability, accuracy, balance, currency, transparency and traceability.

Sources and the information they provide are carefully considered before inclusion. Factors relevant to the assessment of the reliability of sources and information include:

- the motivation, purpose, knowledge and experience of the source
- how the information was obtained, including specific methodologies used
- the currency and detail of information
- whether the COI is consistent with and/or corroborated by other sources

Commentary may be provided on source(s) and information to help readers understand the meaning and limits of the COI.

Wherever possible, multiple sourcing is used and the COI compared to ensure that it is accurate and balanced, and provides a comprehensive and up-to-date picture of the issues relevant to this note at the time of publication.

The inclusion of a source is not, however, an endorsement of it or any view(s) expressed.

Each piece of information is referenced in a footnote.

Full details of all sources cited and consulted in compiling the note are listed alphabetically in the [bibliography](#).

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Terms of Reference

A 'Terms of Reference' (ToR) is a broad outline of the issues relevant to the scope of this note and forms the basis for the [country information](#).

The Home Office uses some standardised ToR, depending on the subject, and these are then adapted depending on the country concerned.

For this particular CPIN, the following topics were identified prior to drafting as relevant and on which research was undertaken:

- Convention reason
 - Country Guidance – political opinion/MPSG?
 - Changes in country situation
- Background
 - History of conflict
 - Current political system
 - Overview of types of non-state actors
- Paramilitary, guerrilla militia, and criminal groups
 - Identify main groups and profile members
 - Are groups distinguishable?
 - Geographical operational areas
 - Level of influence/control
 - Nature of activities
 - Arms
 - Types of abuses committed/motivation/targets
- Protection/relocation
 - Legal framework
 - Overview of security forces
 - Justice system
 - Ability of state to protect against abuses, and witness protection
 - Corruption
 - Freedom of movement within Colombia
 - Treatment of returnees to Colombia

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Version control and feedback

Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- version **1.0**
- valid from **11 November 2024**

Official – sensitive: Not for disclosure – Start of section

The information on this page has been removed as it is restricted for internal Home Office use.

Official – sensitive: Not for disclosure – End of section

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Changes from last version of this note

First version of this note.

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Feedback to the Home Office

Our goal is to provide accurate, reliable and up-to-date COI and clear guidance. We welcome feedback on how to improve our products. If you would like to comment on this note, please email the [Country Policy and Information Team](#).

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The [Independent Advisory Group on Country Information](#) (IAGCI) was set up in March 2009 by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration to support them in reviewing the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of approach of COI produced by the Home Office.

The IAGCI welcomes feedback on the Home Office's COI material. It is not the function of the IAGCI to endorse any Home Office material, procedures or policy. The IAGCI may be contacted at:

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Information about the IAGCI's work and a list of the documents which have been reviewed by the IAGCI can be found on the Independent Chief Inspector's pages of the [gov.uk website](#).

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