

IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Colombia: The city of Tunja, including its security situation and the presence of armed and criminal groups; access to housing, employment, education, and health services (2020–February 2022) [COL200905.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

Encyclopaedia Britannica describes the city of Tunja, capital of the department of Boyacá in north-central Colombia and accessible through the Pan-American Highway, as a "communications, commercial, and agricultural centre" with gold and emerald mines nearby (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 12 Dec. 2013). Sources indicated that Tunja is also one of Colombia's university cities (Professor 1 Feb. 2022; Project Manager 31 Jan. 2022; Tunja 9 Feb. 2022).

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that out of the 130,629 [translation] "people in need" identified in the department of Boyacá, 646 of them are internally displaced persons (IDPs) that have yet to overcome their "vulnerability" (UN Apr. 2021, 16, 17). The same source indicates that, as of April 2020, 87 percent of small farmers interviewed across 20 Colombian departments were facing [translation] "multiple shocks" impacting production, with an increase in agricultural input prices being "one of the primary factors"; OCHA characterized the resulting situation in Córdoba, Boyacá and Tolima as "critical" (UN Apr. 2021, 92).

2. Security Situation

2.1 Ability to Travel to Tunja

Sources report that safe travel in the Pacific Coast region is challenging due to the presence of armed groups (ACAPS Dec. 2021, 12; Project Manager 31 Jan. 2022). According to ACAPS, an "independent information provider" that specializes in "humanitarian needs analysis and assessment" in crisis situations (ACAPS n.d.), humanitarian access in Colombia had "deteriorated" in the six months preceding December 2021, especially in the departments along the Pacific Coast and the borders with Venezuela, due to territorial disputes and "[t]he diversity and high number of armed groups" (ACAPS Dec. 2021, 12). The same source adds that armed groups and cartels have installed checkpoints "throughout" their territories, limiting access for humanitarian assistance and services (ACAPS Dec. 2021, 12). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a project manager for Colombia at Equilibrium Social Development Consulting (Equilibrium SDC), who also works as a consultant on migration issues in Colombia, stated that given the location of Boyacá close to the centre of the country, the ability to safely travel to Tunja depends on the location of departure, and that travel from the Pacific Coast as well as from the departments of Córdoba and Sucre [translation] "can be risky," due to the activities of organized armed groups in those regions (Project Manager 31 Jan. 2022).

Sources report that migrants from certain areas transit through Tunja on their way to larger cities (Caracol Radio 31 Jan. 2019; Professor 1 Feb. 2022) or other Latin American countries (Caracol Radio 31 Jan. 2019). In an interview with the Research Directorate, a professor at the Universidad Santo Tomás Tunja, who teaches local development, public administration and human rights and is also a

public order" and protecting human rights, indicated, without providing further details, that it is "feasible" for migrants from other regions, including both Pacific and Caribbean coasts, to reach Tunja (Tunja 9 Feb. 2022).

2.2 Prevalence of Violence and Crime

The Equilibrium SDC Project Manager stated that, [translation] "historically," the department of Boyacá, which has a predominantly rural population, has faced "security challenges," mainly due to the presence of guerilla groups (Project Manager 31 Jan. 2022). The same source noted that the number of attacks against civilians [translation] "has been decreasing" since the signing of the Havana Accord [2]; the security situation is now similar to that of other regions of Colombia, where "widespread" security problems occur as a result of "common crime" (Project Manager 31 Jan. 2022). However, Sabine Kurtenbach, a political scientist with a focus on peacebuilding and conflict transformation, and Andrés Rodas Vélez, an "[a]nthropologist and peace and conflict researcher" at Philipps-Universität Marburg, indicate in a chapter on case studies of conflict transformation in Colombia that Boyacá has "much lower" rates of violence than other Colombian departments (Kurtenbach and Vélez Aug. 2021, 70, 378, 379).

According to the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences (Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses, INMLCF), a public organization that oversees forensic services across Colombia (Colombia n.d.), there were 7 homicides in Tunja in 2019, a rate of 3.97 per 100,000 inhabitants (Colombia [2020]). The same source reports that in 2020 there were 8 cases of homicide in the city, a rate of 4.46 per 100,000 inhabitants (Colombia [2021a]). The Professor indicates that, unlike other areas in Boyacá and Colombia, Tunja is "peaceful" and that there is "not much" public violence (Professor 1 Feb. 2022). However, a research professor at a Bogotá university, interviewed for an article by the Colombian radio network Caracol Radio, cited preliminary INMLCF statistics as indicating that in 2021, there were 59 violent deaths in Tunja, the most of any Boyacá city (Caracol Radio 30 Jan. 2022). The Research Professor went on to state that Tunja had the highest number of homicides (9) and suicides (12) of any city in the department (Caracol Radio 30 Jan. 2022). However, the article also noted that violent deaths increased less in the department of Boyacá than in Colombia overall: 11.92 percent compared to 17.34 percent (Caracol Radio 30 Jan. 2022).

The representative of Tunja's Government Secretariat shared the following crime statistics from the Tunja Metropolitan Police for the period from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2021:

[translation]

Homicides: 9

Theft from Persons: 917

Theft from Residences: 167

Theft from Businesses: 247

Motorcycle Theft: 34

Vehicle Theft: 7

Domestic Violence: 1,407

Sex Crimes: 134

Personal Injuries: 745. (Tunja 9 Feb. 2022)

The Professor noted that "much" of Tunja's violence, including domestic and sexual violence, takes place in the private sphere (Professor 1 Feb. 2022). The same source added that support services for survivors of domestic and sexual violence are "only just starting" to be available in Tunja (Professor 1 Feb. 2022). The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Colombia, in an assessment of the human rights situation in Colombia during the national strike that began 28 April

around environmental issues; interviewees report that gas and oil pipelines in the region are causing water supply issues and pose a risk of explosions (Kurtenbach and Vélez Aug. 2021, 71).

3. Presence of Armed and Criminal Groups

3.1 Tunja

Information on the presence of armed and criminal groups in Tunja was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources indicated that armed and criminal groups are not present in Tunja (Professor 1 Feb. 2022; Tunja 9 Feb. 2022). According to the Professor, Tunja and the municipalities surrounding it in central Boyacá are "peaceful" and armed groups are not a concern (Professor 1 Feb. 2022). Similarly, the representative of Tunja's Government Secretariat stated that no armed groups have been reported by either police or army authorities in either urban or rural areas of Tunja (Tunja 9 Feb. 2022). However, a report by the Institute for Peace and Development Studies (Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz, Indepaz), an NGO that promotes peacebuilding in Colombia (Indepaz n.d.), states, without providing further details, that the presence of the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, ELN) in Tunja is [translation] "high" and that "some type of action" undertaken by the group was recorded in the city in 2018, 2019, and 2020 (Indepaz Feb. 2020, 28, 54).

3.2 Boyacá

OCHA reports that armed groups do not have an [translation] "active presence" or have a "low level of influence or activity" in the department of Boyacá (UN Apr. 2021, 69). Kurtenbach and Rodas Vélez indicate that while violence between criminal groups increased "significantly" during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in January to April 2020 in the departments studied, namely La Guajira, Valle del Cauca, Cauca, Meta, and Norte de Santander, there was no marked change in the rate of violence in Boyacá (Kurtenbach and Rodas Vélez Aug. 2021, 70).

However, other sources report that organized criminal groups are present in northern Boyacá (FIP 24 May 2020, 5; Professor 1 Feb. 2022). The Ideas for Peace Foundation (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, FIP), an [translation] "independent think tank" established by Colombian entrepreneurs to contribute to "stable and lasting peace" in Colombia (FIP n.d.), in their report on armed conflict in Colombia during the first trimester of 2020, includes northern Boyacá on a list of regions in which there is [translation] "evidence" of increased armed confrontation and violence prompted by criminal groups moving into the area (FIP 24 May 2020, 5). The FIP adds that Arauca-based [translation] "factions" of the ELN armed group have expanded into the northern region of Boyacá, murdering social and environmental leaders and issuing threats against public officials (FIP 24 May 2020, 12). The Indepaz report notes that there are 20 municipalities in Boyacá where ELN activities take place, five of which experience [translation] "recurring activity related to disputes or consolidation" (Indepaz Feb. 2020, 25–26). The same source further indicates that the ELN [translation] "may have consolidat[ed]" its hold on the department of Boyacá, where there are no "recen[t] threats" to its "control and interests" and states that the ELN's activities are "growing" in the eastern part of Boyacá "towards" the municipalities of Cubará, Güicán, el Cocuy, Chita, Labranzagrande and Pajarito (Indepaz Feb. 2020, 21, 43).

The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020* indicates that according to security forces, criminal groups such as the ELN and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC) dissidents are involved in "illegal mining of gold, coal, coltan, nickel, copper, and other minerals," and that Boyacá was one of five departments in which these illegal mining operations were "particularly common" (US 30 Mar. 2021, 48).

Sources indicate that at least one social leader was assassinated in Boyacá in 2020 (FIP 24 May 2020, 17; SOMOS [2021]). Indepaz states that in 2020, inhabitants in the municipality of El Cocuy, [located in the northeast of the department], reported being targets of forced displacement and [translation] "targeted killings" at the hands of the ELN (Indepaz Feb. 2020, 43). The We Are Defenders Program (Programa Somos Defensores, SOMOS), a program for protecting human rights defenders in Colombia run by three Colombian NGOs [3] (Somos Defensores n.d.), recorded one murder of a community leader between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2021; in February 2020, the Treasurer

that the city [translation] "offers a range of services" that are based on citizens' needs (Tunja 9 Feb. 2022). However, the Professor stated that the ability to access to services has been limited by the high demand on them since Venezuelan migrants began arriving in 2018 (Professor 1 Feb. 2022). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4.1 Access to Housing

The information in the following paragraph was provided by the Professor:

Access to housing in Tunja is "very difficult" for newcomers and among the more "problematic" issues facing migrants to Tunja. "Cultural barriers" contribute to local residents not being "open" to those from a different ethnic group or nationality. Additionally, "most of the time" new arrivals to Tunja need to know a local person to help them successfully access housing. For example, there have been newspaper advertisements for rental units that specify "no Venezuelans." Single women "especially" face barriers to accessing housing in Tunja, because "many" property owners refuse to rent their units to them as they perceive them to be "potential future burdens" since they could become pregnant (Professor 1 Feb. 2022). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources indicate that the Universidad de Santo Tomás Tunja has a legal clinic that provides assistance to Venezuelan migrants, including legal aid (Professor 1 Feb. 2022; Universidad Santo Tomás – Seccional Tunja 23 Aug. 2021) to petition for their rights to access services in the city, including the right to housing (Professor 1 Feb. 2022). In 2019, Caracol Radio reported that migrants from Venezuela stopping in Tunja were forced to take shelter in old, abandoned houses in order to avoid the [translation] "extreme cold of Tunja" (Caracol Radio 31 Jan. 2019).

4.2 Access to Employment

According to data from the Large Integrated Household Survey (Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares, GEIH) [4] conducted by Colombia's National Administrative Department of Statistics (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, DANE), the unemployment rate in Tunja was 18.6 percent in May-July 2021; the average for all 23 cities studied was 16.4 percent (Colombia 31 Aug. 2021, 22). According to the Professor, unemployment is high in Tunja, and employment is "difficult to access" for migrants and locals alike, although newcomers who are "skilled workers" may have less difficulty (Professor 1 Feb. 2022). The same source stated that the city's most important employers are the municipality and the university; there is a "small" agricultural industry and "some activity" in tourism, but "formal private enterprise" is "very limited" (Professor 1 Feb. 2022). According to GEIH statistics from DANE, the rate of informal employment in Tunja was 44.4 percent in the period between May and July 2021, while the average among all cities studied was 48.1 percent (Colombia 10 Sept. 2021, 3, 5). The Professor noted that since the arrival of Venezuelan migrants, the city's informal labour sector has grown (Professor 1 Feb. 2022).

El Diario, a Spanish-language newspaper based in Boyacá (*El Diario* n.d.), reports that the local authorities have made "various efforts" to reinvigorate Tunja's economy and address unemployment (*El Diario* 31 Aug. 2021). The Professor similarly indicated that government programs exist to reduce unemployment in Tunja and help people obtain jobs (Professor 1 Feb. 2022). However, the same source added that these government programs are "not effective" (Professor 1 Feb. 2022). According to the Equilibrium SDC Project Manager, Boyacá's tourism industry has been expanding, making Tunja a [translation] "sort of waystation" and creating jobs in the service industry; the municipal infrastructure development has also increased demand for construction workers, security guards, and heavy equipment operators (Project Manager 31 Jan. 2022). DANE data indicates that the unemployment rate in Tunja in May-July 2021 was down 6.7 percent from the same period in 2020 (25.3 percent to 18.6 percent), although the average unemployment rate for all cities studied in the GEIH dropped 8.6 percent in that time (25.0 percent to 16.4 percent) (Colombia 31 Aug. 2021, 22).

4.3 Access to Education

Sources indicated that education is "easy" to access in Tunja (Professor 1 Feb. 2022) or that the city's infrastructure for primary and secondary education is [translation] "ample and sufficient" (Project Manager 31 Jan. 2022). According to the Professor, when more Venezuelans began arriving in Tunja

Entities (Entidades Promotoras de Salud, EPS) [5], although their services are [translation] "not known for their speed" (Project Manager 31 Jan. 2022). The Professor noted that while health services are "legally guaranteed" in public hospitals in Colombia and newcomers to Tunja can expect to receive emergency health services, it is "very difficult" to access anything beyond basic healthcare; for example, a pregnant woman will be able to access service when in labour but will have significant difficulty accessing prenatal care (Professor 1 Feb. 2022). The same source indicated that "many" have had to resort to legal complaints to enforce their right to healthcare (Professor 1 Feb. 2022). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources report that in the context of the protests that began 28 April 2021 [6], accessing health services in Boyacá became more challenging (ACAPS July 2021, 14; UN Dec. 2021, para. 169). Without providing further details, the OHCHR indicates, according to data from Colombia's Ministry of Defense, that access to health services and medical missions in the department of Boyacá, among several other departments, was impacted by the use of [translation] "force and violence" by security forces against healthcare workers and volunteers over the course of their response to the 28 April 2021 national strike (UN Dec. 2021, para. 169). In a report published by the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social), as of 2 June 2021, 256 attacks against medical missions occurred in the context of social protests taking place across the country [since April 2021], with Boyacá accounting for 5 of the cases (Colombia 2 June 2021). According to ACAPS, road blockades slowed down the transportation of medicine and resulted in shortages of "basic goods" in some areas, including in the department of Boyacá (ACAPS July 2021, 14).

The Professor noted that Tunja has a "high rate" of suicide (Professor 1 Feb. 2022). According to the INMLCF, the number of cases of suicide reported in Tunja was 14 in 2020, a rate of 8.37 per 100,000 inhabitants (Colombia [2021b]). In comparison, the INMLCF reports an overall suicide rate for Colombia of 5.21 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2020 (Colombia [2021b]). Siete Días, a daily online newspaper covering the Boyacá region (Siete Días n.d.), reported in August 2021 that a new online platform called 40 Segundos (40 Seconds) was launched by the city's Social Administrator (Gestora Social) and the Social Protection Secretariat (Secretaría de Protección Social) to provide access to mental health guidance and professional support through social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp (Siete Días 19 Aug. 2021). Information on the rate of usage and effectiveness of this measure could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The Observatory for Fundamental Rights (Observatorio de derechos fundamentales) was established jointly by the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Systems Engineering of the Universidad Santo Tomás in Tunja (Universidad Santo Tomás – Seccional Tunja 13 July 2020).

[2] The Havana Accord was an agreement reached between the Colombian government and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC) guerillas in 2016 following peace talks to end a 50-year war and allow the group to participate in the political process (CBC 23 Sept. 2016).

[3] The We Are Defenders Program (Programa Somos Defensores, SOMOS) is made up of the following human rights NGOs: Asociación MINGA, Benposta Nation of Children (Benposta Nación de Muchachos), and the Colombian Commission of Jurists (Comisión Colombiana de Juristas, CCJ) (SOMOS n.d.).

[4] The Great Integrated Household Survey (Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares, GEIH) is an ongoing national survey to gather data on Colombia's labour market and includes all 23 capital cities and metropolitan areas in Colombia, as well as San Andrés (Colombia 31 Aug. 2021, 2).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Assistant professor at a university in Colombia whose research focuses on gender and politics, state and local politics, and city governance in Colombia; Colombia – Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar; Corporación de Apoyo a Comunidades Populares; Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung en Colombia; Fundación Solidaridad y Compromiso; lawyer at a university in Colombia who specializes in administrative and labour law; lecturer at a university in the UK whose research focuses on gender, peacebuilding and rights for victims of conflict in Colombia; MSD Consulting; Open Society Foundations; post-doctoral fellow in an American institute whose research includes political violence, local peacebuilding, and social movements in Colombia; Première urgence internationale; Profamilia; professor and researcher at a university in Colombia whose research focuses on reconciliation, international law, and the judiciary in Colombia; professor at a university in Canada whose research focuses on historical memory and life after mass violence in Colombia; professor at a university in Colombia whose research focuses on public administration and governance in Colombia; Programa Somos Defensores; program director at a university in Colombia whose research focuses on the role of civil society and transitional justice in regions that experience armed conflicts in Colombia.

Internet sites, including: Al Jazeera; Amnesty International; Colombia – Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, Ministerio de Educación Nacional, Ministerio del Interior; Colombia Reports; Denmark – Danish Immigration Service; *El Espectador*; *El País*; *El Tiempo*; France – Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides; Fundación Paz y Reconciliación; Human Rights Watch; Infobae; International Crisis Group; Tunja – Alcaldía Mayor, Policía Metropolitana; UK – Home Office; UN – Refworld, UNHCR; Washington Office on Latin America.

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