

Rebel feud displaces more than 30,000 in northern Colombia

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Getty Images

The ELN rebel group is a deadly and powerful presence in the region

More than 32,000 people have fled the northern Colombian region of Catatumbo where two rival rebel groups are engaged in a bloody battle.

At least 80 people have been killed over recent days amid the surge in fighting between rebels from the National Liberation Army (ELN) and dissident factions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc).

One official government agency said it had received reports of ELN rebels going house-to-house and killing those suspected of ties with rival groups.

The government has declared a state of emergency and the first of a planned deployment of 5,000 soldiers have arrived in the area.

President Gustavo Petro said on Tuesday that the state "had failed" to contain the violence but that it would learn from that failure.

His government has reactivated arrest warrants for 31 top commanders of the ELN, which had been suspended while the rebel group held peace talks with the government.

Last week, President Petro suspended the talks for a second time in less than a year due to the violence in Catatumbo.

The fighting has been so fierce that 32,000 people have fled their homes, according to figures provided by the Ombudsman's office on Tuesday.

Many have sought refuge in schools and sports stadiums which have been converted into impromptu shelters.



EPA

Thousands of people have sought shelter in a sports stadium in the city of Cúcuta

Investigative news programme [Noticias Uno](#) said it had seen a military intelligence report which suggested that the surge in violence between the two rival groups had been triggered by "the loss of a multi-million-dollar cocaine shipment in November 2024".

According to the report, a member of the Farc dissident group known as Frente 33 came to an agreement with their rivals from the ELN to "not interfere" with each other's cocaine production and shipments.

Both the ELN and the remnants of the Farc rebel group which remained active after the main guerrilla group signed a peace agreement in 2016 are heavily involved in the drugs trade.

The pact between the two groups seems to have broken down over the "lost" cocaine shipment, the intelligence report suggests.

Although it is not clear which "lost" stash the report is referring to, Colombian media have pointed out that in December last year counter-narcotics agents in the Dominican Republic seized 9.5 tonnes of cocaine which they said had originated in Catatumbo.

The mountainous region, on Colombia's north-eastern border with Venezuela, is a hotspot for cocaine production and trafficking.

President Petro, who was a member of a left-wing rebel group in his youth, said this week that "what happened in Catatumbo is yet another example of a shift from insurgent guerrillas to narco-armed organisations".

He also referred to the ELN as a "mafia".

Petro campaigned on a promise to bring "total peace" to Colombia but last week he said that "the ELN has no will for peace".

Farc
Drugs trade
Colombia