

### Watch List 2022; Colombia: Tackling Colombia's Next Generation in Arms

Armed conflict in Colombia is escalating in rural areas, with some communities reporting higher levels of violence or coercion than before the peace agreement. In this excerpt from the [Watch List 2022](#), Crisis Group urges the EU and its member states to encourage the implementation of the 2016 peace accord and help Colombia find substitutes for the coca crop.

Colombia's hard-won peace is withering in the countryside. Following the signing of the 2016 accord between the state and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), levels of violence dropped across much of the country. But armed conflict is now escalating in a small but growing number of rural pockets, where communities report that violence and coercion are as bad as or worse than before the peace agreement. Competition between armed groups, criminals and the military in certain areas seems likely to worsen in 2022, and the homicide rate across the country is on an upward trajectory. More seemingly stable regions risk being dragged back into a cycle of conflict.

Rather than ideology, the ebbs and flows of the illicit economy define localised violence in enclaves found along the Pacific coast, near Colombia's borders with Venezuela and Ecuador and close to the Atlantic. Armed and criminal groups strong-arm communities for resources and recruits, often disproportionately harming women and families with their coercive tactics. In some affected communities, mothers have become the last line of defence against child recruitment and face brutal punishment for speaking out against this practice.

The coming year could well place additional strains on conflict-affected communities. Presidential and congressional elections are due between March and June, with local elections scheduled for early 2023. As in past electoral contests, armed groups and sometimes also political and business interests may use or commission violence to consolidate their influence, particularly in regions with a history of conflict and where institutions have little capacity to resist co-optation.

*In this context, the European Union (EU) and its member states should:*

- Publicly and privately urge all candidates to recognise that implementation of the 2016 peace accord remains a priority for the international community. Of particular importance are reforms to the rural economy and political system that were intended to take place over the medium to long term but in many cases have not yet begun.
- Advocate for and devote aid programming to the gender focus and ethnic chapter of the peace accord, implementation of which is lagging.
- Expand support for the Attorney General's Office in an effort to lower rates of impunity for crimes against social leaders and ex-combatants.
- Drawing on experience in Bolivia and Peru, help Colombia craft a new path for coca crop substitution, which is vital to sparing poor farmers from involvement in the drug economy.

### Security Divergence

Colombia's present security challenges date to rapid changes in territorial control that started in 2017, when the FARC laid down its arms. The 2016 peace agreement had envisaged the state moving to establish control over former FARC bastions, but armed groups proved far swifter and nimbler along key trafficking routes and in far-flung regions. Without the FARC controlling lucrative markets, "the territory was left naked", as one social leader in Nariño put it. In a rush to capture illicit rackets, armed groups swept in, including the remaining leftist insurgency the National Liberation Army (ELN), so-called dissident groups initially formed from a small number of former FARC who resisted demobilisation, post-paramilitary outfits that trace their origins to right-wing groups that fought the FARC, and local criminal syndicates. The dissidents in particular are emblematic of this new phase in Colombian conflict. Rather than forming one organised insurgency, the dissidents comprise dozens of separate local fronts largely focused on controlling area businesses, from coca to marijuana to

illegal mining, and routes for illicit goods. Local frustration over the government's failure to meet pledges it made in the peace accord to jump-start rural development, sponsor programs for coca substitution and protect former FARC combatants have facilitated the dissidents' co-optation of certain communities.

Since the start of the pandemic, violent groups have moved toward exerting full-fledged control of the regions where they operate. Armed organisations have absorbed more recruits, consolidated their influence with locals and clashed with rivals. Vulnerable communities have few resources to resist them. The Gulf Clan, a post-paramilitary group, used COVID-19 lockdowns to intimidate civilians into staying out of its way while swallowing up its most significant rival, the Caparros. After a brief humanitarian ceasefire in early 2020, the ELN has similarly used violence to impose quarantines and movement restrictions, upped its asymmetrical attacks on state security forces, and spread into areas where it had not had a significant presence before. Two major dissident factions – one under the leadership of Gentil Duarte and Iván Mordisco and another calling itself the Segunda Marquetalia – have begun consolidating dispersed fronts within loose rival alliances. Leaders of the former never entered the peace process and consider themselves the only remaining true expression of the FARC, while the latter emerged after chief negotiator Iván Márquez and Jesús Santrich announced they had taken up arms again in August 2019. The two umbrella groups confront each other as mortal enemies when they meet.

Regions caught in the middle of disputes between armed outfits, or between armed outfits and the military, continue to see the highest levels of visible violence. In Nariño and Cauca on the Pacific coast, the two rival dissident alliances seek to displace one another, while the ELN tries to stay afloat and safeguard its coca and mining enclaves. The military has carried out operations against all three. The ELN and Gulf Clan engage in regular violent clashes in places such as Bajo Baudó and San Juan in the region of Chocó, often in the midst of civilians. Along riverine trafficking routes in Putumayo near the border with Ecuador, post-paramilitary groups, as well as bands connected to the two main dissident strands, are all competing for control.

Other parts of the country that appear quiet may in fact be under the largely invisible but highly coercive rule of a single armed group. The Gulf Clan runs the show in southern Córdoba, regularly threatening local authorities and social leaders, and demanding extortion fees from nearly all merchants. In southern Guaviare, dissidents allied with Gentil Duarte issue rulebooks for local communities to live by. All these groups capitalise on the economic ruin caused by the pandemic and fading confidence in the government's willingness to implement the rural reforms contemplated by the peace accord. They urge discouraged and often desperate farmers to plant coca, resulting in consistently rising rates of cultivation nationwide.

## Patterns of Violence

The many thousands of Colombians living in conflict-affected zones report that their situation is as bad as it has been at any point in the last decade – and, in some cases, worse. In seeking to control the illicit economy, armed groups need to control land where coca is grown, gold is mined and trafficking routes pass. To do so, they must also control people, which they do through a repertoire of coercive methods. Rising assassinations of local activists (commonly known as social leaders) who have spoken out against armed groups and their practices are one stark example of disciplinary violence. Threatening or killing a community figure often has the effect of silencing an entire sector of the population. Outspoken female leaders are particularly vulnerable. They report receiving threats not only to themselves but also to their children and extended family members. They say they are also targeted for sexual violence.

Armed groups learned perverse lessons from the pandemic that continue to shape their behaviour. After eighteen months of school closures, they have developed a wealth of strategies for luring children and youth to their ranks, from organising sports and social clubs to throwing parties to running online video game competitions. Their overwhelming success in recruiting minors has shattered social cohesion in some communities. Families in areas with a notable dissident and post-paramilitary group presence say it is nearly impossible to avoid some form of capture by these networks; once inside, children find it hard to escape. Families who report cases of recruitment or approach the group directly for help can face violent reprisal and social ostracism. "Before, mothers published on social media when someone was recruited, saying they were missing, but now they are quiet", said one female indigenous authority in Cauca.

Armed groups have also imposed confinement well beyond the scope of COVID-19 quarantines as a means of control. With the exception of the ELN and some dissident fronts, most armed groups are neither uniformed nor based in camps, rendering it difficult even for their own members to know who belongs. Confinement is a way to clarify who is a member and to ensure that rivals do not enter an area. Between January and October 2021, well over 50,000 people were subject to confinement imposed by armed groups, ranging from curfews to blanket movement restrictions. According to the UN Refugee Agency, almost all of the victims were from vulnerable Indigenous or Afro-Colombian communities. Throughout the summer and autumn, farmers in Nariño's Telembí Triangle reported

how competing dissident factions planted landmines at the exits of their rural neighbourhoods, warned anyone who considered fleeing that they would not be allowed to return, and in extreme cases prevented residents from leaving their homes even to tend crops. Humanitarian agencies across Colombia have scrambled to respond to this invisible and growing crisis, at times struggling to understand who they should even approach to secure access. Beyond posing a threat to communities' ability to maintain food supplies and security, forced isolation of these areas often deprives children of access to school and health care.

These conditions are likely to worsen in the months ahead both because the government does not yet appear to have a compelling strategy to address the latest manifestations of violence, and because electoral campaigning in 2022 and 2023 will dampen any immediate prospects for reform. Elections tend to increase violent competition for territorial control in Colombia – a matter of particular concern in the lead-up to local votes in 2023. Mayoral and town council races are vulnerable to manipulation – including through voter intimidation and violence – by both illegal and legal political interests that covet the influence local state officeholders have over who receives lucrative public contracts, who fills key regulatory posts and how funds are allocated. Meanwhile, Colombia's armed forces have struggled to adapt to the changing configuration of conflict. Their insistence on tactics used to combat the former FARC insurgency – captures, coca eradication and strategic checkpoints – do little to weaken today's more convoluted webs of criminality or to protect the vulnerable communities forced to live within them.

Parts of the 2016 peace accord that were meant to short-circuit the illicit economy have stalled. The failure of a coca crop substitution program stands out as especially problematic. Some 100,000 small-hold cultivators voluntarily ripped their crops out of the ground in 2017 and 2018; they have yet to receive promised support for a new livelihood. Four years later, many have reluctantly started replanting coca, faced with the imperative of putting food on the table and, in many cases, compelled to do so under orders from an armed group. Programs supporting rural development that would render legal crops more competitive have moved far too slowly to arrest the strides of the illegal economy. Meanwhile, mechanisms to ensure that these and other aspects of the accord include and respect the autonomy of ethnic communities remain underfunded and peripheral to the policymaking process. A promise to prioritise gender (taking into account women's particular needs to ensure participation and protection) in program design and policy has today evolved into little more than a box-checking exercise to ensure female attendance at meetings.

## What the EU Can Do

The EU and its member states are in the unusual position of enjoying high levels of trust in the Colombian government, civil society and conflict-affected communities. A memorandum of understanding recently signed by Bogotá and Brussels testifies to the strength of the EU-Colombia relationship. The EU has also been a key donor to the peace process, and has been especially supportive of disarmament and efforts to demobilise and reintegrate former FARC members in civilian life. It has also been among the few donors to give priority to meeting the needs of female ex-combatants, whose projects can require different types of technical and logistical support given their specific requirements, such as child care.

Still, the critically important effort to implement the 2016 accords has been undercut by the failure to deliver on reforms necessary to give communities economic hope and the ability to engage in the nation's political life. In the run-up to elections, the EU can signal its priorities to useful effect, making clear that international donors continue to insist upon the complete implementation of the peace accord, including politically difficult rural and land reforms that have so far languished, some in congress and others in rollout, often for lack of political will. The Special High-Level Mechanism for Ethnic Peoples – which is meant to ensure that the constitutional rights and prerogatives of Indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombians, including territorial autonomy, are respected in implementation of the peace agreement – is another example: the body lacks sufficient funding, and has not been included in planning processes linked to the accord's implementation.

The EU's support for the Attorney General's Office has been essential to its efforts to strengthen investigations of crimes against social leaders and former FARC combatants, the two waves of assassinations that have claimed around 700 lives since the peace accord and have been central to armed groups' attempts to establish social and territorial control. So long as impunity remains the norm for perpetrators of violent crime in the countryside, the EU should continue and expand this support.

Finally, the EU remains one of the few international bodies that could credibly help the Colombian government find a new route toward coca crop substitution, based on previous experience in Bolivia and Peru. The peace accord legally prioritises substitution before forced eradication, a confrontational strategy that tends to put the brunt of counter-narcotics efforts on impoverished farmers and has been proven ineffective in reducing crops. Yet more effective, voluntary approaches

are underfunded and have never enjoyed broad political support. Colombia needs a new, more viable off-ramp for the thousands of families who grow coca out of necessity. The EU and member states should throw their weight behind efforts to build one.

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