ecoi.net

Document #2113459

IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (Author)

Colombia: National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, ELN), including activities and areas of operation and influence; ability to track individuals who move to other areas of the country; profiles of individuals it would be motivated to track and target; state response, including the peace process; state protection for ELN targets (2022–July 2024) [COL201938.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

Sources describe the ELN as Colombia's "largest remaining rebel group" (Al Jazeera 2023-06-09; AP 2023-12-26). According to *Jane's Country Risk Daily Report*, which provides "open-source defence intelligence" (Janes n.d.), the ELN continues to be active in 2023 and has taken advantage of the "demobilisation" of another armed group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC), by expanding its territorial reach and becoming "Colombia's primary NSAG [non-state armed group] threat" (2024-03-12). For information on the FARC, particularly FARC dissident groups, their activities, areas of operation and influence, and ability to track and target individuals across Colombia, see Response to Information Request COL201939 of July 2024.

In a humanitarian report on Colombia, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) indicates that "[c]onfrontations between the government and armed groups decreased in 2023, while disputes between non-state armed actors intensified," noting one conflict between the government

and the ELN, one between the ELN and the Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, AGC) [also known as the Gulf Clan (Clan del Golfo), Los Urabeños, and Clan Úsuga], and one between the ELN and a FARC dissident group (2024-04-03).

La Silla Vacía, a Spanish-language news website in Colombia (La Silla Vacía n.d.), citing [translation] "confidential" data obtained from the Ministry of Defence, reports that the number of ELN members has increased to 6,158 during the first half of 2023 (2024-03-13). The same source indicates that while the ELN has the largest number of members of any armed group in Colombia, the early 2023 figure cited represents a [translation] "moderate growth of 5.3 percent" when compared to the 5,851 members recorded for 2022 (La Silla Vacía 2024-03-13). According to October 2022 information available on the US *Counter Terrorism Guide*—a website concerning "international terrorist threats" produced by the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence's National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)—there are "approximately 2,500 [ELN] fighters" (US 2022-10).

2. Areas of Operation and Influence

Citing data from the Ministry of Defence and without naming particular regions, the article by La Silla Vacía notes that as of the first half of 2023, the ELN operates in 19 departments and 184 municipalities across the country (2024-03-13). According to a map prepared by the Peace and Reconciliation Foundation (Fundación Paz & Reconciliación, Pares), an organization that conducts research to support democracy, peace and human rights in Colombia (Pares n.d.), the ELN has a presence in 231 municipalities across Colombia (Pares 2024-05-22). This map, available online, indicates the type of presence the ELN has across the country, including [translation] "inactive," "new presence," and "continuous presence" (Pares 2024-05-22). The map indicates that the group is present in many municipalities in the western part of the country, including Cauca and Nariño; eastern parts of the country, including Arauca, Vichada, and parts of La Guajira and Cesar; as well as from Chocó to Norte de Santander, including northern Antioquia and southern Bolívar (Pares 2024-05-22).

In a report on armed conflict in Colombia, the Ideas for Peace Foundation (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, FIP), an [translation] "independent" Colombian think tank that aims to contribute to "peace, security, and sustainable development" in Colombia (FIP n.d.), states that the ELN "controls most of the [Arauca] department" (2024-02-13, 3). The FIP report also indicates that the ELN has a presence in the following areas:

- Southern Cauca
- Northern Cauca
- Bajo Cauca region in Antioquia, northeastern Antioquia and southern Bolívar

- Cordillera area of Nariño and Guambuyaco
- Southern and central Chocó, northern Buenaventura (Bajo Calima)
- Catatumbo
- Northern Antioquia and southern Bolívar
- Pacific area of Nariño
- Buenaventura's southern rural areas (2024-02-13).

Sources report that the ELN has expanded in Venezuela [translation] "in recent years" (InSight Crime 2024-06-18; Indepaz 2024-05-07). InSight Crime, a think tank and media organization that studies organized crime in the Americas (Insight Crime n.d.), adds that the ELN has "established itself as a binational guerrilla group" (2024-06-18).

In an interview with the Research Directorate, a professor at Antioquia University whose research focuses on [translation] "armed conflict, peace negotiations and post conflict," stated that armed groups "are not spread throughout the country," but rather have varying levels of presence in different territories (Professor 2024-06-25). The Professor indicated that the ELN has a [translation] "strong presence" in the departments of Arauca, Chocó, Cauca, southern Bolívar and northern Antioquia, and "less presence" in Norte de Santander and southern Córdoba (2024-06-25).

According to an article by the Associated Press (AP), despite the peace agreement signed in 2016 between the Colombian government and the FARC, "violence" continues to affect communities in rural areas of the country "where the ELN has been active, along with FARC holdout groups and drug trafficking gangs" (2023-08-03). La Silla Vacía states that the data provided by the Ministry of Defence shows that the [translation] "[T]otal [P]eace policy has not been effective in stopping the expansion of armed groups" (2024-03-13). For information on the Total Peace policy, see Section 5 of this Response.

Citing a [translation] "report on actions in the framework of the ceasefire," Pares states that "the ELN continues to carry out actions in the departments where it has historically had a presence," and adds that conflict between armed groups has "mainly occurred in departments such as Chocó, Bolívar and Antioquia" (2024-02-21, 5).

3. Activities

The information in the following section was provided by the US NCTC's *Counter Terrorism Guide* and the US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2023*:

Members of the ELN are equipped with "small arms, machine[guns], mines, and [improvised explosive devices (IEDs)]" and the group engages

in "armed assaults, assassinations, extortion operations, and hostage-takings" (2022-10).

Armed groups such as the ELN "committed unlawful killings" mainly in areas with weaker government presence and where "illicit" economies exist (2024-04-22, 16). Additionally, the ELN "committed crimes and acts of terror throughout the country, including bombings, violence against civilian populations, and violent attacks against military and police facilities" (2024-04-22, 13). The Attorney General's Office of Colombia (Fiscalía General de la Nación) states that "45 cases with 93 homicides of civilians not related to the conflict but committed by FARC dissidents, ELN, and other illegal armed groups" occurred from 1 January to 31 July 2023 (2024-04-22, 16). Data from the Centre for Research and Popular Education / Peace Program (Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular / Programa por la Paz, CINEP/PPP), [a Colombian non-profit human rights organization run by the country's Compañía de Jesús [Jesuit Order] (CINEP/PPP n.d.)], indicates that "the ELN and criminal organizations were responsible for four documented cases of serious physical abuse that included seven victims" from January through August 2023 (2024-04-22, 18).

3.1 Kidnapping and Extortion

In an interview with the Research Directorate, an assistant professor in the Professional Security Studies Department at New Jersey City University, whose research focuses on drug trafficking, organized crime, and security in Latin America, including Colombia, stated that "[k]idnapping, ransom and extortion are lucrative sources of money for armed groups" (Assistant Professor 2024-06-18). Jane's Country Risk Daily Report specifies that for the ELN, kidnapping for ransom "has been an important source of revenue" since its inception (2023-11-06). According to a 2024 AP article, although the ELN "has been reluctant to disclose how many hostages it is currently holding," the Ministry of Defence estimates that the group "could be holding at least 38 civilians" (2024-02-06). US Country Reports 2023 also cites data from Colombia's Ministry of Defence indicating that there were 13 kidnappings "attributed" to the ELN from 1 January to 20 June 2023 (2024-04-22, 17–18).

Sources report that in October 2023, the ELN's detachment in northern Colombia kidnapped the parents of a Colombian national soccer player, which jeopardized the ceasefire agreement (AP 2024-02-06; *Jane's Country Risk Daily Report* 2023-11-06). The same sources report that the player's mother was freed hours later (*Jane's Country Risk Daily Report* 2023-11-06) or that the police rescued the mother soon after, "while his father was released 12 days later following numerous protests and petitions" (AP 2024-02-06).

Infobae, a Spanish-language online news outlet from Argentina (*The Washington Post* 2016-06-08), reports that a police sergeant and her two

children were kidnapped by the ELN on 3 July 2023 in the department of Arauca and released on 7 July 2023 (2023-07-07). According to US *Country Reports 2023*, on 29 July 2023, the ELN kidnapped a commander of the police force in Genova, Nariño, who was released on 2 August 2023 "as part of the demands made by the national government during the August 3 start of the bilateral ceasefire with the ELN" (US 2024-04-22, 18).

3.2 Illicit Economies

Human Rights Watch states in its report covering the events of 2023 that " [n]umerous armed groups," including the ELN, "operate in Colombia fueled by illegal economies," such as "drug trafficking and illegal mining" (2024-01-11, 161). According to US *Country Reports 2023*, Colombian security forces indicate that the ELN and other armed groups engage in "illegal mining of gold, coal, coltan, nickel, copper, and other minerals" and that such "[i]llegal" mines, operating under unsafe conditions, are "particularly common in the departments of Antioquia, Boyacá, Choco, Cundinamarca, and Valle del Cauca" (2024-04-22, 49). InSight Crime reports that the ELN engages in "illegal mining" activities in Venezuela "with the blessing of military and political sectors" loyal to Venezuela's President (2024-06-18).

According to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), "an independent civil-society organization, headquartered in Geneva" (GI-TOC n.d.), criminal groups in Colombia "engage in deforestation primarily through extortion practices" and the ELN, as well as FARC dissident groups, are "the major players in deforestation" (2023, 4). For information on FARC dissident groups, see Response to Information Request COL201939 of July 2024.

4. Ability to Track Individuals

According to the Assistant Professor, although it "mainly" operates in jungle and rural areas of Colombia, the ELN is not concentrated in a single zone and there is no region in Colombia "beyond the reach" of armed groups, including the ELN (2024-06-18). The Assistant Professor added that for those targeted by this group, relocating to large urban cities, such as Bogotá or Medellín, "does not necessarily mean one is safe" (2024-06-18). The same source indicated that the ELN uses its "cells and connections," as well as intelligence gathered from "corrupt" authorities, obtained "by paying [them] the right price," to locate its targets (Assistant Professor 2024-06-18). The Professor stated that an armed group's ability to track their target depends on whether they have [translation] "territorial dominance" in the area where the target is located; in such areas, the armed group has access to resources such as weapons, businesses, and "men" (2024-06-25). However, the same source added that information is [translation] "costly and difficult" to collect in areas where armed groups have "shared" control with other armed groups or state authorities, or where they have little to no presence, such as in large

urban cities like Bogotá, which are "heavily monitored by authorities" (Professor 2024-06-28).

The Professor stated that moving to a large urban area [translation] "does not completely reduce the risk" to an individual targeted if the armed group considers them to be of "high value," to represent a "high risk [for the ELN]," or to be a "traitor" to the group, such that it would be motivated to track them in areas where it does not have a large presence (2024-06-28). According to the same source, people who relocate from a rural area where [translation] "the ELN holds sway" to a large city may still face "some risks," and could not enjoy a "normal" life, as they would have to "live carefully and take precautions" with their job, home, and social networks (Professor 2024-06-28).

According to a criminal index [1] published by InSight Crime, the ELN scored 40 out of a possible 40 points on its "territorial reach" in 2023; InSight Crime notes its "extensive presence in Venezuela," where it operates in "19 of the 20 municipalities bordering Colombia," controlling "more [border] crossing points, drug production zones, and smuggling routes than the Venezuelan state," and receiving "protection" from the Maduro regime in Venezuela (2024-01-03). The same source adds that the ELN scored 30 out of 40 points on its level of "state penetration" (InSight Crime 2024-01-03).

4.1 Motivation to Track and Profiles of Individuals Targeted

The Assistant Professor stated that while the ELN targets "multiple actors," people living in rural areas "where institutions are weaker" tend to "suffer more," and Indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations "have been devastated by the armed conflict" (2024-06-18). The same source noted that these groups target those who "owe them money" or those who "they want to extort," including landholders and journalists, and added that union leaders are also at risk in Colombia (Assistant Professor 2024-06-18).

US *Country Reports 2023* indicates that armed groups, including the ELN, "threatened and killed government officials," noting that the ELN "threatened to attack some local political candidates who did not support" them (2024-04-22, 26). The US further reports in its *Counter Terrorism Guide* that the ELN "mostly attacks the Colombian Government, military forces, and critical infrastructure," and adds that the group "also targets civilians" (2022-10). Freedom House notes that "resource-rich zones and drug-trafficking corridors," in particular, "remain highly insecure," and adds that armed groups including the ELN "regularly abuse the civilian population, especially in coca-growing areas" (2024-02-29, Sec. F3).

According to Jane's Country Risk Daily Report, an increase in "militant activity" by the ELN and other armed groups "has led to increased violence against ethnic communities as well as forced displacement and

land grabbing" (2024-03-12). A report on the UN verification mission in Colombia, which covers the period from 27 December 2023 to 26 March 2024, writes that "[r]ural communities, in particular Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities and women and children within them," are affected "disproportionately from the persisting violence and lack of development in many regions of Colombia where the presence of the State remains insufficient" (UN 2024-03-27, para. 97). For information on the situation of Afro-Colombians, including treatment by armed groups, see Response to Information Request COL201565 of August 2023.

5. State Response and the Peace Process

Freedom House indicates that in December 2022, the administration of President Gustavo Petro resumed peace talks with the ELN for the first time since 2019 (2024-02-29, Sec. F3). Media sources report that Petro aims to achieve "total peace" by engaging in negotiations with the ELN and other armed groups in Colombia (Al Jazeera 2023-06-09; Reuters 2023-06-09). Sources report that the Colombian government and the ELN agreed to a six-month ceasefire beginning on 3 August 2023 (Reuters 2023-06-09; Al Jazeera 2023-06-09; AP 2023-08-03). The AP adds that the ceasefire seeks to "suspend attacks" between the ELN and Colombian authorities across the country (2023-08-03).

Freedom House notes that despite the government's 2023 ceasefires and peace agreements with the ELN and FARC dissident groups, "reports of violence continue" (2024-02-29, Sec. F3). The AP states that the ceasefire "has reduced fighting" between the government and the ELN; however, reports of the ELN "recruiting teenagers" and funding its operations through "extorsion and kidnappings" during the ceasefire have led to questions on the truce's ability to "improve security for civilians in rural areas" (2024-02-06). Citing a Colombia analyst for International Crisis Group, the AP writes that despite a reduction in clashes between the ELN and government during the ceasefire, violence in Colombia continues because its source has long been "combats between illegal groups, and [the] pressure they exert on civilians" (2024-02-06).

Sources report that on 6 February 2024, the Colombian government and the ELN extended the ceasefire by another six months, with the ELN agreeing to halt kidnappings of civilians for ransom (UN 2024-03-27, para. 8, 9; AP 2024-02-06). According to the UN mission verification report, this extension marks the "longest ceasefire" between the ELN and the Colombian government (2024-03-27, para. 8). Citing remarks made by Colombia's peace commissioner during a radio interview, the AP writes that although "'[m]any of the peace deals that have been signed in this country have had little impact on the ground'," it remains "'important to work on territorial peace'" (2024-02-06).

For further information on the Total Peace Agenda, see Response to

Information Request COL201567 of August 2023.

6. State Protection

The FIP report indicates the following:

So far, the actions implemented by the Government in terms of security and dialogues with the armed groups have not had clear positive effects on the areas where there are clashes between the [Estado Mayor Central (EMC), a FARC dissident group] and the ELN in Arauca and Cauca, or between the EMC in alliance with the ELN against the Clan del Golfo in Bajo Cauca and southern Bolívar department. Nor in the disputes between the ELN and the Clan del Golfo in southern Chocó and northern Buenaventura, or between the two FARC's dissident factions in Nariño. (2024-02-13, 4)

According to the Assistant Professor, the Colombian government has not been able to adequately protect individuals from armed groups due to institutional and economic challenges, including "corruption" and ties between the state and organized crime (2024-06-18). The Assistant Professor noted that although the state has measures and laws to protect individuals, "they have not always been effective" (2024-06-18). GI-TOC similarly states that while legislation to protect survivors of armed conflict exists,

the implementation of these laws often falls short, leading to delays and shortcomings. Government inefficiencies in investigating, prosecuting and convicting criminals highlight the need for improved crime-fighting strategies. Witness protection is also a concern, with individuals facing threats, especially from organized-crime networks. Rural and [I]ndigenous communities, as well as activists, lack sufficient protection from the government, making it difficult for them to seek justice through formal channels. (GI-TOC 2023, 7)

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

Note

[1] The InSight Crime index is based on a methodology developed to

map, measure, and analyze the characteristics of criminal groups with an established territorial presence ... us[ing] information obtained through fieldwork, interviews, and databases to measure the following variables: territorial reach (40 points), criminal economies (40 points), state

penetration (40 points), military capacity (40 points), structure (40 points), leadership (20 points), and criminal alliances (10 points). (2024-01-03)

References

Al Jazeera. 2023-06-09. "Colombia and ELN Rebel Group Sign Ceasefire Agreement." [Accessed 2024-06-13]

Assistant Professor, New Jersey City University. 2024-06-18. Interview with the Research Directorate.

Associated Press (AP). 2024-02-06. Manuel Rueda & Astrid Suárez. "Colombia Extends Cease-Fire with National Liberation Army as Rebels Promise to Stop Kidnappings." [Accessed 2024-06-13]

Associated Press (AP). 2023-12-26. Manuel Rueda. "Colombia's ELN Rebels Say They Will Only Stop Kidnappings for Ransom if Government Funds Cease-Fire." [Accessed 2024-06-13]

Associated Press (AP). 2023-08-03. Juan Francisco Valbuena. "Colombia Begins a Six-Month Cease-Fire with Its Last Remaining Rebel Group in Hopes of Forging Peace." [Accessed 2024-06-13]

Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular / Programa por la Paz (CINEP/PPP). N.d. "Nosotros." [Accessed 2024-07-05]

Freedom House. 2024-02-29. "Colombia." *Freedom in the World 2024*. [Accessed 2024-05-10]

Fundación Ideas para la Paz (FIP). 2024-02-13. María Victoria Llorente. *Total Peace: Armed Groups Win Head and Shoulders*. [Accessed 2024-06-21]

Fundación Ideas para la Paz (FIP). N.d. "Quiénes Somos." [Accessed 2024-06-28]

Fundación Paz & Reconciliación (Pares). 2024-05-22. Liliana Espitia. "Presencia ELN en Colombia 2024." [Accessed 2024-06-28]

Fundación Paz & Reconciliación (Pares). 2024-02-21. *Informe especial sobre el proceso de paz con el ELN*. [Accessed 2024-06-27]

Fundación Paz & Reconciliación (Pares). N.d. "Somos Pares." [Accessed 2024-07-04]

Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). 2023. "Colombia." *Global Organized Crime Index*. [Accessed 2024-06-20]

Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). N.d.

"About Us." [Accessed 2024-07-02]

Human Rights Watch. 2024-01-11. "Colombia." World Report 2024: Events of 2023. [Accessed 2024-06-12]

Infobae. 2023-07-07. Sergio Rodríguez Rey. "ELN liberó a la sargento Karina Ramírez y sus hijos." [Accessed 2024-07-09]

InSight Crime. 2024-06-18. "National Liberation Army (ELN)." [Accessed 2024-06-12]

InSight Crime. 2024-01-03. "GameChangers 2023: Top 5 Criminal Newsmakers." [Accessed 2024-06-20]

InSight Crime. N.d. "About Us." [Accessed 2024-07-04]

Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (Indepaz). 2024-05-07. Daniela Castillo. "Proceso de paz con el ELN: diálogos regionales como alternativa histórica." [Accessed 2024-06-12]

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). 2024-04-03. "Colombia." *Humanitarian Report 2024*. [Accessed 2024-06-13]

Janes. N.d. "About." [Accessed 2024-07-09]

Jane's Country Risk Daily Report. 2024-03-12. "Colombia - Country Overview." (Janes) [Accessed 2024-06-13]

Jane's Country Risk Daily Report. 2023-11-06. "Kidnapping of Footballer's Father Threatens to Derail ELN Peace Process in Colombia." (Janes) [Accessed 2024-07-03]

La Silla Vacía. 2024-03-13. Santiago Rodríguez Álvarez. "Cifras secretas del gobierno confirman que todos los grupos armados crecieron." [Accessed 2024-06-21]

La Silla Vacía. N.d. "¿Qué es la Silla Vacía?" [Accessed 2024-06-21]

Professor, Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia. 2024-06-25. Interview with the Research Directorate.

Reuters. 2024-06-09. Nelson Acosta. "Colombia, ELN Rebels Declare Ceasefire as Latest Cycle of Talks Ends." [Accessed 2024-06-13]

United Nations (UN). 2024-03-27. Security Council. *United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia: Report of the Secretary General*. (S/2024/267) [Accessed 2024-06-13]

United States (US). 2024-04-22. Department of State. "Colombia." *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2023*. [Accessed 2024-05-10]

United States (US). 2022-10. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Office of the Director of National Intelligence. "National Liberation Army (ELN)." *Counter Terrorism Guide*. [Accessed 2024-06-19]

The Washington Post. 2016-06-08. "Infobae Now Powered by The Washington Post's Arc Technology." [Accessed 2024-07-09]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Assistant professor at a Colombian university whose research focuses on urban violence and state responses to crime and violence in Latin America, including Colombia; Centro de Recursos para el Análisis de Conflictos; International Crisis Group; Fundación Paz y Reconciliación; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime; Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz; International Committee of the Red Cross.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; Armed Conflict Location and Event Data; Austrian Red Cross – ecoi.net; BBC; Bertelsmann Stiftung; Colombia – Defensoria del Pueblo, Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz, Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, Ministerio de Tecnologías de la Información y las Comunicaciones; Colombia Reports; Conflict and Environment Observatory; EU – EU Agency for Asylum; Runrun.es; *Small Wars Journals*; United States Institute of Peace; Universidad del Rosario – Observatorio Colombiano de Crimen Organizado; Washington Office on Latin America.

Associated documents

Document ID 2113459 Translation / language version

10 July 2024 | IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (Author)

Colombia

Query response on Colombia: National Liberation Army (ELN - Ejército de Liberación Nacional) (2022 - July 2024) (areas of operation and influence; activities; kidnapping and extortion; ability to track individuals; state response and peace process; state protection)

Colombie : information sur l'Armée de libération nationale (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN), y compris ses activités ainsi que ses zones d'opération et d'influence; sa capacité de retrouver des

personnes qui déménagent ailleurs au pays; les profils des personnes qu'elle voudrait retrouver et prendre pour cible; la réponse de l'État, y compris le processus de paix; la protection offerte par l'État aux cibles de l'ELN (2022-juillet 2024) [COL201938.EF] (Response, French)

fr

ID 2113460

Austrian Red Cross Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien T +43 1 589 00 583 F +43 1 589 00 589 info@ecoi.net Contact Imprint & Disclaimer F.A.Q. Data Protection Notice

ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.











