



Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace"

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Preventing War. Shaping Peace.

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Principal Findings

What's new? President Gustavo Petro's government has embarked on a policy of "total peace", aiming to achieve sharp reductions in lethal violence. The administration says it will first work to pen humanitarian agreements with an array of armed and criminal groups while shifting the focus of military strategy to protection of civilians.

Why does it matter? Colombia's conflicts with armed and criminal groups have intensified as these organisations boost their power and illicit revenue by controlling rural populations that lack the state's protection. Groups could take advantage of the "total peace" initiative to tighten their grip unless the state clamps down on their insidious methods.

What should be done? Beyond working to stop torture, disappearances and lethal violence against civilians, Bogotá should insist that armed groups end forms of coercion such as child recruitment, sexual and gender-based violence, and movement restrictions. State bodies and the military should strengthen mechanisms to protect civilians in rural areas.

Executive Summary

Aiming to turn the page on decades of bloodshed, the new Colombian government is working toward what it dubs “total peace”. Its campaign to end the conflicts that have wracked the country comes at a critical moment, with insurgent and armed criminal groups driving a spike in killings and a surge in intimidation in many rural areas. President Gustavo Petro is seeking to tamp down lethal violence through dialogue, unlike his predecessor, Iván Duque, who relied on military force to subdue armed groups. In addition to pursuing ceasefires, Petro’s government says its priority is to forge humanitarian agreements with these outfits with a view to prohibiting killings, torture and disappearances. While laudable in many ways, this new approach is also risky; it could strengthen the armed groups unless it also addresses forms of violence they use to prey upon vulnerable communities such as child recruitment, sexual violence and movement restrictions. Bogotá should seek to broaden the agreements accordingly, while relying on monitoring, law enforcement and, if warranted, the military to ensure compliance.

Elected in 2022 with the help of overwhelming majorities in many of the areas hardest hit by conflict, Petro has resolved to curb violence throughout the Colombian countryside, especially its most remote locales. 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. Although the 2016 accord between the state and the largest left-wing insurgency, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), initially ushered in a reduction in conflict, fighting has ticked back up again in recent years as implementation of the accord faltered while existing outfits expanded and new factions emerged. The main groups vying for control of rural settlements – including the National Liberal Army (ELN), two rival splinter or “dissident” groups composed of reconstituted FARC remnants, the Gulf Clan and smaller illicit bands – are now the focus of government efforts to pen deals aimed at halting the hostilities.

The government has obtained congressional authorisation to open talks with armed and criminal groups. It has reached a ceasefire with one, and it has resumed negotiations with the ELN. Officials’ immediate goal is to cut down the incidence of three violent crimes – murder, torture and disappearances. To motivate groups to strike the necessary bargains, the government is floating the possibility of negotiated settlements, judicial leniency, economic incentives and scaled-back military operations. There is a danger, however, that armed groups could take advantage of the incentives offered to them to engage in talks and seek to consolidate their power. If the state takes no steps to loosen their grip on rural communities, ceasefires and other concessions could end up strengthening their hold, intensifying violence in communities that are home to Colombia’s most vulnerable citizens.

The security and humanitarian stakes could hardly be higher. Decades of state and military offensives have in effect pushed the front lines of Colombia’s conflict to the most peripheral parts of the country, inhabited by some of the country’s least protected people – including Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities, particularly along the Pacific coast and in border areas. At the same time, the break-up of larger armed and criminal groups has given rise to a multitude of local operations

seeking control of illicit businesses and trafficking routes. Unlike the former FARC or the drug trafficking cartels of the last century, these groups are as a rule neither able to nor interested in confronting state forces in battle. Instead, they have become expert in forcing communities into compliance through a sophisticated mixture of enticements, handouts, threats and punishments.

Colombia's most isolated and unprotected citizens, including rural women and children, are among the primary victims. 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. So, too, have draconian movement restrictions, including forced confinement. Especially hard hit are Afro-Colombians, who make up between 10 to 20 per cent of the population but 53 per cent of all those displaced by violence in 2022. Indigenous people, who compose just under 5 per cent of the country's inhabitants, account for more than half of those forcibly confined in their homes or neighbourhoods.

The first months of the total peace policy have seen a slower tempo of hostilities involving these 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. This state of affairs could worsen. Some groups may lack the incentive to engage in good-faith talks. Even those that enter into agreements may intend to capitalise on ceasefires to expand their influence. Avoiding this outcome will require the state to make crystal clear that these forms of violence are unacceptable. One place to insist is in the agreements it reaches. The government should remain adamant that armed groups end lethal violence, disappearances and torture as part of the humanitarian arrangements that it is trying to fashion. But it should also demand an end to other forms of coercive violence when concluding these accords. Provisions for halting recruitment of children, movement restrictions and sexual violence should be part of any deal the state strikes with armed groups.

At the same time, authorities should strive to align security strategy with the dialogue process and make clear to the military what its role should be. The armed forces should keep moving away from offensive operations toward protecting civilians, gradually severing the links between armed actors and the vulnerable communities they abuse. The defence ministry should consider how the military will deal with outfits that either decline to enter into the desired humanitarian arrangements or fail to comply with them. Some combination of law enforcement pressure and (particularly when there is a gross breach of an agreement) military action will be needed. Clear instructions should be given to that effect. Furthermore, the Colombian state should press ahead with rolling out the 2016 peace accord, above all its commitments on rural development and coca substitution. With foreign technical and financial assistance, civilian state bodies should also redouble their efforts to counter recruitment and reduce sexual violence in far-flung rural areas.

Talks with Colombia's violent outfits are the best place to begin the search to end the country's conflicts. But until the people with the least power feel relief from the armed groups' asphyxiating grip, the country's peace will be far from total.

Bogotá/Brussels/Washington, 24 February 2023

Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace"

I. Introduction

President Gustavo Petro has spearheaded a sharp turn in the way Colombia handles its armed conflicts. Since taking office in August, Petro has vowed to forge "total peace" with all armed and criminal groups. Although the eventual goal of ending decades of combat with and among the groups is striking in its ambition, the government's initial objectives and methods are intended to be pragmatic. In practice, total peace means embarking on dialogue with illegal outfits to "safeguard lives", while revamping the country's security strategy to make protection of civilians the priority.¹ While the long-term aim is to disarm or dismantle these groups, the immediate goal is to reduce the harm caused by them, specifically in the form of homicides, forced disappearances and torture.² Petro's administration has made clear, in a deeply realist recognition of these groups' coercive hold on much of rural Colombia, that its main request is that they stop killing.³

After making a series of approaches to armed groups, on 31 December 2022, the government announced six-month ceasefires with six organisations as a means of paving the way to talks. All but one of these ceasefires is now on hold due to either legal or political challenges.⁴ But the government appears committed to finding a way to make its strategy work, including through seeking new legislation that would lay out favourable judicial terms for demobilised criminals.⁵

The total peace policy begins with the premise that large swathes of the country, home to nearly 15 per cent of the population, are not effectively administered by the

¹ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, October 2022.

² Crisis Group interviews, senior Petro administration official, Bogotá, October 2022; Petro administration official, Bogotá, February 2023. Petro has more recently suggested that the military and judicial system should continue to target groups that engage in illicit activities. "Petro sobre cese: 'Grupo que esté 'traqueteando', grupo que será perseguido'", *El Tiempo*, 8 February 2023.

³ "Danilo Rueda, comisionado de Paz: 'Estamos en una etapa de acercamientos, todavía no hay una mesa de conversación'", *Cambio*, 16 January 2023.

⁴ On 13 January, the attorney general called into question the legality of negotiations, and therefore ceasefires, with criminal groups. As a result, by mid-February only one ceasefire was in place, with a faction known as the FARC-EP. "El fiscal general se mantiene firme: 'No pasaré a la historia como quien quitó las órdenes de captura a criminales'", *Semana*, 18 January 2023.

⁵ On 15 February, the government presented a draft law aimed at demobilising members of criminal groups, prescribing a mix of jail time and restorative justice for those who meet conditions such as giving authorities information about the organisations to which they belonged. Anyone who identifies a group's assets – whether cash, properties or other items – would be able keep up to 6 per cent of the value of these ill-gotten gains (which would be made legal). "Proyecto de Ley No 'Por la cual se establecen mecanismos de sujeción a la justicia ordinaria, garantías de no repetición y desmantelamiento de estructuras armadas organizadas de crimen de alto impacto y se dictan otras disposiciones'", 15 February 2023.

state, but subsist instead under the sway of armed and criminal groups.⁶ These outfits wield not just territorial but also social and economic control over residents, setting rules, meting out a form of justice and providing livelihoods. According to government officials, curbing the high rates of violence witnessed in recent years will require negotiating with the parties that hold this de facto dominion.⁷ While critics chafe at the notion that the government might end up cutting deals with violent groups, officials and local activists insist the policy is simply a level-headed response to the balance of power in many rural areas. 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".⁸

There is, however, a risk that civilians in certain places may wind up being even more vulnerable to certain forms of violence than they are today. While a reduction in killings, disappearances and torture can only be welcome, if the government focuses on these crimes to the exclusion of other more insidious forms of violence – such as child recruitment, sexual and gender-based violence, and forced confinement – it may allow the armed groups to ratchet up their predation. The danger is greatest for the people who have the least access to state services and protection, including rural ethnic communities; women and children are especially exposed.

Against this backdrop, this report looks both at the total peace agenda and the ways in which it could – absent an updated approach – allow armed and criminal groups to expand their reach over certain parts of Colombia. It explores the mechanisms by which these groups assert control over communities, focusing in particular on the three categories of violence identified above (child recruitment, sexual and gender-based violence, and forced confinement). It also offers recommendations for how the government might mitigate the risk that predation increases as a consequence of new policies being put into place. The report is based on field research in Arauca, northern Cauca, southern Córdoba, Nariño, Soacha, Cartagena and Bogotá, as well as extensive previous work on rural insecurity. Crisis Group conducted over 90 interviews, including with victims, young people, women, community leaders, military and government officials, humanitarian organisation staff and diplomats between September 2022 and February 2023.

⁶ Internal humanitarian estimate shared with Crisis Group, July 2022.

⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior Petro administration official, Bogotá, October 2022.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Quibdó, January 2022. Provinces are called departments in Colombia.

II. The Push for "Total Peace"

The need to address Colombia's severe humanitarian crisis and persistent violence was a recurrent theme of Petro's 2022 election campaign. Petro drummed home the flaws in the security policy of the outgoing conservative government of President Iván Duque – which he said relied on the excessive and counterproductive use of military force. By contrast, Petro pledged to pursue a "pact for life", referring to the need to address basic rural economic concerns, make up for longstanding state abandonment of the countryside and restart negotiations with the National Liberation Army (ELN), the country's last leftist guerrillas.⁹ Support for Petro, as well as turnout, touched its highest levels in conflict zones.¹⁰

For proponents of the government's new policy, baptised "total peace" soon after Petro's electoral victory, the main route forward is through talks with all the major violent groups inflicting harm in Colombia. As evidence, officials in Petro's administration point to the 2016 peace agreement with the largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). In its aftermath, various illegal outfits fought to grab the territories the FARC had vacated. Petro's team says history shows it is not possible to end a conflict featuring competing armed groups by demobilising just one of them. Since most of the fighting today is among groups vying for resources and territory (rather than between specific groups and the state), officials maintain that removing one group from the battlefield can have the unintended effect of empowering the others.¹¹ They contend that groups are reluctant to cut individual deals with the state, lest they surrender turf to a rival. Thus, Petro's administration argues, it is crucial to strike a bargain with all the significant groups in the battlespace – as many as several dozen – in order for peace to hold.

Consistent with this emphasis on inclusion, in the first weeks and months after Petro took office in August 2022, the administration conveyed an open invitation to dialogue to all armed and criminal organisations. At least 22 groups expressed interest.¹² Petro also floated the idea of a multilateral ceasefire that would pause all clashes and, in effect, freeze the front lines of conflict in order to convene separate talks with each group.¹³ 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.¹⁴

⁹ See tweet by Gustavo Petro, @petrogustavo, president of Colombia, 6:31am, 7 May 2022.

¹⁰ Javier Duque, "¿Por qué ganó Petro?", *Razón Pública*, 19 June 2022.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, senior administration official, Bogotá, September 2022.

¹² "22 Grupos armados buscan sumarse a la paz total", Indepaz, 16 September 2022; "Segunda Marquetalia' de Iván Márquez desescalaría acciones para iniciar diálogos", *El Colombiano*, 13 December 2022; Remarks by Alfonso Prada, press conference, Interior Ministry, 4 January 2023.

¹³ "Petro plantea cese al fuego multilateral con grupos armados", Associated Press, 22 September 2022.

¹⁴ "Toda Colombia con Buenaventura: potencia de la vida en Paz Total", press release, Colombian Presidency, 3 December 2022. The government also offered to mediate among rival groups who are clashing for control in particular areas. Elizabeth Dickinson, "Arauca: La Guerra y la Paz Total", *Razón Pública*, 20 November 2022.

At the same time as it was mooted a broad ceasefire, the Petro administration sought legislative authority to hold talks with armed groups. On 3 November, Colombia's Congress passed a law that sets parameters for such talks.¹⁵ Under the law, the government can hold negotiations only with groups that are still pressing political demands upon the state; as a practical matter, this provision means that the government is empowered to make deals with the ELN and a single FARC dissident faction calling itself FARC-EP, which is still in arms because its leadership never signed the 2016 agreement.

On the other hand, for groups designated by the law as high-impact criminal structures, the government can use talks only to seek their demobilisation and voluntary submission to the judicial system, though the details here are not yet final.¹⁶ This designation applies to the Gulf Clan, Colombia's most important narco-trafficking network, and FARC dissidents known as the Segunda Marquetalia, whose leaders, including Iván Marquez, the former chief negotiator of the 2016 agreement, signed the deal and then abandoned the peace process.¹⁷

Resolved to launch its plans for talks quickly, the government restarted formal negotiations with the ELN in Caracas on 21 November.¹⁸ A second round is now under way in Mexico.¹⁹ Both sides are working from an agenda agreed to in 2016, during the last round of negotiations.²⁰

Officials have also held exploratory meetings with several other groups.²¹ Although it has been operating with limited resources and staff, the government says it is in contact with the FARC-EP, Segunda Marquetalia, Gulf Clan and Self-Defence Forces of Sierra Nevada (another organisation deemed criminal), as well as criminals in major cities such as Medellín, Buenaventura, Barranquilla and Quibdó, among others. While the military estimates that there are roughly 18,000 combatants serving as

¹⁵ Law 2272 of 2022, signed by President Petro into law on 4 November 2022.

¹⁶ The state's National Security Council is responsible for classification of armed groups in Colombia since 2016. "Directiva Permanente No. 15 de 22 de abril 2016", Colombian Defence Minister, 2016. In order to create preferential or differentiated terms of justice for these groups, the government will be required to pass a new law in Congress, the draft of which it presented on 15 February. Under current legal procedures, armed group members can individually demobilise and receive lighter sentences in exchange for providing intelligence and other information about their former group. There is no preferential system for an entire criminal group wishing to lay down arms, however.

¹⁷ This distinction is a longstanding feature of Colombia's conflict, codified in a series of laws and Constitutional Court decisions. Amnesties and negotiations are permitted for groups that have carried out political crimes, committed with the aim of achieving political change, but not for common crimes that are undertaken solely for profit or other motives. Thus, drug trafficking is only eligible for special judicial treatment when it is undertaken entirely to support a rebellion and not for personal gain. See, for example, "El narcotráfico como delito político: ¿desatino o condición para el posconflicto?", *Razon Pública*, 25 September 2017; and "Narcotráfico y delito político", *Dejusticia*, 12 December 2014.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Dickinson, "Colombia's Last Guerrillas Take First Step Toward 'Total Peace'", *Crisis Group Commentary*, 23 November 2022.

¹⁹ "El Gobierno de Colombia y el ELN llegan a México con la urgencia de concretar el alto al fuego que persigue Petro", *El País*, 13 February 2023.

²⁰ "Acuerdo de diálogos para la paz de Colombia entre el gobierno nacional y el Ejército de Liberación Nacional", March 2016. These items include community participation, democratic and economic reform, rural transformation, attention to victims, and an end to conflict.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, people with knowledge of meetings, September and December 2022, January 2023.

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, the real total may be as much as 36,000.²²

Initial reports from meetings with various groups point to a range of demands.²³ Members of the FARC-EP have suggested a role for themselves in safeguarding national parks where they maintain bases, for example. Criminal groups are likely to seek leniency from the courts and economic concessions, perhaps along the lines of the government's draft law, which suggests a maximum jail term of eight years and the possibility of keeping a percentage of the groups' ill-gotten gains.²⁴ They might seek to retain some control of mines they now operate illegally or parts of their stakes in the palm oil and cattle businesses. Some close to the discussions say the Segunda Marquetalia could be offered the chance to rejoin the 2016 FARC agreement.

The political, legal and other complications of holding talks with armed and criminal groups have already frustrated some of the government's ambitions. For example, on 31 December, Petro announced a ceasefire aimed at creating a suitable climate for talks with the ELN, FARC-EP, Gulf Clan, Segunda Marquetalia and Self-Defence Forces of Sierra Nevada.²⁵ But three days later, the ELN denied it had agreed to a bilateral ceasefire, saying the government's announcement had created a "crisis" in negotiations.²⁶ At the time of publication, only one ceasefire protocol, involving the FARC-EP, had been signed.

Other obstacles have since emerged. In early January 2023, the government issued decrees authorising each ceasefire, and promised to lift arrest warrants and guarantee security for armed and criminal group members who participate in dialogue and ceasefire monitoring. On 13 January, however, the Attorney General's Office refused to lift warrants for members of criminal groups, in effect freezing plans for reaching deals with these organisations.²⁷ This internal discord (which the above-referenced draft law on criminal group demobilisation seeks in part to address) foreshadows one dilemma that looms as the government seeks to reach understandings with criminal groups. While senior government officials say they are willing to discuss socio-economic issues with these outfits, the Attorney General or the courts may interpret the law to impose more restrictive conditions on talks.

²² Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Bogotá, January 2023.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, people with knowledge of meetings, September and December 2022, January 2023.

²⁴ "Proyecto de Ley No 'Por la cual se establecen mecanismos de sujeción a la justicia ordinaria, garantías de no repetición y desmantelamiento de estructuras armadas organizadas de crimen de alto impacto y se dictan otras disposiciones'", op. cit. See footnote 5 for more on this draft law.

²⁵ Decrees 2656, 2657, 2658, 2659 and 2660 of 2022, Colombian Ministry of Defence, 31 December 2022.

²⁶ "El decreto presidencial sobre cese bilateral es una propuesta para ser examinada", ELN Central Command, 3 January 2023.

²⁷ "Oficio No. DVG-2000-13/01/2023", letter from Martha Janeth Mancero to Danilo Rueda Rodríguez, Attorney General's office, 13 January 2023. As of mid-January, the military was observing a ceasefire with the FARC-EP alone. The Attorney General in Colombia is independent of the elected government, and forms part of the institutions of legal control and oversight that also includes the Ombudsman, Inspector General and Financial Auditor.

This institutional dispute has raised the government's sense of urgency in seeking to pass the aforementioned draft law that could render judicial processes more flexible and provide more incentives for criminal groups and their members to lay down their weapons, subject to safeguards intended to ensure their demobilisation in fact proceeds in good faith.²⁸ Until that happens, the Attorney General has declared that the only discussion possible with criminals is about how they can be brought to justice through the ordinary courts.²⁹

²⁸ "La ley está prácticamente terminada: ¿cuándo radican el proyecto de sometimiento?", Caracol Radio, 12 February 2023.

²⁹ "Petro y Barbosa: los resultados del encuentro entre el presidente y el fiscal", *El Espectador*, 30 January 2023.

III. Community Control

A. Vulnerable Communities

The Petro government is seeking to engage in dialogue with armed and criminal groups at a time when these organisations no longer view the state as their main adversary in the fight for territorial control, but instead depend for their survival and growth on coercion of local populations. While military operations against these groups have had some effect, for example by seizing illicit shipments and keeping certain leaders on the run, armed and criminal groups have generally been able to establish their authority without directly attacking the state. Instead, they have focused on fighting rival outfits and subjugating communities so as to give themselves a safe base of operations.³⁰ Understanding these dynamics will be critical to the Petro government's ability to restore peace and protect civilians.

Deteriorating humanitarian conditions throughout rural Colombia in the years since the 2016 peace accord, particularly after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, are the most visible manifestation of the predatory control that armed groups increasingly assert over communities. Since the state signed the accord with the FARC guerrillas, a variety of armed and criminal groups including FARC dissidents, the ELN and criminal bands account for worsening abuses of civilians.³¹ Forced displacement has risen from just over 10,000 cases per year to more than 85,000 in 2022, while killings of social leaders have also touched new heights.³²

Most of this violence takes place amid clashes between rival groups. 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.³³ "The confrontations that are happening are between different structures", a senior military officer explained. "We do not have confrontations with them".³⁴ Social leaders are particularly vulnerable during such fighting. 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.³⁵

This violence disproportionately affects those who have the least access to legal safeguards and formal employment, largely because of political exclusion, historical

³⁰ These trends appear to have intensified in the Petro presidency's first trimester, which saw a reported 79 per cent increase in inter-armed group fighting compared with 2021. These same groups reduced their military actions against the state. "Petro y la estrategia de paz y seguridad: efectos y alertas", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, November 2022.

³¹ See, for example, Crisis Group Latin America Reports N°95, *Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia*, 27 September 2022; and N°63, *Colombia's Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace*, 19 October 2017; and Crisis Group Commentary, "Tackling Colombia's Next Generation in Arms", 27 January 2022.

³² "Entre enero y noviembre fueron asesinados 199 líderes, lideresas sociales y personas defensoras de derechos humanos", press release, State Ombudsman, 7 December 2022.

³³ "2021, el año con mayor número de víctimas de desplazamiento en 5 años", Consultoría para los derechos humanos y el desplazamiento, 21 December 2021.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, January 2023.

³⁵ "Why are rights activists targeted in Colombia?", *Latin American Advisor*, 6 February 2023.

legacies of racism and geographic remoteness from population centres.³⁶ Beginning in the late 19th century, agrarian colonisation pushed minority populations to the most remote parts of Colombian territory. Decades later, the military and police beat back armed groups from the country's mountainous economic heartland toward its extensive poorer periphery.³⁷ These shifts help explain why 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, "these populations tend to live in historically excluded territories" and suffered heightened discrimination during the armed conflict.³⁸ Economic need has also made these communities particularly vulnerable to adopting the illicit livelihoods that Colombia's armed groups offer.

Ethnic communities have also been targeted by armed groups as the collective landowners of roughly one third of Colombia's territory, including areas that are rich in minerals and feature abundant fluvial transport routes.³⁹ Armed groups have repeatedly sought to control these communities 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".⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ 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.⁴²

³⁶ The Indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations of the Pacific coast are among the outstanding examples of peoples affected by conflict and traditionally excluded from the provision of state services. Crisis Group Latin America Report N°76, *Calming the Restless Pacific: Violence and Crime on Colombia's Coast*, 8 August 2019. For more on the characteristics that render populations more vulnerable in conflict, see M. Marin-Ferrer, K. Poljanšek and L. Vernaccini, "Index for Risk Management – INFORM: Concept and Methodology", European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2017, p. 34; and Maha Ahmed and Franziska Gassmann, "Defining Vulnerability in Post-Conflict Environments", Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, 29 September 2009.

³⁷ See, for example, Dario Fajardo Montaña, "Fronteras, Colonizaciones, y Construcción Social del Espacio", in *Frontera y poblamiento: estudios de historia y antropología de Colombia y Ecuador* (Lima, 1996).

³⁸ "Francia Márquez: los temas de los que habló la vicepresidenta ante la ONU", *El Espectador*, 11 January 2023.

³⁹ Comments by Armando Wouriyu Valbuena, secretary of the Special High-Level Body on Ethnic Peoples of Colombia, before the UN Security Council, 11 January 2023.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, former Colombian official, January 2023.

⁴¹ "Sentencia T-236/17", Colombian Constitutional Court, 2017.

⁴² The clearest manifestation of this pattern is in Nariño, where eradication is prohibited throughout the department due to a 2021 court ruling protecting ethnic communities. Since then, the amount of coca grown in ethnic territories has doubled. "Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2021", UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), October 2022, p. 51. As of 2021, roughly one third of all coca in Colombia was located inside Indigenous or Afro-Colombian territories, where eradication is not permitted without community consent. "Colombia: Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2021", UNODC, October 2022, p. 17.

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.⁴³ Meanwhile, Afro-Colombians, who make up between 10 to 20 per cent of the population, represented 53 per cent of all forcibly displaced people in 2022.⁴⁴ At just under 5 per cent of the population, Indigenous communities account for more than half of those living in forced confinement.⁴⁵

B. *Enticements and Violence*

While armed outfits have sought to win the compliance of local communities through force and intimidation since the second half of the 20th century, those 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.⁴⁶ 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 time, they impose curfews, recruit, demand collaboration and forcefully silence anyone who would question their authority. With these groups aiming to entrench themselves in community life, an Afro-Colombian leader explained, "There is a conflict to win over the people, [going on] atop the people".⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸ 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 be-

⁴³ "Colombia Monitor Humanitario", UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 8 December 2022.

⁴⁴ Estimates of the Afro-Colombian population vary from just under 10 per cent, as recorded by the official statistics agency, to 20 per cent according to the UN refugee agency. "Población Negra, Afrocolombiana, Raizal y Palenquera", DANE, 6 November 2019; "Situación Colombia: Afrodescendientes", UN High Commissioner for Refugees, June 2012.

⁴⁵ Data from OCHA Sala Humanitaria, Annual Totals 2016-2022. These trends hold true for other indicators of violence. In 2022, Indigenous persons made up 20 per cent of the massacre victims and 22 per cent of the murdered social leaders. Afro-Colombians, meanwhile, accounted for more than half of all those displaced in 2022.

⁴⁶ Both guerrilla and paramilitary groups established extensive systems to control the provision of justice, mediate disputes, influence local officials and regulate the local economy. See Ana Arjona, "Civilian Resistance to Rebel Government", in Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir and Zachariah Mampilly (eds.), *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (New York, 2015), pp. 189-190.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Jamundí, October 2022.

⁴⁸ Historically, both the ELN and the former FARC sought to control the provision of justice as a means of cementing their status in society. See Ana Arjona, *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War* (Cambridge, 2018); and Luis Trejos, "Dominio territorial y control social en el conflicto armado colombiano", in César Barreira et al., *Conflictos sociales, luchas sociales y políticas de seguridad ciudadana* (Toluca, 2013), pp. 191-210.

cause the group's decisions are more likely to be respected".⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰

Armed groups have also sought to co-opt local elected authorities by offering their ostensible assistance to the communal action councils that are responsible for neighbourhood governance in non-ethnic communities. For example, the Gulf Clan uses its economic resources in southern Córdoba to provide what seem to be public goods, for example funding road improvements. But their help comes at a cost. As a former council president explained: "The councils today are all subordinated to the [armed group's] orders and respond to their interests, not those of the community. They say, 'Convene a meeting for me', and they give orders". In Putumayo, southern Colombia, a powerful FARC dissident front calling itself Comandos de la Frontera has obliged local councils to take censuses in order to ascertain who is who, push for more coca cultivation and hold meetings when required.⁵¹

A similar phenomenon affects ethnic governance bodies, such as Indigenous governors and Afro-Colombian community councils. As a local expert on ethnic group rights in Colombia told Crisis Group: "Armed groups have learned over many years that the easiest way to gain control is to penetrate these communities' own existing structures using arms and money. ... The persistent economic need in these communities renders them vulnerable to this sort of manipulation".⁵²

Behind all these groups' supposedly benevolent actions lurks the threat of violence, which is all the more potent because of the intelligence-gathering networks they construct within the community, including paying women and children to report on neighbours. In certain areas, the monitoring of public behaviour is explicit. 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.⁵³ 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.

According to community members, this climate of constant surveillance destroys interpersonal trust and forces people to acquiesce to the armed group's authority.⁵⁴ A military officer monitoring these networks explained that "any kid on a motorcycle or bike could be part of their network".⁵⁵ Few dare to report crimes to state authorities, or to resist the armed bands' edicts, knowing that their own family members or neighbours might inform the group.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Arauquita, November 2022.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, social leaders from rural areas, Arauquita, November 2022.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, former council members, La Hormiga, April 2021.

⁵² Crisis Group telephone interview, January 2023.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, community leaders living in areas under the Dagoberto Ramos, Jaime Martínez and Carlos Patiño fronts in Cauca, Santander de Quilichao, October 2022.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, community leaders in Montes de María, Maríalabaja, March 2022.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, military officer, November 2022.

C. The Total Peace Conundrum

Against this backdrop, Petro's total peace policy will need to strike a delicate balance in order to succeed. On one hand, the administration recognises that the state is in no position to dislodge the armed and criminal groups that use these coercive tactics of social control any time soon. The government's goal, as a result, is neither to reassert its writ entirely, nor to achieve a rapid demobilisation of these groups, but in the short term to improve their behaviour. Reducing lethal violence (as well as torture and disappearances) would doubtless come as a great relief to many communities, even if it fails to drive out the armed group at fault. On the other hand, if the total peace agenda fails to end the group's predation upon Colombia's most vulnerable communities, it may in fact enable these organisations to sink deeper roots in these places.

The challenge for the government will be to provide higher levels of protection for civilians – including through talks with armed groups – without leaving the communities in their iron grip even more vulnerable. As discussed below, this task will, among other things, require the government to expand the demands it is placing on armed groups so that they encompass certain forms of insidious violence that both do great harm to their victims and act as tools by which the groups consolidate their community control.

IV. Child Recruitment

One of the most effective ways for armed groups to cement their control is through recruitment of minors, which increases their military might and, more importantly, reinforces the compliance of communities whose children join the ranks. While Colombia's armed groups have long enlisted minors to fight in their conflicts – with at least 16,238 children pressed into service between 1990 and 2017 – the purpose of recruitment has evolved.⁵⁶ Whereas once groups looked to child recruits to reinforce their numbers, they now also see them as a vehicle for sowing dependence among the communities from which the children are taken.⁵⁷

A. *Why Recruit?*

Although it is difficult to quantify, community testimonies and military, government and civil society estimates of armed group numbers indicate that recruitment has grown sharply since a low point in 2016, especially during the pandemic, when many young people were unable to attend school or find gainful employment.⁵⁸ Government officials say the number of fighters in just one criminal group, the Gulf Clan, has increased from roughly 2,500 in 2016 to 9,000 today.⁵⁹ The FARC-EP dissidents have also expanded their footprint, with their presence spreading from an estimated 79 municipalities in 2018 to 119 in 2022.⁶⁰ Today, they are estimated to have at least 3,200 fighters, not including civilian support networks.⁶¹

Many of these new recruits are under the age of 25, and a significant number are minors. Colombia's child welfare agency has documented 1,166 cases of recruitment of children under age 18 since 2016, but this total is widely believed to be an undercount.⁶² The military, for example, says it has recovered at least 70 minors in the first five months of the Petro presidency, 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

⁵⁶ "No es un mal menor: Niñas, niños y adolescentes en el conflicto armado", Colombia Truth Commission, August 2022, p. 28. Since 2002, the military has received more than 35,000 fighters seeking to demobilise, of which 40 per cent – more than 15,000 – entered armed or criminal groups as minors.

⁵⁷ For more on the history of recruitment in the conflict, see "Una guerra sin edad: informe nacional de reclutamiento y utilización de niños, niñas y adolescentes en el conflicto armado colombiano", National Centre for Historical Memory, December 2017.

⁵⁸ In a recent survey, respondents aware of recruitment in their regions cited economic push factors, deception and the pandemic's impact as among the major factors inducing minors to join the armed groups. "Current Dynamics of Child Recruitment in Colombia", UN University, July 2022.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior Petro administration official, Bogotá, September 2022.

⁶⁰ See "Los Grupos FARC-EP: un escenario complejo", Indepaz, October 2020; and "Presencia de la línea 'Gentil Duarte' en Colombia 2022", Fundación Paz y Reconciliación, 2022.

⁶¹ "Este es el acuerdo de cese al fuego entre Gobierno y 'Farc Ep', de Iván Mordisco", *El Espectador*, 19 January 2023.

⁶² Crisis Group correspondence, Colombian Family Welfare Institute staff, November 2022. Historically, official recruitment numbers capture only a fraction of likely cases. For example, while the Truth Commission recognised over 16,000 victims of child recruitment up until 2016, it estimated the true number may have reached over 40,000.

young people recruited between January and October 2022 alone, surpassing the official annual estimate for the entire country.⁶³

Exploiting the pandemic and general economic hardship in rural Colombia, armed and criminal groups have absorbed new recruits in the hope of expanding their territorial reach.⁶⁴ Recruitment of minors in particular is not merely a means of boosting armed might, but also a mechanism for co-opting rural communities by fostering dependence on the armed group. With the exception of the ELN, all armed groups in Colombia today are paying (or promising to pay) salaries, including to children. "As a young person, finding work or education opportunities is difficult and costly. But what is easy is becoming a trafficker or a lookout for these groups", explained a single mother in Soacha, on the outskirts of Bogotá.⁶⁵

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.⁶⁶ Family members are more likely to collaborate with the group, if asked to do so, in hopes that the children will one day return. Personal links to the group may also enhance affinities with its rank and file.⁶⁷ The effect is often striking, dividing entire communities between those with a demonstrable link to the group and those without. As a youth leader in Cauca put it, "Daily life is split, some living in community organisations and others part of armed groups".⁶⁸

Child recruitment has helped sow discord among Indigenous communities, weaken local authorities and empower armed outfits. Traditional authorities are usually composed of older individuals, and groups exploit this fact to argue to minors that they can only obtain power or higher economic status within their communities by joining their ranks.⁶⁹ A prominent local figure in Cauca recalled an incident in 2021, when Indigenous Governor Sandra Liliana Pena was assassinated, allegedly at the behest of FARC dissidents. Community members pushed back against the Indigenous guard's attempt to arrest the suspect. "The message was that 'the only ones who have a problem with the guerrilla are you, the traditional authorities, not us the community'. ... The community is now compromised".⁷⁰

B. *How Recruitment Happens*

Since the pandemic, armed and criminal groups have grown increasingly adept at painting themselves as an attractive option for children and adolescents. They have

⁶³ Indigenous officials say a majority of recruits are below the age of 24. Crisis Group interview, Indigenous official, Santander de Quilichao, October 2022.

⁶⁴ Elizabeth Dickinson, "Lockdowns produced a new generation of child soldiers", *Foreign Policy*, 6 December 2021.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Cazucá, December 2022.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Indigenous authority, Santander de Quilichao, July 2021.

⁶⁷ In Cauca, for example, many residents say almost everyone has family ties to the FARC dissidents, which shapes personal behaviour in both coerced and voluntary ways. Crisis Group interviews, residents, Patía, November 2021.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Santander de Quilichao, October 2022.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous authorities, Santander de Quilichao, July 2021.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, Indigenous authority, Santander de Quilichao, July 2021.

done so by establishing an outsized presence in rural social life, becoming in many cases the main sources of economic stability, recreational opportunities and even affection. The harsh reality of life in these groups' ranks is either suppressed out of fear or ignored out of hope.⁷¹

Recruitment might begin when an armed organisation identifies a child or family in economic need. Communities in southern Córdoba recount how the Gulf Clan will try to "look like good guys, giving gifts and food", even providing Christmas gifts to local children, then later drawing in family members as recruits.⁷² Some cases of groups paying families whose children they take have been reported in Cauca.⁷³ Children themselves are particularly vulnerable to enticements. In both rural and urban areas, many children are at home alone after school while their parents remain at work. At times, there is little to eat and nothing to do. "The children look for other forms of affection, and they let themselves be taken and recruited", said a young Indigenous official in northern Cauca.⁷⁴

Residents in Cauca, Arauca and Nariño indicated that several different armed groups are now setting up operations either inside or next to schools, with the intention of luring in children.⁷⁵ Members of several FARC dissident fronts in northern Cauca have located arms depots next to schools and invited children to see them, attracting them the same way police officers or firefighters might by showing off their gear. Teachers who protested have been intimidated into silence or forced to move away.⁷⁶ 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, particularly those involving river crossings. These mechanisms not only endanger children but have also deterred them from attending classes. They have pushed some youngsters into joining the armed groups. As a teacher explained, "A lot of children have left this year ... because they have so much free time and no option for school".⁷⁷

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, responsible for keeping an eye on out-of-town visitors or the licence plates of passing cars on certain roads. In some areas, the process is reported to start with those as young as 8 or 9, while children are brought directly into

⁷¹ Enticements for young people are a longstanding feature of Colombia's conflicts, though guerrilla groups did not previously pay salaries. In 2009, the State Ombudsman's Office said it estimated that roughly 86 per cent of child recruits felt they had joined voluntarily. Poverty, victimhood, lack of access to education and difficult family situations were and continue to be vulnerabilities that groups exploit. Fernando Pieschacón et al., "Estudio exploratorio de patrones culturales que contribuyen a la vinculación de niños, niñas y jóvenes a los grupos armados en Colombia", Corporación Alotropía, 2006.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, social leader from rural southern Córdoba, Montería, October 2022.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, community leaders, Santander de Quilichao, October 2022.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Santander de Quilichao, October 2022.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interviews, local authorities and community leaders, Santander de Quilichao and Arauca, October and November 2022.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, community leaders and parents, Santander de Quilichao, October 2022.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, schoolteacher, January 2023.

the ranks of fighters from around age 12.⁷⁸ A military officer in Olaya Herrera, Nariño, said "recruitment begins at the school. Maybe they ask the child to be aware of where troops are moving. They become group members by the time they are in their teens. This recruitment is easy because of the children's needs".⁷⁹

Armed groups also manoeuvre their way into the social lives of adolescents, offering otherwise limited opportunities for sport and entertainment.⁸⁰ Recruitment of teenagers often happens in groups, with several friends leaving home to join at the same time. Armed group members in various regions have reportedly approached minors in public spaces, such as neighbourhood parks or football fields during community games.⁸¹ Parents also report that armed and criminal groups call their children to parties or other social gatherings, at which they attempt to recruit the teenagers.⁸² They offer alcohol, mobile phones, and the promise of motorcycles and guns. Technology has become increasingly important for adolescent recruitment. Armed group members are reported to have posted idyllic pictures of life inside the ranks on social media, in a bid to attract friends, or to have offered the chance to play free video games.⁸³ Demobilised combatants also report that children are being used to recruit other children, enticing them in social settings.⁸⁴

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. A group of displaced mothers in rural Cartagena said many recruits joined apparently of their own free will, based on their aspirations for a better life, though Colombian law still considers these individuals to be forced to take up arms.⁸⁵

Recruitment is not limited to boys; girls are also increasingly drawn in with promises, including of food, affection and belonging.⁸⁶ At times, girls facing abuse or sexual violence in their homes see the armed groups as a safe haven.⁸⁷ They are enlisted to be lookouts, or when they are older, to join groups directly. Some fight in the ranks. Others are used for operations in which a woman is less likely to encounter suspicion, for example those requiring passing through checkpoints.⁸⁸

These trends in recruitment of minors align with the causes driving older individuals to join armed and criminal groups. Fighters who have voluntarily demobilised

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, social leaders, Saravena and Santander de Quilichao, October and November 2022.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Tumaco, January 2023.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Indigenous authority, Santander de Quilichao, July 2021.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Crisis Group interviews, parents of children who have faced recruitment pressures, Santander de Quilichao and Cúcuta, June-July 2021.

⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, parents of children who have faced recruitment pressures, Santander de Quilichao and Cúcuta, June-July 2021.

⁸⁴ Data from Colombian military survey of demobilised persons since 2018, shared with Crisis Group, January 2023.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Cartagena, November 2022.

⁸⁶ Military officers who receive recovered children say the gender ratio has been shifting, with increasing numbers of girls in the last two years. Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, January 2023.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interviews, community members, Santander de Quilichao, October 2022.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Montería, November 2022.

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.⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰

C. *The Damage Done*

Recruitment of minors has a devastating effect on affected young people, as well as their families and communities. Residents, humanitarian organisations and military officers say children as young as twelve are being sent to the front lines of combat among armed groups, where their lives are often endangered.⁹¹ Many of the children recruited by FARC dissidents in northern Cauca, for example, have been deployed to fight in Argelia and Tambo in the south, where these groups are embroiled in fierce confrontations with the ELN and the military.⁹² In general, young recruits are relocated – in part so that they cannot escape and their families cannot reclaim them.⁹³ This tactic magnifies the group's social control: areas where children are sent receive an influx of manpower, while the communities they draw from remain docile in order to safeguard the children's lives and well-being.⁹⁴

Once inside armed groups, child recruits discover a reality very different from the ideal that had been painted for them. While many groups do pay their members, wages are often lower or more infrequent than had been promised.⁹⁵ Conditions are difficult, and there is often little training. In rural Tumaco, along the Colombian border with Ecuador, the FARC dissident faction, Segunda Marquetalia, has reportedly deployed new, untrained recruits (including children) at the heart of battles to seize control from rivals, driving up casualties among both fighters and civilians.⁹⁶

Some children disillusioned with their roles 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 put it.⁹⁷ In areas overseen by the Gulf Clan, residents reported that recruits who try to leave are killed.⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, in cases where parents or community

⁸⁹ Data from Colombia military survey of demobilised people since 2018, shared with Crisis Group, January 2023.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous authorities, Santander de Quilichao, July 2021 and October 2022; humanitarian officials, Bogotá, December 2022; military officers, October–November 2022.

⁹² Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous authorities, Bogotá, November 2021.

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous authorities and humanitarian officials, Santander de Quilichao and Tumaco, October 2022 and January 2023.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, December 2022.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, community leaders from Córdoba, Montería, November 2022.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official, Bogotá, December 2022.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Arauquita, November 2022.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, community leaders from Córdoba, Montería, November 2022.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, October 2022.

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.¹⁰⁰

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 explained.¹⁰¹ Mothers often carry the greatest burden – first in terms of preventing recruitment, and then recovering children if they leave. A mother of five explained: "You do not know what to do with your children. If you cannot find a way for them to study or get a job, they become cannon fodder for the groups".¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³

The young people who manage to avoid recruitment can find themselves targeted by the groups that they declined to join and in immediate danger, as can their families. Often, they are forced either to leave their homes for other regions or to curtail social activities almost completely. "Before, we used to be able to go to football matches, parties, town bazaars", explained a young person in a rural area, "but now we cannot be out at night, and these same spaces are not safe".¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous officials, Santander de Quilichao, October 2022.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, Indigenous authority, Santander de Quilichao, October 2022.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, social leader from Cravo Norte, Saravena, November 2022.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous officials, Santander de Quilichao, October 2022.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, Arauquita, October 2022.

V. Sexual and Gender-based Violence and Exploitation

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. As with other types of targeted violence, sexual 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. Victims fear retaliation if they speak out. Even if they summon the courage to do so, the inefficient judicial system means that impunity for these crimes is near complete, as is the silencing effect on women and their families.¹⁰⁵

This type of coercive violence is historically so pronounced that the 2016 peace agreement includes reparations for women, as well as special consideration for them in all its sections, including those about land reform and transitional justice.¹⁰⁶ According to the National Centre for Historical Memory, more than 14,000 women have suffered sexual violence since 1958; an extraordinary 87 per cent of them are Afro-Colombian and a third of them were minors when the attack occurred.¹⁰⁷

These official statistics likely represent only a fraction of the true number of cases. Deep taboos around the issue, together with the threat of retaliation by perpetrators, conspire to prevent many reports from reaching authorities. Some communities themselves say they are only now starting to understand how widespread this violence is and how deeply it has affected social life. A female leader in Arauca explained, "We women have not properly contemplated the issue of sexual violence – not even among ourselves. We have not absorbed its dimensions".¹⁰⁸

As with recruitment, sheer economic need has traditionally rendered women and girls vulnerable to violence.¹⁰⁹ Female heads of household who have children to provide for have become targets for exploitation by armed and criminal groups, as well

¹⁰⁵ For more on the use of sexual and gender-based violence as a form of social control in Colombia's conflict, see "Las mujeres frente a la violencia y la discriminación derivadas del conflicto armado en Colombia", Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, October 2006, p. 9. See also "Sentencia C-335/13: Medidas para Fomentar la Sanción Social y Denuncia de Prácticas Discriminatorias y Violencia contra las Mujeres", Colombia Constitutional Court, 2013.

¹⁰⁶ "Colombia: Acuerdo Final para la Terminación del Conflicto y la Construcción de una Paz Estable y Duradera", November 2016.

¹⁰⁷ "Mujeres afrocolombianas, las más afectadas por la violencia sexual ejercida por actores armados", National Centre for Historical Memory, 25 May 2022; "Un 30% de las víctimas de violencia sexual en el conflicto armado son niñas o adolescentes", National Centre for Historical Memory, 19 June 2021; Diana Pinzón, "La violencia de género y la violencia sexual en el conflicto armado colombiano: Indagando sobre sus manifestaciones", in Jorge Restrepo and David Aponte (eds.), *Guerra y violencias en Colombia: herramientas e interpretaciones* (Bogotá, 2009), pp. 353-393; Ivonne Suárez Pinzón, "Violencia de género y violencia sexual del conflicto armado colombiano", *Cambios y Permanencias*, no. 6 (2015), pp. 173-203.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, female social leader, Saravena, November 2022.

¹⁰⁹ "Las mujeres frente a la violencia y la discriminación derivadas del conflicto armado en Colombia", op. cit., p. 17.

as their members acting alone.¹¹⁰ "Women's economic dependence creates risks", a young female community leader in Quibdó explained. "The lack of formal job opportunities means that you have to depend on third parties", referring to the trade-offs women can be led to make, gaining economic security at the cost of control over their sexual and family decisions.¹¹¹ 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.

Indeed, girls and young women in conflict areas at times describe becoming the romantic partner of a combatant as the best or only option for securing their futures. "This is an economic guarantee of being able to bring something home", one young woman put it.¹¹² This sort of relationship is so common in some areas that young women increasingly regard it as a normal way to get ahead. Gender stereotypes, particularly the idea of dominating masculinity, have grown exaggerated amid the conflict in Colombia.¹¹³ According to some young people, boys and men are expected to take up arms, and girls and women to serve them, including by providing companionship and domestic work in exchange for economic support.¹¹⁴

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.¹¹⁵ A single mother explained:

The men in these groups are in abstinence in the field, so then they look for a girl. ... And then that girl is also marked, and in many cases they try to use her as a source of information.¹¹⁶

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.¹¹⁷ In Tibú, the rumour that a number of women had passed

¹¹⁰ "Lecciones aprendidas desde los conflictos armados en América Latina para la prevención de violencia sexual. Estudio de caso Colombia", Corporación Humanas – Centro Regional de Derechos Humanos y Justicia de Género, March 2022.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Quibdó, January 2022.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, Quibdó, January 2022.

¹¹³ "Las mujeres frente a la violencia y la discriminación derivadas del conflicto armado en Colombia", op. cit.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Indigenous youth, Santander de Quilichao, October 2022. For more on this pattern of gender relations, see "Las mujeres frente a la violencia y la discriminación derivadas del conflicto armado en Colombia", op. cit.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, female community leaders, Saravena, November 2022.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, social leader from Puerto Rondón, Saravena, November 2022.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, military officers, February and October 2020; religious authority in Tibú, Cúcuta, June 2021; and female community members, Saravena, November 2022.

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 2021.¹¹⁸

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.¹¹⁹ 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.¹²⁰ According to reports, these recruits are often as young as 8 or 9.¹²¹ 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.¹²²

Sexual violence and exploitation in conflict settings extends beyond transactional relationships. Girls in conflict areas may face abuse at home or in other isolated locations. Indigenous authorities in Cauca have documented several cases of girls being assaulted on the long walk to and from school. Often, these authorities say, the perpetrator is someone who knows the victim – a fact that serves to silence her out of fear of possible repercussions.¹²³ While not all these attacks appear directly linked to the conflict, community members insist that they happen because, by dint of its actions over time, the armed group has made sexual violence appear ordinary and entrenched impunity for perpetrators.¹²⁴

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’”.¹²⁵ 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.¹²⁶ 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.¹²⁷

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, social leaders and religious authorities, Tibú, June 2021. See also Kiran Stallone and Julia Zulver, “A Colombian town’s spike in femicides is linked to armed groups”, *New Humanitarian*, 12 April 2022.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, social leaders, Montelíbano and Quibdó, August 2021 and January 2022.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Montelíbano, August 2021.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interviews, female social leaders, Saravena, November 2022; female social leader, Quibdó, January 2022; humanitarian official, Tibú, June 2021. For more on sexual violence against women in Colombia’s conflict, see “¡Que dejen de cazar a las niñas y los niños!: Informe sobre violencia sexual contra niñas, niños y adolescentes en el conflicto armado en Colombia”, COALICO/Oxfam, March 2014.

¹²² Crisis Group interview, Tumaco, January 2023.

¹²³ Crisis Group interview, Indigenous official, Santander de Quilichao, October 2022.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, female community leaders, Soacha, November 2022; Indigenous officials, Santander de Quilichao, October 2022; female community leaders, Montelíbano, August 2021. See also “Lecciones aprendidas desde los conflictos armados en América Latina para la prevención de violencia sexual. Estudio de caso Colombia”, op. cit., p. 14.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, female social leader, Quibdó, January 2022.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, religious official, Quibdó, January 2022.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, social leaders and medical professionals, Saravena, November 2022.

VI. Movement Restrictions

Forced confinement is the most emblematic form of coercion in Colombia's reconfigured conflict since the peace accord. 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.¹²⁸ Humanitarian organisations say confinement is becoming more widespread, even as armed groups apply it in ever more draconian fashion, limiting aid access.

A. *Methods of Confinement and Control*

Trapping the civilian population in a specified area by restricting movement in or out, and disciplining those who refuse to abide by the rules, is a blunt and effective way for armed groups to exercise control of communities. The two most common reasons for employing it are, first, to prevent an enemy group from entering an area and, secondly, to establish authority after taking over a new territory. In both instances, the restrictions on movement instil fear, broadcast the armed group's willingness to mete out punishment and ensure broader compliance with the armed group's directives. Confinement disproportionately affects Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, which together account for an estimated 10 to 20 per cent of the population but represented more than 80 per cent of the victims of confinement in 2022.¹²⁹

Chocó, a department on the Pacific coast, has experienced among the largest number of cases of confinement in Colombia.¹³⁰ After the 2016 peace accord, the ELN moved quickly to control former FARC bastions, most of them along Chocó's rivers. Over the last two years, however, the Gulf Clan has moved in an attempt to eject the guerrillas. As part of its efforts to keep its enemies from driving it out, the ELN has confined communities under its control. The ELN often tells residents that they cannot leave, tend their crops or fish in the sea, at least during certain hours; it blocks most supplies from entering the area as well. The logic behind confinement starts with the reality that neither residents nor combatants in this chaotic confrontation are sure if people they encounter are civilians or members of rival fighting groups. If all the residents are confined, the armed group can assume that anyone it sees attempting to enter or leave is an enemy.¹³¹

The ELN is not the only group to use this tactic. Upon seizing new areas from the ELN in Chocó, the Gulf Clan has also confined residents as a way to understand who lives in the community and prevent the ELN from returning, operating on the same assumption that anyone who breaches the rules on movement must be hostile.¹³² At times, armed groups convey orders restricting movement through pamphlets or word

¹²⁸ Data from OCHA Sala Humanitaria, Annual Totals 2016-2022.

¹²⁹ Data from OCHA Sala Humanitaria, December 2022.

¹³⁰ "Tendencias e Impacto Humanitario en Colombia 2022", OCHA, 23 January 2023.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian officials, Quibdó, Bogotá and Tumaco, January and November 2022, January 2023.

¹³² Crisis Group interviews, religious officials and humanitarian officials, Quibdó, January 2022.

of mouth; on other occasions, they plant landmines.¹³³ Transgressors thus risk punishment ranging from harassment and the seizure of motorcycles or cars to death.¹³⁴

Dissident groups engage in similar practices. Rural residents in the Telembí Triangle region, in the Pacific coast department of Nariño, were told by dissident factions encroaching on their community that, in the words of a displaced person, "If you leave your home [ie, are displaced to another location], you will not be able to come back for ten years".¹³⁵ In order to 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 who escaped recall militants firing on their boats as they left the area.¹³⁶ Victims said they suspected that the armed groups in question wanted their location to remain secret and 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, on the border with Venezuela, as a way to shut down all movement and trap their rivals. Arauca saw fierce clashes throughout 2022 between the ELN and FARC-EP dissident Fronts 10 and 28, with the ELN pushing into areas that were traditionally under FARC control before the peace accord. While doing so, they have limited movement because, in the words of a local government official, "they view everyone with suspicion, as collaborators" of their rivals.¹³⁷ In this instance, confinement is largely enforced through checkpoints.¹³⁸

Confinement is not always comprehensive and, indeed, many 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.¹³⁹ Both the ELN and the Gulf Clan reportedly stop residents in southern Bolívar who have ventured out of the municipality to check if their journey offers grounds for suspicion.¹⁴⁰

B. *Confinement's Effects*

In all its manifestations, confinement causes humanitarian harm. Restrictions on movement jeopardise a community's food security, as well as its access to education and health care. Families confined in Nariño have reported being prohibited from tending their crops, whereas in fluvial areas, fishing communities cannot go out on the waters they depend upon during certain hours of the day or, in some cases, at

¹³³ Crisis Group interviews, religious and humanitarian officials, Quibdó, January 2022.

¹³⁴ In one emblematic case, armed men shot at a family with two children in their vehicle who had allegedly violated curfew and passed along a road in Arauca. The children were killed. "La tragedia de Briany y Delys, los dos niños asesinados por el ELN en Arauca", *Semana*, 23 April 2022.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interview, displaced mother, Roberto Payán, September 2021.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interview, displaced elderly person, Roberto Payán, September 2021.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interview, local authority, Arauca, November 2022.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, social leaders and military officers, Saravena and Arauca, November 2022.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, social leaders, Maríalabaja and Montería, March and October 2022.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, social leaders from southern Bolívar, Aguachica, March 2022.

all.¹⁴¹ Due largely to local gender norms, women often bear the greatest burden, as they are providers of last resort for their families if men are unable to put food on the table. The erosion of livelihoods and traditional practices chips away at community bonds, limiting whatever capacity local people might have to resist armed group control and the forced collaboration it leads to.¹⁴²

Confinement is nevertheless 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 the existence of 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. Often, fighting means the area is unsafe, impeding the government from either formally acknowledging the situation or providing assistance. As a local official in an affected area explained, "Those we are able to aid are those who are easy to reach".¹⁴³ Indigenous groups in Chocó and southern Córdoba report rising rates of suicide among young people who are trapped for periods that sometimes last months.¹⁴⁴

Cases of confinement afflict ethnic communities to a far greater extent than others, and in a growing number of instances, these communities are self-confining as a means of defence, where no other options exist.¹⁴⁵ Indigenous Awá communities, for example, repeatedly self-confined in Nariño in January, staying in their homes and keeping their children out of school in order to avoid being caught in crossfire between rival FARC dissident fronts.¹⁴⁶ These confinements lasted from a few days to more than a month, during which little or no aid reached these areas. Elsewhere, for example in Chocó, affected communities that in the past might have elected for displacement rather than staying to face conflict have resigned themselves to confinement. The reason is that those who relocate temporarily to cities often receive little by way of state support, and then find they are rarely able to recover their land upon return. As a way to safeguard their farms and livelihoods, some communities have chosen to stay put.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, displaced families and humanitarian officials, Quibdó and Magui Payán, September 2021 and January 2022.

¹⁴² Crisis Group telephone interview, expert on ethnic rights in Colombia, January 2023.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Tumaco, January 2023.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Quibdó and Tierralta, January 2022 and August 2021.

¹⁴⁵ Data from OCHA Sala Humanitaria, Annual Totals 2016-2022.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Awá community members, Llorente, January 2023.

VII. State Responses

Reducing violence, which sits at the heart of Petro's total peace policy, is vital to remedying Colombia's most serious humanitarian threats. His administration's two-pronged approach of negotiations and an improved security strategy focused on civilian protection has the potential to bring relief to the communities hardest hit by conflict, so long as it demarcates clear roles for civil and military authorities and is properly resourced. But the policy could unintentionally entrench armed group control of communities in the long term. To manage this risk, authorities will have to pair their efforts to convince armed groups to reduce killings, disappearances and torture with a push to address the stealthier, non-lethal forms of coercion they employ against some of Colombia's most defenceless people.

A. *Constructing Meaningful Humanitarian Agreements*

Protagonists of the Petro administration's total peace policy say the priority for talks with armed and criminal groups will be to reach humanitarian agreements. In its initial outreach, the Petro government asked all groups not to kill, torture or perpetrate forced disappearances.¹⁴⁷ As part of the ceasefires announced on 31 December 2022, the government urged groups to achieve "zero violence" in their territories, including refraining from clashing among themselves, though it has not publicly specified the terms of this request. Before the legality of most of these ceasefires came into question, the government said it was developing protocols with each group to monitor compliance with these requirements.¹⁴⁸ In early February, the government signed an initial ceasefire protocol with the FARC-EP focused on preventing clashes between the armed group and state security forces.¹⁴⁹

The weakness in this approach – even if other groups are brought into the mix – is that the government's appeal for improved humanitarian conditions is too narrow. Baneful as homicides, disappearances and torture are, together they represent a mere fraction of the violence that armed and criminal groups inflict upon rural people. Moreover, part of the price for reducing these types of violence would be that the groups enjoy more freedom to pursue the other powerful means through which they exercise control and cause misery. Under the terms of the envisaged ceasefires, they will in theory be able to use these coercive tools even as the military scales back its operations to combat them. Failing to prohibit these practices therefore risks offering armed and criminal groups an opportunity to consolidate social and economic control without fear of immediate repercussions.

If the Petro administration can persuade armed groups to sign up, one way to formalise an agreement to curtail both the most lethal and the more insidious forms of violence would be through "cessation of hostilities" accords aimed at addressing

¹⁴⁷ "Parar de atentar y matar, es un requisito para dialogar": comisionado de Paz a grupos ilegales", *El Colombiano*, 31 October 2022.

¹⁴⁸ Due to the legal challenges mentioned earlier, only the protocol with the FARC-EP has so far been drafted. Remarks of Alfonso Prada, press conference, Ministry of the Interior, 4 January 2023.

¹⁴⁹ "Gobierno y disidencias de Farc Ep firman protocolo de cese al fuego", *El Espectador*, 8 February 2023.

humanitarian concerns.¹⁵⁰ These deals would be broader than the ceasefire agreements – which focus on limiting clashes between groups and the state in order to protect the lives of local civilians – and could be constructed to include the full range of violent activities that coerce communities.¹⁵¹ Inside Colombia's government, a number of officials are already pushing for such issues to be part of a next phase of agreements with armed groups.¹⁵²

As part of this effort, government negotiators should pay particular attention to the types of violence that serve to muzzle civilians and perpetuate an armed group's control. At a minimum, these humanitarian cessations of hostilities should oblige armed and criminal outfits to desist from forced confinement and broader movement restrictions, renounce sexual and gender-based violence, and end the recruitment of minors while also releasing children currently in arms – a demand that the government has supported.¹⁵³ As discussed below, the agreements should provide for monitors who will have access to affected communities and be in a position to cite violations, triggering consequences, such as prosecution (and the stripping of any judicial immunity gained as part of the deal) or in serious cases, the use of military force. The more specific the agreements are, the more difficult they will be to agree upon, but the less likely that armed groups will be able to violate them without consequence.

As government officials prepare these agreements, and as they consider what constitutes "coercion of communities", they should listen to recommendations from a series of independent forums called Humanitarian Tables that have emerged throughout the country with the aim of conveying communities' demands regarding the use of violence. This grassroots initiative first emerged during a past attempt at negotiations with the ELN, as a way for residents of Chocó, an insurgent stronghold, to communicate their concerns to the government and the rebels. The efforts grew in prominence while Iván Duque was president, when few other channels existed for communities to express their grievances to armed groups.

Now, in Chocó, but also in Catatumbo, Cauca, Arauca and other departments, civil society groups have put forward their own definition of what a minimum level of humanitarian respect by armed groups would look like.¹⁵⁴ In the case of communities in the department of Córdoba, recommendations boiled down to seven points including prohibitions on sexual violence, an end to movement restrictions and demands

¹⁵⁰ Petro on 8 February publicly endorsed a move to expand from ceasefires to cessations of hostilities in order to provide greater relief to the civilian population. "Pasar de 'cese al fuego' a 'cese de hostilidades', la propuesta de Gustavo Petro", *El Espectador*, 8 February 2023.

¹⁵¹ While a ceasefire generally applies to direct clashes between the state and an armed group, a cessation of hostilities would involve ending violent actions such as kidnapping and asymmetric attacks, as well as possibly recruitment and other practices. Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Bogotá, January 2023.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, February 2023.

¹⁵³ The government has indicated that it will demand the release of forcibly recruited minors from interlocutors as a condition of any agreement. "Gobierno condicionará la firma acuerdos de la paz total a desvinculación de menores de edad", *Blu Radio*, 13 December 2022.

¹⁵⁴ "Mesas Humanitarias y de construcción de paz", *Vivamos Humanos*, 2022.

that groups stop using civilian buildings such as schools as camps or places for recruiting children.¹⁵⁵

Humanitarian-focused cessations of hostilities would mark a major step toward providing more general reprieve from the most harmful aspects of armed and criminal group control. Above all, they would represent a means of preventing groups from taking advantage of talks with the government to consolidate their mechanisms of local power, particularly if – as discussed below – the cessations can be backed by a credible threat of military force for those that violate these arrangements' terms.

This approach will face enormous obstacles. It is not yet clear what might be sufficient to entice various groups to agree to these humanitarian concessions or how, as a practical matter, monitoring mechanisms could independently track compliance in remote and inscrutable locations often under the control of the armed group in question. As discussed in Section II, the Attorney General has narrowly construed the president's authority to lift arrest warrants and offer concessions to criminal groups. It will continue to do so unless the administration passes a new draft law through Congress that, in its current form, provides for preferential justice regimes and the lifting of arrest warrants at the president's request in order to facilitate demobilisation.¹⁵⁶

Moreover, these broader agreements would be just a first step toward a solution to the issue of armed group influence in rural Colombia. Should these coercive tools be removed, the groups would be neither disarmed nor demobilised. They could well find other means of intimidating and extorting local populations, which they would likely use to gain the cooperation they feel they need in pursuing their ideological or criminal objectives. Nevertheless, a comprehensive cessation of hostilities, if achievable, would still represent movement in the right direction.

B. *Aligning Security Strategy with Total Peace*

The security forces have a vital role in creating incentives for armed and criminal groups to engage with the authorities with the will to compromise. As a Colombian official involved in a decade of past peace talks put it, "If there is no military pressure, then all of this is just romanticism".¹⁵⁷ 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.

But in doing so, it should not bring back past policies. Indeed, a return to the offensive strategy employed in the years since the 2016 peace accord, and above all under the government of former President Duque, would be ill-advised. By all accounts, this approach failed to contain violence and may even have stoked it. The previous em-

¹⁵⁵ "Propuesta de Mínimos Humanitarios para el Departamento de Córdoba", press release, Mesa Humanitaria Córdoba, October 2022. As a signatory of the Safe Schools Declaration, the Colombian state already has an obligation to keep combatants in armed conflicts well away from schools. "Por la protección de los estudiantes, maestros y escuelas en contextos de conflicto armado, Colombia se adhiere a la Declaración sobre Escuelas Seguras", press release, Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 18 November 2022.

¹⁵⁶ See footnote 5 for details of this draft law.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, September 2022.

phasis on captures, kills and forced coca eradication often put communities at risk, leaving them to face the wrath of men with guns, all while failing to dismantle the armed groups.

Instead, the defence ministry's new strategy is rightly focused on shifting the military's priority toward the protection of civilians, which – together with talks and comprehensive humanitarian agreements – is vital to breaking the social control and influence that armed and criminal groups exercise. As Crisis Group has previously recommended, the armed forces should shift their approach from an offensive deployment aimed at weakening or crushing an armed group toward a protective force that shields local people from the worst effects of illegal armed occupation and thereby can win their approval.¹⁵⁸

In practice, ministry officials say this change in approach means placing a greater emphasis on measuring the impact of military operations through metrics such as improvements in humanitarian conditions and building a stronger monitoring system for threats such as confinement.¹⁵⁹ Instead of prioritising operations such as captures, which often result in retaliatory violence against the community, the military is being encouraged to focus on communicating with citizens directly and undertaking activities such as patrols on rural roads or rivers. As a gauge of its success, the military could also track the rate at which crimes are reported to the authorities as a proxy for the level of trust they have gained among the population.¹⁶⁰ A rise in crime reports would also strengthen the military's understanding of the threats and its ability to respond to citizens' concerns.

As Crisis Group has previously argued, focusing on civilian protection should also entail changes in the way that combatants are defined and how much lethal force can be used against them.¹⁶¹ The military must narrow its definition of participation in conflict, to the extent this determines who it can target with force, in order to better comply with international standards, and in recognition of the fact that many alleged collaborators are victims of armed group coercion. Finally, the new security strategy should and will emphasise joint operations coordinated with civilian ministries in order to help ensure that military actions are swiftly followed up by the intervention of judicial and civilian state institutions.¹⁶²

Simultaneously, the government should start considering how to respond if and when groups or factions of them decline to join talks or fail to show good faith in honouring their commitments to reduce violence. In the former case, armed and criminal groups will need to contend with the government's new security strategy, which, if successful, should impede their capacity to prey on communities from which they have drawn strength and resources. Members will also remain subject to the criminal justice system if they can be apprehended. Capture operations may be warranted

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group Report, *Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia*, op. cit.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, December 2022.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior military commander, Bogotá, November 2022.

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group Report, *Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia*, op. cit.

¹⁶² The military's most recent campaign plan reflects these priorities. See "Plan 'Perseo'", Colombian Armed Forces, 23 August 2022.

in the case of financiers and key traffickers, whose removal would have an impact on an armed group.

As for armed and criminal groups that reach agreements with the government, part of the solution will be to help make sure that authorities have reliable information about non-compliance. Ceasefire protocols signed with the FARC-EP include a monitoring mechanism with representation from the government, the military, the guerrilla group, civil society and the Catholic Church.¹⁶³ Other agreements should follow suit. When a violation occurs – as identified by the monitoring mechanism or otherwise – political authorities will need to determine whether law enforcement or military action is the appropriate response. In many instances, arrest and trial will be the answer. But in more serious cases, as an official within the government argued, “if these groups are not complying, the security forces have to pursue them in order to avoid them taking advantage of talks”.¹⁶⁴ Similarly, the government could seek to activate judicial levers, including extradition, when combatants or commanders renege on agreements.

C. *Changing Incentives*

Even as talks with armed and criminal groups progress, the Petro government must keep making the policy changes needed for long-term peace. Economic hardship in Colombia's countryside continues to drive recruitment, embolden armed groups and push workers into illicit businesses. Although the issue of rural development is central to the 2016 peace agreement, the urban-rural gap in Colombia remains striking. Multidimensional poverty rates nationwide hover above 18 per cent, but that number rises to roughly 40 per cent in the rural areas where conflict has been sharpest.¹⁶⁵ In these areas, a third of students lag behind in school, while more than half the population lacks access to clean water. As noted above, without other options, communities tolerate armed groups that provide the possibility of sustenance and a basic level of governance. Young people often seek out these groups as the only way they see to earn a living.

Breaking that pattern requires the provision of security, but also access to state services and licit economic opportunities. Here, the 2016 accord remains the best guide, particularly through its points 1 and 4, addressing rural reform and illicit crops, respectively. The former calls for reforms such as greater land titling, distribution of land to victims and the poor, and infrastructural development, while point 4 recommends voluntary crop substitution as a way to reduce coca crops.

Implementation continues to be uneven. The Petro government has already taken steps to accelerate rural and land reform, including through a deal with the largest cattle growing association to purchase 3 million hectares of land for distribution to

¹⁶³ “Gobierno y disidencias de Farc Ep firman protocolo de cese al fuego”, op. cit.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, February 2023.

¹⁶⁵ “Índice de Pobreza Multidimensional – IPM: Agregado municipios PDET. 2019-2021”, DANE, 6 June 2022.

landless farmers.¹⁶⁶ This deal is remarkable not just for its size but also because, arguably for the first time, it has involved large landowners in the longstanding campaign for redistribution. But many more areas of rural reform specified in the peace accord lag behind, including commitments to expand infrastructure to enable farmers to get their produce to market, ensure access to credit and gain congressional approval for a special rural and agrarian jurisdiction to address the countryside's specific needs.¹⁶⁷

Drug policy is another area where the government has the chance to redress the long-time institutional bias that has placed the weight of counter-narcotics efforts on the most disadvantaged players in the supply chain – poor farmers who earn only a subsistence income from the drug trade. The government has told the security forces to seek dialogue with coca farmers in the hope they may agree to substitution rather than forced eradication. Petro has said his government would allow farmers to pull up illegal crops voluntarily in step with the speed at which alternative legal produce begins to yield profits.¹⁶⁸ This approach is widely supported among coca growers, particularly in ethnic communities that advocated for it while the 2016 agreement was being drafted.¹⁶⁹ The government has also suggested it will seek to reduce or eliminate penalties and lower incarceration rates for coca farmers with less than ten hectares and for minor drug offences, for which a large number of women are now in jail.¹⁷⁰

Finally, the government should begin planning how to provide economic and livelihood packages for members of armed and criminal groups in hopes of convincing them to return to civilian life. Officials who have worked on past reintegration programs say these programs would benefit from a greater emphasis on education and training, stronger follow-up and more psychological support.¹⁷¹ In a limited way and with stringent vetting for human rights, the government might consider offering fighters the chance to join the state security forces as rural police or soldiers. The idea is controversial, but it is not unprecedented, as the military has previously integrated

¹⁶⁶ "Como 'histórico' califica el Presidente Petro firma del acuerdo entre Gobierno y ganaderos que permitirá comprar 3 millones de hectáreas de tierras para entregar a campesinos y campesinas del país", press release, Colombian Presidency, 8 October 2022.

¹⁶⁷ The 2016 peace agreement mandates creation of an agrarian jurisdiction with specialised judges expert in handling land and other rural disputes. A draft law passed the Colombian Senate in December. "Senado aprobó creación de Jurisdicción Agraria y Rural", press release, Colombian Senate, 7 December 2022. Other portions of the peace accord that lag far behind in implementation are commitments on gender and ethnic communities. See, for example, "III Informe de observaciones sobre los avances en la implementación del enfoque de género del Acuerdo de Paz", Grupo de Género en la Paz, May 2021. On the role of ethnic communities in the peace accord, see "Los derechos propios de los pueblos étnicos en el Acuerdo de Paz de agosto de 2016", *Rev. Derecho Estado*, no. 40 (2018), p. 113-126. "Informe de seguimiento, impulso y verificación a la implementación del capítulo étnico del acuerdo final para la terminación del conflicto y la construcción de una paz estable y duradera", IEANPE, December 2021.

¹⁶⁸ "Petro propone mantener cultivos de coca y avanzar en sustitución", *Portafolio*, 17 December 2022.

¹⁶⁹ "Colombia: Petro sugiere sembrar coca y sustituto en paralelo", Associated Press, 16 December 2022.

¹⁷⁰ "Polémico proyecto del Gobierno Petro podría legalizar hasta el 67% de cultivos de coca del país", *El Colombiano*, 1 February 2023; "Gobierno liberaría presos para frenar hacinamiento", *El Colombiano*, 9 November 2022; "Caracterización de condiciones socioeconómicas de mujeres relacionadas con problemas de drogas", UNODC, 2019.

¹⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, June-July 2022.

small numbers of former FARC guerrillas with some success.¹⁷² Many combatants, particularly young ones, lack other professional experience but do know the countryside. With the security forces overstretched and discredited, reincorporated fighters who are rigorously trained to protect civilians could help police rural areas, filling a gap that has dogged the Colombian state.¹⁷³

D. *Protecting Civilians*

Colombia's civilian state institutions also play a role in offering protection to civilians, although they rely on a thin, ineffective set of mechanisms. Furthermore, the reach of these institutions is unavoidably inhibited by the presence of armed and criminal groups in rural communities. It is vital that the Petro government work to strengthen these responses, many of which align with the letter and spirit of the 2016 peace agreement, even as it begins talks with violent groups.

Perhaps the most urgent concern is the prevention of and response to child recruitment. Some 23 state institutions are meant to coordinate a prevention program, under the leadership of the high peace commissioner.¹⁷⁴ All state institutions have a legal responsibility to treat child recruits as victims of conflict.¹⁷⁵ Yet at the moment, efforts are mostly ad hoc. Indeed, there is no protection system that would permit officials to intervene if a teacher or parent reports that a child has come under pressure to enlist in an armed group.¹⁷⁶

Efforts to prevent recruitment could include the provision of safe spaces for children, as communities often cite the lack of after-school activities – as well as empty cupboards at home – as a vulnerability that armed and criminal groups exploit. Displaced and forcibly confined children without access to school are particularly prone to recruitment. Recreation centres, art clubs and other venues for social activities could go a long way toward reducing children's exposure to these threats. Similarly, children and young people who resist efforts at recruitment often require protection, and the at-risk communities where they live lack the funds or support infrastructure to help these threatened families should they need to move away from home. Prevention programs, safe spaces and evacuation procedures could all benefit from stronger donor support.¹⁷⁷

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

¹⁷² Crisis Group Latin America Report N°92, *A Fight by Other Means: Keeping the Peace with Colombia's FARC*, 30 November 2021.

¹⁷³ See also Crisis Group Report, *Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia*, op. cit.

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, January 2023.

¹⁷⁵ In 2022, Colombia's transitional justice court, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, ruled that all public officials and institutions must treat children recruited into armed and criminal groups as victims of conflict. "Auto 1305", Special Jurisdiction for Peace, 2022.

¹⁷⁶ The former director of the Colombian Family Welfare Institute has said that the body – responsible for protecting minors and rehabilitating child combatants – has "no role" in preventing the recruitment of minors. "Preocupación por empalme con la nueva directora del ICBF", W Radio, 23 September 2022.

¹⁷⁷ Donors to Colombia's prevention efforts include the U.S. Department of State.

Family Welfare Institute.¹⁷⁸ While this program supports many victims, not all children and their families know about it or want to join it.¹⁷⁹ 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.¹⁸⁰ 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:

[The Family Welfare Institute] does not undertake any sort of investigation to understand why recruitment happened. Was there a family member abusing the child? ... Instead, they take the child back to their closest family member and, many times, they are killed or taken once again.¹⁸¹

Cases of conflict-related sexual violence also 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.¹⁸² Yet women describe a number of concerns that often prevent them from reporting crimes and receiving any attention at all. Some state officials, they say, decline to receive reports or may even blame victims for supposedly having attracted the assault with their clothing or behaviour.¹⁸³ Officials are not always well versed in these types of crimes, and numerous women report feeling re-victimised when asked to provide testimony.¹⁸⁴ By 2017, Colombia had a 92 per cent impunity rate for conflict-related sexual violence, with many reports archived without further study.¹⁸⁵ Foreign technical and financial support aimed at improving training for officials who receive these reports and expanding the ranks of officers specialised in gender-based violence would

¹⁷⁸ The program is divided into three six-month components intended to: establish the legal situation of the child; reintegrate him or her into the family or community; and follow up on the child's well-being. Crisis Group correspondence, Colombian Family Welfare Institute staff, 9 November 2022.

¹⁷⁹ A total of 220 demobilised children and adolescents entered the Specialised Care Program for the Restoration of Rights in 2022, the highest number since 2018. "Observatorio del Bienestar de la Niñez", Colombian Family Welfare Institute. Children who did not join the program often said they did not know it existed. See "It's Like Starting From Scratch": Informal Support Accessed by Individuals who Disengaged from Armed Groups as Children in Colombia", UN University, November 2022.

¹⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Santander de Quilichao, October 2022.

¹⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, October 2022. Rural dwellers also say there are not enough spots available for children who need shelter outside the home. Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous authorities, Santander de Quilichao, October 2022.

¹⁸² The Unit for the Attention and Integral Reparation of Victims (Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas) was established in 2011 to attend to victims of armed conflict. In 2021, Congress extended the possibility of being accredited as a victim and receiving support for another ten years, until 2031.

¹⁸³ "No one can report what is happening here out of fear". Crisis Group interview, female social leader, Soacha, November 2022. Other interlocutors made similar statements. Crisis Group interviews, female social leader, Cartagena, November 2022; female victims of assault, Saravena, November 2022; LGBT social leader, Soacha, January 2020.

¹⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, victims, Saravena, November 2022.

¹⁸⁵ "La guerra inscrita en el cuerpo: Informe nacional de violencia sexual en el conflicto armado", National Centre for Historical Memory, 2017.

mark important steps toward remedying these flaws, particularly within the Attorney General's Office and the National Victims Unit.

The state response to forced confinement also suffers from major shortcomings. As mentioned earlier, the procedure for recognising a case of confinement and beginning to provide aid is long and arduous, especially when active combat is under way in the area in question. Confinements are not recognised as eligible for assistance of any kind until they are verified by a visiting local official, yet the official can only go if the military certifies that the area is safe to enter. Often, the area is judged unsafe, delaying aid to those most in need.¹⁸⁶ This procedure would benefit from international technical assistance that could verify confinements using technology and community testimony.

If and when recognised, local authorities are the first responders, yet their budgets are often over-stretched. One municipality in Nariño, for example, exhausted its entire annual displacement and confinement response budget in the first emergency of the year in January.¹⁸⁷ Donors could consider ways to strengthen local state budgets and their ability to respond. At the moment, the burden of food aid, sanitation kits and other basic goods falls upon the National Victims Unit, as well as international agencies. This aid response sometimes wanes over time, however, even though confinements can continue for months or even longer.¹⁸⁸ As of June 2022, affected individuals can be accredited as victims, a welcome step that opens the door to longer-term state support. Still, this process requires documentation of the confinement and inscription of the victims, who must reach an urban area to report their cases.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ If a visit is possible, this information is then presented to a committee including local officials, the Ombudsman, the military and others in order to decide whether to recognise the event. Crisis Group interviews, international observer members of committees, Tumaco, January 2023.

¹⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official, Tumaco, January 2023.

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian officials, Quibdó, January 2021.

¹⁸⁹ "Acompañando tu registro", National Victims Unit regulations, December 2022.

VIII. Conclusion

The government's immediate goal of reducing lethal violence as it works toward "total peace" could hardly be more urgent for the millions of Colombians living under the constraints imposed by oppressive armed groups. Communities throughout the country are clamouring for the government to ensure respect for basic humanitarian standards. 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 permanent reductions in violence.

The country's most isolated communities would warmly receive the sharp reduction in killings, torture and disappearances that Petro's government is aiming for. But if the cost is that the authorities concede that armed groups will keep entrenching themselves throughout the countryside, free to use coercive means to ensure residents' compliance with their dictates, then these communities are likely to keep fearing for their future. In addition to the immediate harm they cause, child recruitment, sexual violence and movement restrictions have the effect of enhancing the power of illegal groups in civilian life. Officials should therefore broaden their objectives for talks with these groups, pushing for safeguards to prevent armed groups from taking advantage of dialogue and ceasefires to dig in their heels. The government must strive to ensure that an imperfect peace today does not stoke more violence tomorrow.

Bogotá/Brussels/Washington, 24 February 2023

Appendix A: Map of Colombia



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Canadian Department of National Defence, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, United Arab Emirates (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy), United Nations Development Programme, United Nations World Food Programme, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the World Bank.

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February 2023

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Latin America and the Caribbean since 2020

Special Reports and Briefings

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.

Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE in a Time of War, Special Briefing N°9, 29 November 2022.

A Glut of Arms: Curbing the Threat to Venezuela from Violent Groups, Latin America Report N°78, 20 February 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Imagining a Resolution of Venezuela's Crisis, Latin America Report N°79, 11 March 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Broken Ties, Frozen Borders: Colombia and Venezuela Face COVID-19, Latin America Briefing N°42, 16 April 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Mexico's Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace, Latin America Report N°80, 4 May 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, Latin America Report N°81, 8 July 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Bolivia Faces New Polls in Shadow of Fraud Row, Latin America Briefing N°43, 31 July 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Leaders under Fire: Defending Colombia's Front Line of Peace, Latin America Report N°82, 6 October 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Virus-proof Violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle, Latin America Report N°83, 13 November 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Disorder on the Border: Keeping the Peace between Colombia and Venezuela, Latin America Report N°84, 14 December 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Venezuela: What Lies Ahead after Election Clinches Maduro's Clean Sweep, Latin America Report N°85, 21 December 2020 (also available in Spanish).

The Exile Effect: Venezuela's Overseas Opposition and Social Media, Latin America Report N°86, 24 February 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia, Latin America Report N°87, 26 February 2021 (also available in Spanish).

The Risks of a Rigged Election in Nicaragua, Latin America Report N°88, 20 May 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Electoral Violence and Illicit Influence in Mexico's Hot Land, Latin America Report N°89, 2 June 2021 (also available in Spanish).

The Pandemic Strikes: Responding to Colombia's Mass Protests, Latin America Report N°90, 2 July 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Haiti: A Path to Stability for a Nation in Shock, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°44, 30 September 2021 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Broken Canopy: Preventing Deforestation and Conflict in Colombia, Latin America Report N°91, 4 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Handling the Risks of Honduras' High-stakes Poll, Latin America Briefing N°45, 23 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

A Fight by Other Means: Keeping the Peace with Colombia's FARC, Latin America Report N°92, 30 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Overcoming the Global Rift on Venezuela, Latin America Report N°93, 17 February 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Keeping Oil from the Fire: Tackling Mexico's Fuel Theft Racket, Latin America Briefing N°46, 25 March 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Brazil's True Believers: Bolsonaro and the Risks of an Election Year, Latin America Briefing N°47, 16 June 2022 (also available in Portuguese and Spanish).

Hard Times in a Safe Haven: Protecting Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia, Latin America Report N°94, 9 August 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia, Latin America Report N°95, 27 September 2022 (also available in Spanish).

A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever, Latin America Report N°96, 5 October 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Ties without Strings? Rebuilding Relations between Colombia and Venezuela, Latin America Report N°97, 1 December 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Haiti's Last Resort: Gangs and the Prospect of Foreign Intervention, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°48, 14 December 2022 (also available in Spanish and French).

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