COLOMBIA
Escalation of violence in southern Bolívar

Thematic Report
15 January 2026

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Aim

This report analyses the humanitarian crisis in southern Bolívar – the result of an escalation of violence driven by territorial disputes among non-state armed groups (NSAGs) over strategic corridors and illegal economies, especially with gold mining gaining increased prominence in recent years. It provides a protection-led analysis, with a focus on the impact of explosive ordnance (EO) and severe humanitarian constraints. The report details how these factors trigger sectoral spillovers across the subregion's seven municipalities. The findings aim to inform humanitarian decision-making and response-planning.

Methodology

This report is based on a comprehensive desk review of secondary data sources, including humanitarian reports, UN publications, government documents, and national or local news outlets. The analysis period spans January–November 2025, with secondary information collected between October–November. This review is complemented by 17 key informant interviews (KII) conducted between November–December with NGOs, local institutions, conflict experts, social leaders, and community-based organisations.

Southern Bolívar forms part of the broader Magdalena Medio region. For this report, the focus is limited to seven municipalities: Arenal, Cantagallo, Montecristo, Morales, San Pablo, Santa Rosa del Sur, and Simití.

When available, data was disaggregated by municipality, affected population, and humanitarian sector. That said, uneven information coverage across municipalities may overrepresent areas with higher humanitarian presence or more active civic administrations. Consequently, certain rural sectors with restricted access may be underreported despite facing similar protection risks. This imbalance may affect the interpretation of trends, potentially obscuring the scale of humanitarian impacts.

Limitations and information gaps

A major limitation is the persistent lack of disaggregated and verifiable data on risks, which significantly hinders triangulation and the development of an evidence-based understanding of the crisis. This gap likely leads to an underestimation of humanitarian needs and risks, specifically regarding gender-based violence (GBV), recruitment, and EO, limiting the ability to accurately assess severity and requiring that some findings be interpreted with caution given lower confidence levels. Reporting remains limited given the social control that NSAGs maintain, as well as fear of retaliation and distrust in institutions among people. In municipalities such as Montecristo and Cantagallo, groups have announced that they will consider a military target anyone sharing information for censuses or visiting institutional offices (KII 10/12/2025; GIFMM et al. unpublished). Systematic underreporting from fear of retaliation undermines the reliability of needs assessments, directly impeding accurate humanitarian targeting. This information gap risks mischaracterising the crisis and misallocating resources across affected municipalities, as the lack of verifiable data obscures the true scale and urgency of protection needs.

Conflict and difficult terrain characterised by high altitudes and reliance on fluvial transport – further restricted by weather conditions – restrict mobility, hindering humanitarian assessment and monitoring of the situation, leaving the specific needs of dispersed rural populations in the highest areas of the Serrania de San Lucas largely undocumented (KII 04/12/2025 a; KII 04/12/2025 b).

Critical gaps remain regarding the exact location of high-risk routes with EO contamination, elevating risks specifically for agricultural workers and children travelling to school. A lack of confirmed figures on the recruitment and use of children associated with armed groups also persists. At the same time, there is a lack of quantitative data on GBV impacts, as well as the specific vulnerabilities facing the LGBTQ+ community. That said, qualitative information collected from KIIs recognises the protection risks associated with GBV. Regarding displacement, while figures exist for the number of people affected by mass and individual events, granular data on displacement patterns remains limited given their highly dynamic and short-range nature, specifically concerning arrival locations and updated statistics on returnees. Information on the differentiated impacts that Afro-Colombian communities, women, and children face also remains scarce.

To mitigate these limitations and information gaps, efforts were made to clearly identify the areas where data was lacking. Targeted interviews with NGOs, local institutions and community-based organisations addressed identified data gaps, improving the granularity and accuracy of the analysis, especially regarding the presence and behaviour of NSAGs, access constraints, and protection risks at the municipal level. Still, significant gaps remain regarding the scale and severity of humanitarian needs, differentiated impacts on specific population groups, and quantitative trends over time, as underreporting and access restrictions continue to affect these issues.

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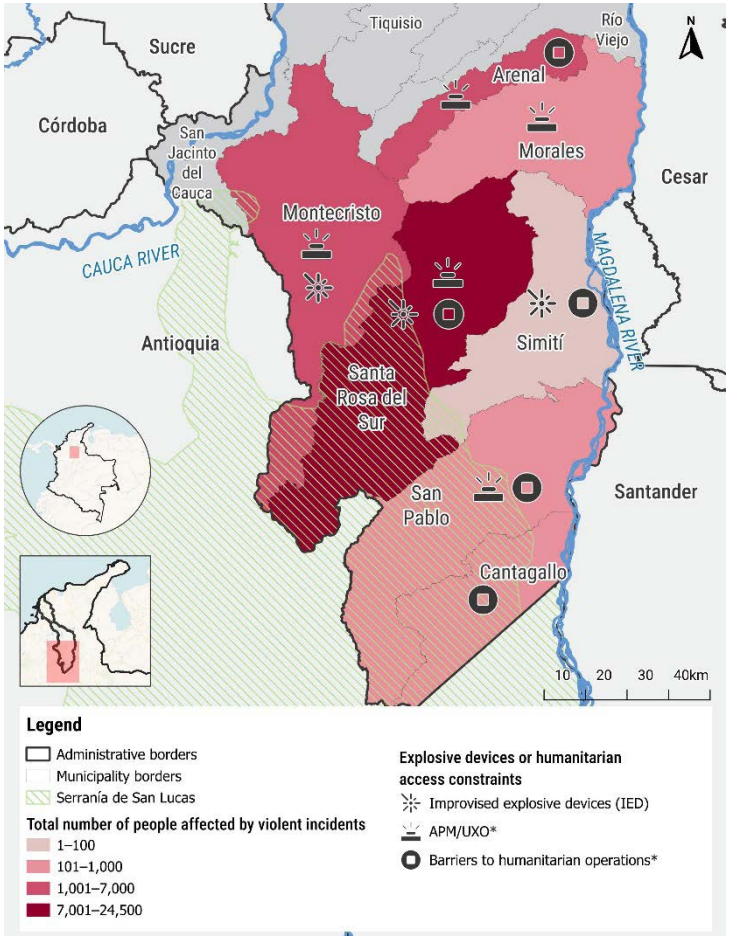


Sources: ACAPS using data from MinAmbiente/SIAC (accessed 31/12/2025); OCHA (accessed 11/12/2025); AICMA (accessed 03/12/2025); Magdalena Medio LCT (unpublished)

Note: municipalities that experienced events related to antipersonnel mines (APM) and unexploded ordnance (UXO) were identified using Acción Integral Contra Minas Antipersonal data from January–September 2025. Remaining data was sourced from the OCHA Humanitarian Monitor. Information on locations affected by barriers to humanitarian operations was further triangulated using unpublished documentation from the Magdalena Medio Local Coordination Team.

Table 1. Population and poverty statistics in southern Bolívar municipalities

Municipality	Total population (2026 projection)	% of rural population	% of Afro-Colombian population	% of rural population in poverty
Arenal	8,767	41.1	33.9	64.3
Cantagallo	8,924	44.6	5.6	68.6
Montecristo	16,337	76.9	19.1	72.0
Morales	26,067	69.6	0.8	62.2
San Pablo	29,312	19.8	0.5	66.3
Santa Rosa del Sur	33,538	39.2	0.4	57.5
Simití	18,410	67.4	0.7	59.7
Bolívar (department)	2,251,190	26.1	20.5	21.5
Colombia	53,399,171	24.1	7.0	24.3

21.5 72

Source: ACAPS using data from DANE (accessed 28/11/2025 a); DANE (accessed 28/11/2025 b); DANE (accessed 28/11/2025 c); DANE (accessed 28/11/2025 d); DANE (accessed 27/11/2025); DANE (accessed 21/11/2025 a); DANE (accessed 21/11/2025 b)

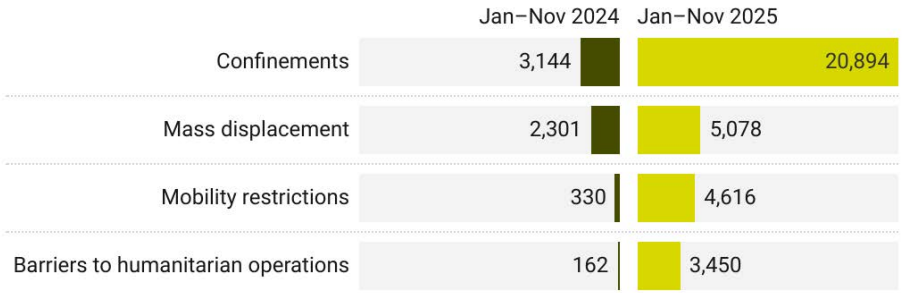
Note: rural poverty estimates are based on the 2024 Multidimensional Poverty Index. Municipal data is from 2018, the most recent official data available. Indigenous population shares are excluded as they do not exceed 0.2% in any municipality.

Escalating violence in southern Bolívar has triggered a severe protection crisis with cascading multisectoral impacts. As the Gaitanist Army of Colombia (EGC), National Liberation Army (ELN), and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) dissident groups present in several municipalities dispute the strategic Serranía de San Lucas corridor, illegal checkpoints, threats against civilians, and the withdrawal of humanitarian and civic authority personnel restrict access to essential services, aggravating pre-existing structural vulnerabilities, such as poverty, rural isolation, and informal economies, among others.

At the national level, Bolívar has emerged as one of the departments most affected by forced displacement and confinement. This ranking is largely driven by the situation in southern Bolívar, where intensified territorial disputes among NSAGs across the seven municipalities – Arenal, Cantagallo, Montecristo, Morales, San Pablo, Santa Rosa del Sur, and Simití – have resulted in repeated mass displacement and confinement events concentrated in rural areas. As a result, Bolívar currently ranks fourth in the country for recorded confinement events, following Cauca, Chocó, and Valle del Cauca. Regarding displacement, Bolívar ranks third nationwide, behind only Cauca and Antioquia (OCHA accessed 22/12/2025). Individual displacement is the dominant modality in the department, with 11,892 people displaced between January–September (Blumont/3iS accessed 01/12/2025). Available data does not currently allow for a qualitative comparison of how confinement and displacement dynamics, such as duration or enforcement, differ between southern Bolívar and other affected regions.

Between January–November, 20,894 people in southern Bolívar were confined, 5,078 experienced displacement, and 4,616 faced mobility restrictions. Mobility restrictions increased the most rapidly, surging by 1,299% in 2025 after affecting 330 people during the same period in 2024. Mass displacement rose by 121%, from a baseline of 2,301 people in 2024, while confinement figures increased by 565%, from 3,144 people affected in 2024 (OCHA accessed 11/12/2025). These sharp escalations reflect an increase in the frequency and geographic scope of events compared to 2024.

Figure 1. Reported number of people affected by the main violence indicators in southern Bolívar, January–November 2025, compared with the same period in 2024



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Source: ACAPS using data from OCHA (accessed 11/12/2025); OCHA (accessed 04/12/2025)

This territorial dispute between NSAGs has intensified targeted killings, child recruitment, EO contamination, and attacks on civilian infrastructure. These risks are linked to efforts to assert and consolidate territorial control over strategic corridors, positioning the context in southern Bolívar as an emerging humanitarian crisis in 2025 (OCHA 24/10/2025; KII 03/12/2025 c).

NSAGs exert territorial control through widespread confinements, mass displacement, and widespread EO use. EO contamination functions as a deliberate tool of territorial control by restricting civilian movement, denying access to agricultural areas, obstructing transit routes to essential services, such as education and healthcare, and deterring humanitarian presence and returns from displacement (KII 03/12/2025 a; KII 03/12/2025 c).

This control includes threats, co-optation, and coercion against community action boards (JACs), limiting their capacity to operate and affecting local organisational processes (KII 28/11/2025). JACs are nonprofit civic and social entities that unite residents to promote community development and participatory democracy. Operating in almost every rural settlement, they are the primary form of organisation in Colombia and remain essential for reaching dispersed rural populations in need of humanitarian assistance (MinInterior 18/03/2020). Such pressure on these groups is part of a broader strategy of governance substitution, in which NSAGs seek to replace or undermine civic authorities and community structures, consolidating territorial control and influence over decision-making (KII 03/12/2025 b; KII 03/12/2025 c). The upcoming April 2026 elections for JACs, presidency, and congress might increase the risk of coercion and interference in local governance. The combination of armed intimidation and physical constraints, such as the region's difficult geography and climate, limits humanitarian access and the visibility of the crisis's scale (KII 04/12/2025 a). Ultimately, this undermines the effectiveness of the humanitarian response, hindering the timely delivery of life-saving aid to affected people.

Structural deficiencies compound the current conflict. All affected municipalities are sixth-category jurisdictions, the lowest fiscal tier in Colombia, limiting institutional presence and essential services (DP 28/09/2023). These budget constraints interact with conflict dynamics by creating a governance vacuum that NSAGs exploit to consolidate territorial control and impose parallel authority (KII 03/12/2025 b). Fiscal limitations concretely reduce the number of healthcare and educational personnel, leaving civic authorities and community responders unable to effectively mitigate displacement, confinement, and other protection risks.

Alarming poverty indicators further evidence these gaps. Except for Santa Rosa del Sur, every municipality exhibits Unsatisfied Basic Needs Index (NBI) levels exceeding 34.48% (DANE accessed 16/12/2025). As the region's commercial and mining hub, Santa Rosa del Sur's prosperity attracts armed interest, intensifying territorial disputes. Conversely, high NBI levels elsewhere diminish community coping capacities, leaving them less able to withstand the shocks of displacement and confinement (DP 28/09/2023). The most relevant deprivation dimensions for current needs include inadequate access to health services, limited educational opportunities, lack of basic utilities, and constrained livelihoods. The Multidimensional Poverty Index for the rural population across southern Bolívar fluctuates significantly, ranging between 57.5–72% (DANE 31/01/2020). These socioeconomic conditions aggravate the humanitarian crisis.

As the conflict intensifies, KIIs indicate that the context in southern Bolívar could escalate into a high-intensity crisis under certain conditions, such as further territorial disputes and increased attacks against civilians. The concern lies in shared humanitarian patterns with the early 2025 Catatumbo crisis – a rapid surge in violence that left tens of thousands facing mass displacement, confinement, threats, and attacks against civilians, triggering an institutional collapse. Southern Bolívar is following an escalation speed that threatens to overwhelm local response capacities, highlighting the urgent need for monitoring and humanitarian response (KII 03/12/2025 a; OCHA 21/03/2025).

DRIVERS

The EGC, the ELN, and FARC-EP dissident groups are actively competing for territorial control of southern Bolívar and revenue from illegal economies in the area (EE 06/10/2025). A 2023 Ombudsman's Office early warning that remains in effect identified Arenal, Cantagallo, Morales, San Pablo, Santa Rosa del Sur, and Simití as high-risk municipalities (DP accessed 06/01/2026). The primary risk driver is the EGC's expansion into former ELN and FARC-EP territories to seize and control lucrative natural resource enclaves and strategic corridors (DP 28/09/2023). This offensive strategy to weaken the ELN nationally through territorial gains in southern Bolívar generates severe humanitarian impacts. The EGC's expansion is particularly destabilising because it imposes strict social and political control over communities, establishing rules of conduct that undermine the autonomy of local community organisations (La Silla Vacía 24/05/2024).

Strategic corridors

Southern Bolívar serves as a critical revenue-generating and transit hub for NSAGs, where the exploitation of gold in the Serranía de San Lucas fuels the conflict and strategic corridors connect distinct conflict fronts across Colombia (DP 10/02/2025; Dialogue Earth 12/12/2024). The Serranía de San Lucas acts as a strategic chokepoint for illicit trafficking between the Panamanian and Venezuelan borders. Its rugged terrain and remote location limit state reach and surveillance and heighten the risk of EO contamination along key transit routes (KII 03/12/2025 b; Vorágine 15/09/2024). Control over this corridor allows NSAGs to connect the western (Urabá–Chocó) and eastern (Catatumbo–southern Cesar) flanks, consolidating access to cross-border markets and increasing their resilience against military presence (La Silla Vacía 24/05/2024).

For the EGC, consolidating control in southern Bolívar is a key step for completing a continuous strategic corridor extending towards the Venezuelan border into Catatumbo region. Municipalities including Arenal, Cantagallo, Morales, Santa Rosa del Sur, and Simití are critical nodes, enabling control over river transport along the Magdalena River and mobility routes towards the Caribbean (KII 03/12/2025 b).

Illegal economies

Southern Bolívar serves as a strategic area for two primary illegal economies: coca cultivation and gold mining. On the one hand, NSAGs have historically benefited from coca trafficking; approximately 80% of the department's coca crops are concentrated in the subregion, making it a critical epicentre for both the production and transit of illegal goods. This concentration heightens the humanitarian risk for farmer communities, who face increased protection threats as NSAGs impose strict territorial control to secure cocaine production (Vorágine 15/09/2024). On the other hand, the expansion of various armed groups since 2020 has consolidated gold mining as the dominant driver of territorial competition, a trend that has intensified through 2025. Although both illegal economies coexist, the high profitability and liquidity of gold have shifted the conflict's focus (Pares 06/03/2025; KII 03/12/2025 b). Crucially, the dynamics surrounding NSAGs' efforts to secure these revenues have severely aggravated the humanitarian situation (ACH et al. 11/03/2024).

Control over gold mining zones in the Serranía de San Lucas drives territorial competition, resulting in EO use to secure mines, forced labour, and the confinement of nearby communities (KII 03/12/2025 b). In 2024, Bolívar had the third-highest level of alluvial gold exploitation (AGE) in Colombia, with 99% of the department's AGE concentrated in protected zones in the Serranía de San Lucas (Vorágine 15/09/2024; UNODC 09/06/2022). Weak state regulation enables NSAGs to consolidate power and enforce production quotas to secure revenue (KII 19/11/2025).

IMPACTS

Protection risks

Table 2. Population affected by the main reported violence indicators in southern Bolívar by municipality (January–November 2025)

0 — 13,074

Municipality	Reported confined people	Reported mass displaced people	Reported people affected by mobility restrictions	Reported people affected by barriers to humanitarian operations
Santa Rosa del Sur	13,074	3,043	4,616	3,250
Montecristo	5,869	519	0	0
Arenal	1,771	1,319	0	0
Morales	0	165	0	0
San Pablo	0	0	0	200
Cantagallo	180	32	0	0
Simití	0	0	0	0
Total	20,894	5,078	4,616	3,450

Source: ACAPS using data from OCHA (accessed 11/12/2025)

Armed conflict in southern Bolívar exposes civilians to multiple risks, including displacement, confinement, child recruitment, contamination from EO and the widespread use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), land dispossession, forced labour, GBV (including sexual violence

and exploitation), the homicide of community leaders, and threats against civilians and social and agricultural organisations (GIFMM et al. unpublished; ICRC 27/03/2025; KII 09/12/2025). NSAGs impose control rules, social norms, and coercive authority over communities, restricting political life and social organisation (ET 07/11/2025; La Silla Vacía 24/05/2024). The fear generated by the extensive control NSAGs exert over daily life inhibits association and participation rights (KII 03/12/2025 a).Between January–November 2025, confinement, mass displacement, mobility restrictions, and barriers to humanitarian operations affected the most people in Santa Rosa del Sur (23,983), Montecristo (6,388), and Arenal (3,090). These municipalities accounted for 96.4% of the affected population during this period. Santa Rosa del Sur faced the highest severity as the only municipality with the four violent indicators, while Montecristo and Arenal accounted for over 7,600 confined people combined (OCHA accessed 11/12/2025).

While protection risks affect the general population across both urban and rural areas, rural populations are the most affected given their dispersed nature and the lack of institutional presence (KII 02/12/2025 a). These communities, mostly populated by farmers and mine workers, face compounding protection risks including threats, homicide, and displacement (ICRC 27/03/2025). Based on a KII, NSAGs occupy abandoned homes or displace residents to install families brought from other regions to work in mines under their control (KII 04/12/2025 b; KII 04/12/2025 d). There is an increased protection risk from the reported targeting of schools and homes under the assumption that rival groups are operating within them (KII 04/12/2025 d; KII 03/12/2025 c).

Increased risk of EO contamination (antipersonnel mines, IEDs, and drone-delivered explosives)

Bolívar registered the highest number of reported antipersonnel mine (APM) incidents in Colombia in 2024, with 58 incidents in the department (AICMA accessed 03/12/2025). Persistent access constraints, however, suggest underreporting, hindering direct comparability with other departments. NSAG use of explosive devices and APM has increased steadily since the escalation of the armed conflict in 2020, with a sharp rise reported in 2025, reflecting greater contamination levels than in previous years and compared to other departments (KII 09/12/2025; OCHA 24/10/2025). The main driver of this trend is a strategic shift where groups use minefields to consolidate territorial expansion and as a defensive measure to impede enemy movement (KII 09/12/2025; KII 04/12/2025 b). Based on KIIs, this has led to the recontamination of previously demined areas and an evolution in warfare tactics, specifically the use of drones to drop explosives (KII 04/12/2025 d; KII 04/12/2025 b). Increased EO use in southern Bolívar obstructs access to transit routes and agricultural land, severely compromising mobility, food security, and access to essential health and water services (OCHA 24/10/2025).

From January–September 2025, Santa Rosa del Sur saw 14 humanitarian demining operations, APM detonations, and suspected hazardous areas. During the same period, similar incidents were reported in Montecristo (six), Arenal (three), and Morales (three) (AICMA accessed 03/12/2025). While EO presence is evident in the municipality, it is unclear to what extent higher reporting levels or greater humanitarian presence influence these figures compared to other areas (OCHA 23/06/2025; KII 03/12/2025 a; KII 04/12/2025 d).

Representing a significant escalation in tactical sophistication, NSAGs have started deploying devices constructed with plastic and PVC casing, deliberately minimising metal content. This evolution not only makes detection and clearance significantly more complex and dangerous in the immediate term but also creates a sustained, long-term contamination risk as these materials do not degrade, posing a multidecadal threat that will hinder humanitarian mine action (KII 03/12/2025 c). The difficulty in clearing these areas increases casualty risk in zones where first-level facilities lack trauma capacity. This creates a significant financial barrier for families and increases fatality risk during transit, resulting in a compounding humanitarian impact where EO contamination directly aggravates poverty and mortality rates (KII 04/12/2025 d).

Drone use has also expanded as they are no longer solely used for surveillance but increasingly for EO deployment. This compounds the unpredictability of explosive risks both during confrontations among NSAGs and in incidents affecting civilians (KII 02/12/2025 d; GIFMM et al. unpublished). In 2025, IEDs affected 20 people in southern Bolívar, a figure that includes the use of weaponised drones. This total represents an increase compared to 2024, for which no comparable data is recorded, indicating that weaponised drones are a recent development in the regional conflict. Of those affected in 2025, 17 were in Santa Rosa del Sur and three in Montecristo (OCHA accessed 11/12/2025).

Communities live amid EO, explosive remnants of war, and APM contamination, which constitute a daily life risk as these devices are found along essential footpaths and near homes (KII 09/12/2025; KII 04/12/2025 d; KII 28/11/2025). This constant threat to the civilian population is worsened by NSAG tactics, including the occupation of private homes, which places inhabitants at direct risk during active hostilities (KII 03/12/2025 c; KII 02/12/2025 a).

Armed confrontations, drone use, and EO presence are the primary causes of displacement declarations in the region (KII 25/11/2025). When families return after displacement, they often do not know the extent to which the territory may be mined following confrontations that occurred during their absence (KII 03/12/2025 a). In some cases, NSAGs have rigged the homes left by displaced families with IEDs and other EO, further preventing safe returns and derailing return processes (KII 03/12/2025 c; Pares 15/09/2025). In one such mass displacement incident in Arenal in September, after a month in a temporary urban shelter, families returned to their homes without guarantee of safe return and facing EO risks (Caracol Radio 04/10/2025; El Universal 02/10/2025).

While high contamination levels are reported, Santa Rosa del Sur is not prioritised for demining or mine risk education in 2025 (OCHA 23/06/2025). This has forced demining organisations to suspend operations. Consequently, in the areas where they previously worked, and in the absence of any documented mine action, civilians have adopted the extreme coping mechanism of conducting manual inspections to clear APMs themselves, facing severe personal risks (KII 04/12/2025 b; EE 06/10/2025).

Recruitment and use of children and adolescents

Child recruitment and use by NSAGs in southern Bolívar is persistent but severely underreported owing to fear of reprisals, victim stigmatisation, and the normalisation of violence, with families often facing targeted threats after a child escapes from NSAGs (HCHR 10/07/2025) The identification of only three victims in 2024 across Montecristo, Morales, and Santa Rosa del Sur highlights a structural failure in detection and reporting mechanisms (OCHA 03/04/2025) This vast gap between qualitative evidence and official figures means current data should be treated as absolute minimum estimates that do not reflect the true scale of the crisis.

Control over the youth population includes NSAGs conducting detailed household censuses – recording children's names and ages – through direct home visits. This practice constitutes a form of systematic population management, representing an anticipatory recruitment tactic and demonstrating high territorial penetration by NSAGs. These actions reflect a selective and organised recruitment strategy rather than opportunistic activity (KII 03/12/2025 b). According to key informants, recruitment can begin as early as age ten in dispersed rural areas within these municipalities (KII 03/12/2025 c).

NSAGs use three main strategies to recruit children and adolescents.

- NSAGs target young people through platforms such as TikTok, where they display weapons, money, motorcycles, music, and real-time combat to attract them. This digital recruitment strategy significantly expands the threat's reach, allowing NSAGs to influence youth across border regions and exceeding the geographical limits of physical territorial control (KII 04/12/2025 d; KII 03/12/2025 c; HCHR 25/06/2025).
- NSAGs exploit severe deprivation by using payments and goods to facilitate the recruitment of children. In these contexts, joining an armed group is a result of a lack of viable alternatives and constitutes a form of coercion rather than voluntary engagement (KII 10/12/2025; KII 04/12/2025 d; KII 02/12/2025 d).
- NSAGs often target girls and adolescents with sexual harassment and violence, whether virtually or in person, as a coercive mechanism for recruitment (KII 09/12/2025; KII 02/12/2025 a). In municipalities such as Arenal and Santa Rosa del Sur, KIIs report the homicide of recruited girls, in retaliation for escape attempts (KII 17/12/2025).

Recruitment tactics lead to severe protection violations, including forced labour, sexual exploitation, and forced labour in coca fields (GIFMM et al. unpublished). To prevent desertion and harm family bonds, NSAGs frequently transfer recruited children to distant conflict zones; this serves as a deliberate isolation and control strategy to sever social ties and support networks, ensuring total dependence on the group. For instance, in January 2025, three adolescents recruited in Morales were observed participating in combats with an NSAG in Catatumbo, also illustrating the geographic expansion of NSAG recruitment (KII 10/12/2025; KII 03/12/2025 c; KII 02/12/2025 d; HCHR 25/06/2025).

As a coping strategy to prevent recruitment, families often resort to individual displacement or send their children to live with relatives in other cities. The fragmentation of the family unit has a lasting social impact and weakens community ties (KII 09/12/2025; KII 04/12/2025 a).

Gender-based violence and trafficking in persons

Women, girls, and people with diverse identities face specific protection risks in southern Bolívar, including various forms of GBV, including sexual violence, although reporting remains extremely limited. This underreporting structurally shapes humanitarian blind spots, obscuring the true scale of needs and hindering the delivery of specialised protection services. Beyond fear of reprisals, there is a systemic suppression of GBV visibility; NSAGs deny access to humanitarian organisations if alerts are raised, barring both protection and monitoring (KII 04/12/2025 a; KII 09/12/2025). Patterns of abuse include sexual violence against girls, adolescents, and women, intimidation and coercion, early and forced marriages, and the instrumentalisation of women's bodies as a war tactic, using sexual violence and controlling women's lives to demonstrate territorial dominance (KII 04/12/2025 d; KII 03/12/2025 c; KII 10/12/2025).

Impact on women and girls

- **Sexual violence and harassment.** In rural areas, women and girls face constant sexual harassment across different settings, such as in transit, particularly on roads to schools. Fear of sexual violence also directly contributes to school dropout and limits access to education. In economic settings, especially within mining enclaves, women face heightened exposure to harassment and sexual exploitation linked to NSAG presence (KII 09/12/2025; KII 04/12/2025 d). One example is a specific incident in Santa Rosa del Sur involving the sexual assault of a woman by four NSAG members (KII 17/12/2025; KII 02/12/2025 d).
- **Targeting of female leadership.** Women leaders are stigmatised as informants of state institutions and face threats of sexual violence. Such targeted intimidation has eroded community representation, affecting women's participation in leadership roles (KII

02/12/2025 d). NSAGs also exert psychological pressure by threatening to harm female leaders' children, further coercing women into silence or displacement (KII 02/12/2025 d; KII 03/12/2025 b). These gendered threats are often more severe and pervasive for women, contributing directly to displacement dynamics, as women and their families may flee not only to escape general conflict but also to avoid targeted GBV and social subjugation.

- **Forced labour and exploitation.** In mining zones, women are coerced into logistical roles such as cooking, laundry, and tending to wounded combatants (KII 04/12/2025 b). Women engaged in survival sex also risk being targeted if seen with members of rival armed groups (KII 04/12/2025 d). This exposure is compound for female migrants and refugees who, having lost their support networks, are compelled into sexual labour, a situation where economic necessity and armed group exploitation overlap (KII 04/12/2025 b).
- **Reporting barriers.** Constant NSAG presence during health visits hinders the identification of abuse and violence. Fear of reprisals limits reporting and renders certain GBV responses, such as confidential case management and safe referrals, effectively impossible. Humanitarian organisations that pursue these interventions risk losing territorial access (KII 04/12/2025 a; KII 03/12/2025 a).
- **Trafficking in persons (TIP).** There is a significant risk of TIP for sexual and labour exploitation, affecting both Colombian and migrant and refugee women. In southern Bolívar, women are disproportionately affected by targeting for sexual exploitation and gender-specific labour recruitment practices. Victims are often recruited in other cities through deceptive job offers and transferred to southern Bolívar, where NSAGs retain their documents and use threats to ensure compliance (KII 03/12/2025 a; KII 02/12/2025 b).

Impact on LGBTQ+ populations

Reported incidents likely represent only a fraction of the actual scale of violence given significant underreporting resulting from stigma and fear of retaliation.

- **Targeted killings and displacement.** LGBTQ+ individuals face severe violence from discriminatory practices and persecution by NSAGs. Reported cases include the targeted killing of a lesbian woman in San Pablo and the forced displacement of same-sex couples in Morales and Montecristo. Such violence has broader protection implications, often forcing LGBTQ+ individuals to conceal their sexual orientation, limit social interactions, and, in many cases, undergo secondary displacement to avoid further threats (KII 03/12/2025 a; Caribe Afirmativo 07/03/2025).
- **Systemic persecution.** In southern Bolívar, armed groups that perceive gender diversity and sexual orientation as challenges to the social norms they enforce target LGBTQ+ people, exposing them to persecution and forcing many to hide their identities or flee the region to ensure survival. This can affect their mental health and limit access to essential services, including healthcare, education, and social support (KII 03/12/2025 c; Caribe Afirmativo 07/03/2025).

Displacement

Southern Bolívar accounted for all reported mass displacement in the department between January–November 2025, specifically in Arenal, Cantagallo, Montecristo, Morales, and Santa Rosa del Sur (OCHA accessed 11/12/2025). Individual displacement also remained concentrated in the south, with Montecristo and Santa Rosa del Sur reporting the highest figures (collectively 8,000 people) between January–September (Blumont/3iS accessed 01/12/2025).

The main drivers of individual displacement – which affects fewer than ten households or 50 people – are protection risks such as threats, extortion, GBV, and recruitment, often leading to cycles of repeated displacement. Unlike mass displacement, which triggers immediate institutional emergency responses, this modality results in 'invisible' needs as families disperse across urban settings, facing greater barriers to identification and formal aid access (ACAPS 02/12/2024). Individual displacement is the dominant modality in southern Bolívar; between January–September, it affected 11,892 people in the subregion. Montecristo was the most affected municipality with 5,385 cases, a 16% increase compared to the same period in 2024. Santa Rosa del Sur followed with 2,918 cases in 2025 (including 37 people with disabilities). This 88% surge in Santa Rosa del Sur highlights rapidly worsening security and protection conditions, signalling an escalation in conflict intensity compared to the previous year (Blumont/3iS accessed 01/12/2025).

Among IDPs, 203 were people with disabilities. Adults aged 29–59 (4,769), followed by youth aged 18–28 (2,052), older people aged 60 and above (2,008), adolescents aged 12–17 (1,104), and children aged 6–11 (1,084) represented the largest groups (Blumont/3iS accessed 01/12/2025). In the case of adults and older people, this likely reflects their tendency to be primary targets of extortion, threats, and control over land and assets, whereas displacement among adolescents and youth is more frequently linked to avoiding recruitment and use by NSAGs. While these trends align with known protection risks, available information remains insufficient to fully explain why these specific demographics report higher displacement figures than others.

Key informants identify refugees, migrants, children, and women as the groups most at risk after displacement. Lack of legal status and xenophobia limit access to services for refugees and migrants. Overcrowded schools and teacher shortages prevent children from attending classes, increasing recruitment risks. For women and girls, economic and physical insecurity increases the risk of sexual violence and exploitation (KII 03/12/2025 a; KII 04/12/2025 d).

Between January–September 2025, individual displacement figures included 6,276 women and 5,613 men (Blumont/3iS accessed 01/12/2025). While the numerical difference is modest, displacement poses differential protection risks for women. The loss of informal livelihoods frequently heightens their exposure to GBV, including sexual exploitation, as they lack safe economic alternatives during relocation (KII 04/12/2025 a).

Displacement in southern Bolívar is characteristically short-range, with families moving from rural settlements, commonly from the Serrania de San Lucas, towards towns such as Santa Rosa del Sur. This proximity is driven by an attempt to maintain presence near their assets; families fear that longer-distance displacement results in permanent land dispossession, as NSAGs frequently occupy abandoned homes and mine access routes to prevent returns (KII 04/12/2025 d; KII 03/12/2025 c; KII 02/12/2025 a). This rural-to-urban pattern exerts significant pressure on municipal services and responders and drives the growth of informal settlements, especially as local governments lack the capacity to provide formal sustained shelter (KII 02/12/2025 a).

Families affected by either mass or individual displacement tend to stay only briefly in urban centres before returning home, without legal guarantees or conditions for safe, voluntary return. This information gap is a key constraint on response planning, as these movements often go unrecorded (KII 02/12/2025 d; KII 02/12/2025 a). Inadequate institutional response and limited livelihood recovery opportunities in reception areas leave families with no viable economic alternative to their land. Consequently, displacement is often financially unsustainable, as families incur housing expenses while displaced. This combines with the loss of daily wages and the failure of untended crops and livestock to create financial strain for families. The lack of durable solutions drives a cycle of failed integration, secondary displacement, and unsafe returns to high-risk areas (KII 02/12/2025 a). Cases such as mass displacements in Arenal del Sur and La Marizosa throughout 2025 illustrate these cycles, which often go without institutional support (KII 04/12/2025 b; EE 06/10/2025).

Confinement and mobility restrictions

In southern Bolívar, confinements and mobility restrictions severely affect the population, with both events increasing between January–November 2025 compared to the same period in 2024. This trend reflects an escalation of the armed conflict in the region. Regarding confinement, Santa Rosa del Sur recorded the highest impact, with 13,074 people affected, followed by Montecristo with 5,869 and Arenal with 1,771. In terms of mobility restrictions, Santa Rosa del Sur also reported the highest figures, with 4,616 people affected across three specific restriction events registered during the same period (OCHA accessed 11/12/2025). The high number of people affected relative to the few recorded events suggests both prolonged durations and a significant volume of unreported confinements that evade official monitoring given fear of reprisals.

NSAGs impose confinement and mobility restrictions directly through curfews or indirectly via armed clashes. These tactics aim to assert territorial dominance and control illegal economies (ACAPS 10/07/2025). EO presence is also a primary driver of confinement and mobility restrictions, as clashes and fear of IEDs force communities into self-confinement as a protection strategy, a trend that is inherently underreported. These confinements function both as short-term tactical tools during hostilities and sustained control mechanisms to regulate civilian life (KII 02/12/2025 a).

There is a cycle of double vulnerability. In one such case in La Marizosa (Santa Rosa del Sur), families initially experienced mass displacement followed by a return without institutional safety guarantees. Insecurity and limited state capacity subsequently led them to fall into confinement (KII 04/12/2025 b). Confinement is systematically undercounted because NSAGs often issue explicit orders prohibiting communities from reporting restrictions or leaving their settlements. For example, San Lorenzo (Cantagallo) remained confined between July–August 2025 without external visibility (KII 10/12/2025). These invisible events demonstrate how official figures fail to capture the actual scale of confinements, directly undermining response planning and the timely allocation of humanitarian aid.

Civilian targeting and threats (homicide, kidnapping, and extortion)

Targeted violence against social leaders and community organisations is undermining community governance and local protection mechanisms in southern Bolívar. This manifests primarily through the coercion of local decision-making and the forced imposition of NSAG rules over community structures. January–November 2025 recorded 423 reports of collective and individual threats (OCHA accessed 11/12/2025). This figure aligns with the overall escalation of violence in the region, characterised by increasing trends in confinement, displacement, and mobility restrictions (OCHA accessed 11/12/2025; OCHA accessed 04/12/2025). Attacks against civilians in southern Bolívar primarily target social leaders and community organisations, who face persistent threats, homicide, and extortion by NSAGs seeking to force community decisions and consolidate territorial control (ACH et al. 11/03/2024; DP 28/09/2023). The recent homicide of community leaders and JAC presidents, including a leader in El Golfo (Santa Rosa del Sur) in February 2025, appears aimed at weakening local peace initiatives and collective organisation, reinforcing a longstanding pattern of violence against social leadership (KII 03/12/2025 b; KII 19/11/2025; DP 10/02/2025). A total of 21 homicide events targeting protected people were reported during January–November 2025, a 50% increase from the 14 cases recorded during the same period in 2024 (OCHA accessed 10/11/2025).

Beyond community leaders, migrant populations face distinct and heightened protection risks linked to social and legal exclusion. Their limited knowledge of local conflict dynamics and a lack of support networks leave them especially vulnerable to GBV and forced labour. These risks are aggravated by barriers to regularisation and legal exclusion, which discourage reporting and further isolate them from protective institutions (KII 15/12/2025). Increased competition for limited economic opportunities further strains social cohesion; this environment facilitates labour exploitation, with wages often falling significantly below

market rates (KII 15/12/2025; KII 03/12/2025 a). Irregular migratory status and a lack of land ownership prevent many migrants from registering in the Single Registry of Victims, the official tool designed to identify and record those who have suffered harm from the armed conflict (UARIV accesses 22/12/2025). This exclusion acts as a key structural driver of sustained vulnerability, as it formally bars conflict-affected migrants from the primary mechanism for institutional assistance, protection, and livelihood opportunities (KII 15/12/2025; KII 03/12/2025 a).

Violence linked to illegal economies drives widespread extortion and coercive control over livelihoods. Extortion, mobility restrictions, and kidnapping associated with illegal gold economies target rural workers. Particularly, artisanal mining activities have been co-opted, meaning they can hardly operate independently without being forced into NSAG-controlled structures and extortion cycles. The killing of the president of the Agro-Mining Federation in April 2024 reflects a broader pattern of violence against social leadership connected to resource control (Front Line Defenders 25/04/2024; Dialogue Earth 12/12/2024; DP 28/09/2023).

Based on a KII, extortion has increasingly expanded from individuals to entire communities through various tactics. Armed groups can enter homes, document assets, and impose fixed fees that directly undermine household livelihoods and economic coping capacity (KII 09/12/2025; KII 03/12/2025 c). NSAGs also employ intimidation tactics to enforce and sustain confinement; these include indiscriminate shootings at homes and the mutilation of animals to discourage movement or return, deepening fear and consolidating control. These fear-induced practices complement physical NSAG presence and serve to deepen community psychological impact and ensure territorial control (KII 09/12/2025; KII 03/12/2025 c; KII 03/12/2025 a).

Despite sustained threats, strong territorial attachment continues to shape community responses. Communities organise collectively to remain in their municipalities as a survival strategy, prioritising territorial permanence over displacement. Staying in areas of active conflict increases protection risks, such as being caught in crossfire or facing retaliation from NSAGs for perceived non-cooperation (KII 02/12/2025 d).

Food security risks and livelihood loss

Food security

The escalation of armed conflict and territorial control by NSAGs directly affects the livelihoods and food security of the agro-mining population in southern Bolívar. Risk exposure differs significantly by economic activity; subsistence farmers are the most food-insecure group given their reliance on stable land access, whereas mining-dependent families have greater liquidity and tend to experience faster economic recovery (KII 03/12/2025 a). Agricultural families face a slower path to asset reconstruction, as replacing livestock and re-establishing crops such as coffee, plantain and yucca can take years (KII 02/12/2025 a).

The shift towards mining driven by higher immediate profits has led many families to abandon subsistence crops, creating a dangerous reliance on external markets. When confinement or mobility restrictions occur, these families are left without local food (KII 15/12/2025; DP 28/09/2023).

EO contamination compounds these vulnerabilities. An estimated 500 hectares of coffee and subsistence crops are contaminated with explosive devices in Fátima, a rural area of Santa Rosa del Sur (OCHA 23/06/2025). While this serves as an illustrative example, KIIs report that similar patterns exist across other rural areas in the region. Such a form of EO contamination acts as a seasonal multiplier of food insecurity, as the inability to harvest during specific periods leaves families without food stocks or income, creating a critical food security risk (KII 03/12/2025 a; OCHA 23/06/2025; DP 28/09/2023).

Farmers have been unable to plant during the rainy season (from March–April and from October–November) or collect previous harvests, with investment losses estimated at COP 30 million (approximately USD 8,000) per family (KII 03/12/2025 c). These agricultural disruptions, alongside EO contamination, could trigger a sharp increase in local food prices as communities become dependent on expensive, transported goods. Such a scenario would likely force households to reduce dietary diversity and meal frequency, potentially signalling a transition from localised scarcity to a systemic food crisis by 2026 (KII 15/12/2025; KII 03/12/2025 c).

NSAGs impose illegal checkpoints that block the entry of food, fuel, and essential supplies (DP 22/09/2025). These constraints, alongside armed strikes, such as the one in Santa Rosa del Sur in August 2025, disrupt supply chains and prevent crop harvests, leading to severe food and fuel shortages (OCHA 04/08/2025). The inability of traders to reach rural areas and the lack of fuel for food preparation restrict access to basic staples and fresh proteins, further heightening the food security crisis for farming communities (KII 03/12/2025 a; OCHA 20/08/2025 a). River pollution from intensive mining and inadequate waste management has also disrupted artisanal fishing (KII 04/12/2025 a; OCHA 20/08/2025 b; ANLA 06/06/2025).

Livelihoods

NSAG presence contributes to livelihood losses as they impose extortion fees on vendors, fishermen, merchants, farmers, and miners (Pares 06/03/2025). The burden of this extortion is disproportionately high in the mining sector, which remains under NSAG control. The imposition of production quotas exposes workers to severe protection risks (KII 15/12/2025; DP 28/09/2023). The financial effect of these quotas is forcing families who had previously abandoned coca cultivation or informal mining to return to these activities as their only viable income, representing a constrained choice driven by economic necessity and coercion (KII 15/12/2025; KII 10/12/2025). The most affected by this dynamic are low-income Colombian, migrant, and refugee families dependent on local economies (KII 03/12/2025 a). Economic dependence on mining and illegal economies, alongside the decline of agriculture, increases the risk of communities facing recruitment, extortion, and forced labour by armed groups (KII 15/12/2025; KII 10/12/2025).

Although the Forest Reserve Law dates to 1959, its restrictions on land formalisation and mining titles remain a primary driver of vulnerability in southern Bolívar. By preventing miners and farmers from obtaining legal status, the law sustains a regulatory vacuum that NSAGs currently exploit to consolidate territorial control and enforce extortion (ICRC 27/03/2025; DP 28/09/2023).

These dynamics generate gender-differentiated impacts, particularly through the economic and physical exploitation of women. When those employed in mining logistics, such as cooks and laundry workers, face a sudden loss of income during hostilities, some are drawn into sexual exploitation (KII 04/12/2025 b; KII 03/12/2025 a).

Communities often remain in high-risk areas out of fear of permanently losing their homes, livestock, and crops to occupation or destruction by NSAGs (KII 03/12/2025 c). This is driven by the knowledge that leaving might result in an inability to return and the total loss of both economic projects and life plans as NSAGs consolidate control over abandoned assets (KII 02/12/2025 a).

Health

Infrastructure and access barriers

Health infrastructure across southern Bolívar relies almost exclusively on first-level facilities, both in municipal centres and rural areas, representing a systemic vulnerability that limits the capacity to respond to heightened needs during crises (3iS 16/11/2024). While rural health posts exist, their capacity is limited to basic care, requiring the referral of complex cases to higher-level facilities. This limitation can result in delayed treatment, preventable complications, and increased morbidity, particularly for people in remote areas. Only Simití has a second-level hospital, making it the primary referral point for the subregion, while cases from municipalities such as Cantagallo, Montecristo, or San Pablo are often sent to Aguachica in Cesar department. This increases travel time and costs for patients, delays access to timely care, and disrupts treatment continuity, particularly for those requiring follow-up or specialised services (KII 02/12/2025 c; KII 03/12/2025 c).

A major barrier to healthcare access is geographic isolation and high costs, disproportionately affecting rural communities, displaced populations, and low-income households. For residents in high areas of Santa Rosa del Sur, simply reaching the municipal seat for care is expensive, incurring high transport, lodging, and diagnostic costs (KII 03/12/2025 c; KII 04/12/2025 a). Many rural health posts, such as those in Alto Cañaveral and Carmen de Cucú (San Pablo), either have no auxiliary staff or are not constantly attended (KII 04/12/2025 a). Administrative barriers prevent local health secretariats from providing medication to patients outside their specific insurance networks (EPS), creating significant gaps in urgent care delivery. This disproportionately harms rural residents, displaced populations, children, pregnant women, and older people with chronic or complex health conditions (KII 04/12/2025 a). The structural failure forces the municipality of Santa Rosa del Sur to absorb the service burden from other municipalities, such as Arenal and Morales (KII 04/12/2025 a). Rather than a functional referral system, this centralisation of care reflects the collapse of rural health assistance under conflict conditions as geographic and administrative constraints leave peripheral municipalities unable to meet basic health needs.

Impact of conflict

Existing structural limitations within the health system become more pronounced when compounded by the dynamics of armed conflict. Local trauma response is effectively nonfunctional as injuries from combat or EO must be referred outside the region, such as to Aguachica, Barrancabermeja, Barranquilla, Bucaramanga, or Valledupar, given the limited capacity of local hospitals (KII 03/12/2025 c; EHP Colombia/OCHA 03/04/2025). The dispersion of referral points results in nonstandardised pathways, increasing treatment delays and elevating the risk of preventable morbidity and mortality, indicating that the problem extends

beyond capacity constraints. KIIs report that victims frequently die en route, representing largely preventable deaths linked to structural neglect within the health system and the dynamics of the armed conflict. This situation is further aggravated by the fact that many families lack the necessary resources to cover the displacement required to receive the specialised care they need, making access to treatment a critical determinant of survival (KII 04/12/2025 d).

Access barriers also persist for individuals who have been displaced or who seek refuge in neighbouring departments, such as Antioquia and Sucre. People from areas such as La Marizosa are denied medical attention because they do not have an active registration with the Identification System for Potential Beneficiaries of Social Programs or an EPS in those departments, effectively rendering them medically invisible and compounding their protection risks (KII 03/12/2025 c). This highlights a systemic contradiction: displacement increases health needs while simultaneously invalidating eligibility for care.

Prolonged confinements and mobility restrictions not only limit movement but also act as a public health risk multiplier, significantly hindering access to basic health services in rural areas and aggravating disease spread and severity (EHP Colombia/OCHA 03/04/2025).

The primary populations at risk include women (especially pregnant women), children, older adults, and patients with chronic conditions, including diabetes and hypertension, as they frequently require elevated levels of medical care (KII 10/12/2025; KII 09/12/2025). Confinement and mobility restrictions prevent pregnant women from attending prenatal check-ups. This restriction exposes them to additional health risks and stressors (KII 03/12/2025 b). Many women give birth without access to medical assistance, often relying on midwives. Complications frequently result in death given a lack of choice and inability to reach higher-level health centres with functional emergency referral capacity (KII 04/12/2025 d). Older adults with scheduled appointments and individuals who require monthly medications, such as those for diabetes, also face heightened barriers (KII 09/12/2025).

Communities in high-risk areas lack access to regular health services – including medical brigades, vaccinations, essential medications, and mental health support – because of the systemic withdrawal of services in response to security threats or caused by operational constraints. This gap particularly affects children, adolescents, pregnant women, older adults, and people with chronic conditions. Population concentration in displacement shelters further strains limited local services, creating foreseeable secondary health risks such as disease outbreaks, maternal complications, malnutrition-related complications, untreated trauma, and other emergencies, reflecting gaps in displacement response and policy (OCHA 10/09/2025).

Morbidity and health risks

The population in southern Bolívar suffers from diseases especially linked to poor sanitary conditions and occupational hazards, with conflict dynamics actively producing and sustaining morbidity.

- **Endemic diseases**. In areas such as the Serranía de San Lucas, conflict-specific barriers severely constrain access to malaria treatment. KIIs report that local hospitals often lack the necessary medications after being pressured to hand them over to armed groups. Receiving malaria treatment can also lead to stigma against patients for suspected affiliation with an armed group. This fear of stigmatisation and potential reprisals acts as a strong deterrent, discouraging people from seeking necessary care and leading to predictable excess morbidity and mortality (KII 03/12/2025 c). Malaria remains endemic, but it is the conflict-driven obstacles to treatment that largely determine the severity of outcomes.
- **Occupational health.** Musculoskeletal and ergonomic problems are common, related to the long hours and physical demands of mining and agricultural activities. These injuries often go untreated, contributing to chronic disability and increasing economic dependence (KII 04/12/2025 a).
- **Sexual and reproductive health (SRH).** In mining areas, the risk of sexual exploitation leads to a higher proliferation of sexually transmitted infections, including gestational syphilis, which serves as a high-severity indicator of systemic health service failures (KII 04/12/2025 a). KIIs report cases of abortions in the Serranía de San Lucas, which evidences not only severe limitations on access to SRH services but also GBV concerns (KII 03/12/2025 c).

Mental health

The mental health toll of escalating violence is severe, generating fear and anxiety among communities (KII 09/12/2025). Cases of post-traumatic stress have been identified, compounded by the widespread panic triggered by the sound of drones. Beyond preceding bombardments, drones function as a persistent psychological weapon, causing mental harm through pervasive fear and constant threat perception. This constant state of fear contributes to chronic stress and elevated health risks, including hypertension, underscoring the lack of psychosocial support and access to care for affected populations (KII 10/12/2025; OCHA 20/08/2025 a).

Children are particularly affected as they experience constant fear of crossfire or encountering armed groups, causing them to refrain from attending school (KII 09/12/2025). This not only affects their immediate safety and education but also has longer-term implications for human capital development and community resilience. Psychosocial needs exceed the

current response capacity, though specific data on existing services versus gaps remains unavailable. While it is unclear if primary health facilities offer mental health support, the response is further constrained because community professionals – including teachers and medical staff – face the same conflict-related tensions as the populations they serve, limiting their ability to provide care (KII 03/12/2025 c; KII 03/12/2025 a).

Youth leaders are hesitant to speak openly on certain issues, and women are compelled to exercise a 'silent leadership' out of fear of sexual violence and recruitment. This climate of fear reshapes local governance by limiting open participation, undermines community decision-making, and affects the psychosocial wellbeing of leaders and their communities. This enforced silence fosters chronic fear and psychological distress, gradually eroding both individual wellbeing and community resilience. Despite the high expressed need, especially among women victims of sexual violence, psychosocial care and mental health are critically devalued and are not a priority for local institutional responses (KII 02/12/2025 d).

Education

NSAGs' instrumentalisation of schools represents one of the most critical protection risks in southern Bolívar, as armed group presence in educational infrastructure facilitates child recruitment and use. This systemic targeting of schools, combined with direct attacks on infrastructure, disrupts the school cycle and forcibly displaces teachers and students, further weakening community protection structures (KII 09/12/2025; KII 02/12/2025 c). In July 2025, class suspensions during an armed strike affected 1,413 children and adolescents in Santa Rosa del Sur (OCHA 20/08/2025 a). While official data on the exact duration is unavailable, these prolonged closures significantly increase the risk of child recruitment and use by NSAGs as the lack of protective school environments leaves students exposed during strikes.

Direct impacts on students include the constant threat of crossfire and confrontations, recurrently forcing class suspensions and compelling families to keep children at home as a desperate protection measure (EHP Colombia/OCHA 03/04/2025; KII 09/12/2025; KII 03/12/2025 a). EO contamination of access paths also paralyses community members by blocking the available routes to schools. In June 2025, EO on trails in La Marizosa (Santa Rosa del Sur) that serve as the sole transit point for students and teachers prevented at least 89 children from attending classes (OCHA 23/06/2025). Such contamination shuts down educational services for the entire community, as there are no safe alternative routes in these remote rural areas.

This rural and secondary absence from school further increases the risk of child recruitment, as children are left without supervision and educational activities. School dropout, compounded by a lack of educational opportunities beyond primary school in rural areas, elevates the risk of adolescents being recruited by armed groups or forced into illegal mining (KII 09/12/2025; KII 02/12/2025 d).

Displacement and targeted threats against teachers create severe security barriers that prevent the assignment of personnel, further widening the structural educational deficit. In 2025, at least six teachers in Santa Rosa del Sur had to abandon the territory because of threats or forced displacement (OCHA 20/08/2025 a; OCHA 04/08/2025). NSAGs threaten educators who attempt to prevent recruitment or disseminate human rights information (HCHR 25/06/2025). In Canónico (Montecristo), for instance, NSAGs set the residence of the local schoolteacher on fire. Such acts of violence lead educators to resign and move away from the area. Failure to assign new teachers, coupled with a resistance to flexible hiring processes, has left many children with limited education access, reducing learning opportunities and continuity (KII 04/12/2025 d).

Schools are subjected to attacks or military use by armed groups. These violations include direct strikes, the burning of school buildings, and NSAG occupation of institutions across Arenal, Cantagallo, Montecristo, and Santa Rosa del Sur (KII 04/12/2025 d; GIFMM et al. unpublished). In one instance, in Canónico (Montecristo), an NSAG established a camp in the school and then later triggered a confrontation with a rival armed group (KII 04/12/2025 d). The use of schools as temporary shelters for displaced families in Santa Rosa del Sur has compromised academic continuity for students from the community (OCHA 10/10/2025). Receiving municipalities also struggle to integrate displaced children into the educational system. Insufficient capacity to provide immediate access often results in prolonged absences that evolve into permanent school dropout, significantly increasing long-term recruitment risk. Even where spaces may theoretically be available, systemic weaknesses – such as teacher shortages and class suspensions in multiple municipalities resulting from the armed conflict – prevent effective enrolment and learning, contributing to overcrowding and educational discontinuity (OCHA 23/06/2025; EHP Colombia/OCHA 03/04/2025).

Wash and shelter

Critical **WASH** needs in southern Bolívar stem from distinct factors. Long-term structural deficits compound humanitarian access restrictions and infrastructure damage from the armed conflict. Illegal economies have also led to widespread water contamination. In 2024, 32.1% of the rural population in Bolívar lacked access to an improved water source, not to mention deeper privations in the south. Water insecurity across all municipalities in southern Bolívar significantly exceeds the departmental average, with Montecristo (70.1%) and Santa Rosa del Sur (56.3%) reporting the highest levels. This gap highlights a sharp subregional disparity, where the south faces more than double the water deprivation seen at the departmental level (DANE accessed 15/12/2025). Heavy metals, including mercury and cyanide, contaminate water sources, increasing risks of chronic poisoning and gastrointestinal diseases among communities. APM presence near collection points further restricts access to these sources, forcing people to rely on unsafe water or travel longer distances, aggravating health and protection risks (GIFMM et al. unpublished; OCHA 20/08/2025 a; Pares 06/03/2025).

Beyond the traditional mining of transit routes, the recent contamination of crops and water points represents a tactical shift towards more aggressive territorial control. This evolution indicates that NSAGs are increasingly using EO to restrict civilian access to essential resources (KII 03/12/2025 a).

Confinements and mobility restrictions limit WASH access by suspending water collection routines. NSAG-imposed schedules and EO near riverbanks compel households to rely on unsafe rainwater or stagnant sources, increasing waterborne disease risks (KII 03/12/2025 a). During the dry season in the first semester of 2025, 14,400 people in Arenal and Las Lobas region faced water shortages (EHP Colombia/OCHA 03/04/2025). In Arenal, the water supply is intermittent, leading to increased health complications. Diarrhoea and vomiting are among the most frequently reported outcomes, while skin infections – particularly among children and older people – and menstrual health complications for women are also significant (OCHA 10/09/2025; ACH et al. 11/03/2024). There is also a high incidence of gastrointestinal problems and infections. Cumulative exposure to contaminated water contributes to long-term parasitosis and chronic health issues, particularly among children and adolescents (KII 04/12/2025 a).

Inadequate **shelter conditions** compound these vulnerabilities, reflecting a systemic gap in disaster preparedness. Local contingency plans structurally exclude emergency shelter provisions, leaving municipalities without a formal framework or allocated resources to address housing needs during crises (GIFMM et al. unpublished). When mass displacements occur, the population relies on family networks or poorly equipped, improvised shelters in places such as sports halls, as seen in Arenal and Santa Rosa del Sur. These coping strategies, however, come with significant protection risks and dignity costs, including overcrowding, lack of privacy, and exposure to potential violence (KII 09/12/2025; KII 03/12/2025 c). The only official shelter in the subregion, located in Santa Rosa del Sur, illustrates the severity of the gap. With a maximum capacity of approximately 30 families, its limited scale significantly constrains its ability to respond to mass displacement across the subregion, particularly when large numbers of people are displaced simultaneously in multiple municipalities. As a result, the shelter frequently operates under suboptimal conditions and exceeds its intended capacity (KII 04/12/2025 d; KII 03/12/2025 c).

Humanitarian access

NSAG presence and extensive EO use severely restricts humanitarian access in southern Bolívar. Intensifying conflict dynamics pose significant challenges to both aid delivery and personnel safety. NSAG-imposed notification protocols and movement schedules primarily constrain aid delivery, compounding high safety risks from EO contamination and funding gaps that limit sustained humanitarian operations (KII 04/12/2025 b; KII 04/12/2025 d).

Access of people in need to humanitarian aid

Coercive NSAG control primarily constrains access to necessary aid. NSAGs explicitly prohibit communities from requesting assistance or reporting needs, issuing threats against leaders who do so (KII 04/12/2025 c). Administrative deficiencies further compound these restrictions by hindering aid delivery and registration processes.

Significant gaps persist in humanitarian assistance, including insufficient shelter capacity, food aid, and referral-level health services (EHP Colombia/OCHA 03/04/2025). Between January–October 2025, 4,173 people received assistance through the Community Priorities Response Plan, concentrated in Arenal (1,680), San Pablo (1,519), and Santa Rosa del Sur (873). This coverage remains limited in relation to the scale of displacement and confinement, driven by severe funding shortfalls that force difficult prioritisation choices, leaving many needs unmet. Particularly in municipalities such as Montecristo, Morales, and Simití, the low coverage aligns with higher access constraints and reduced humanitarian presence as security risks continue to impede aid delivery (OCHA accessed 05/12/2025).

Table 3. Reported population reached by humanitarian assistance by municipality and sector, January–October 2025

Municipality	Number of people benefited	% of people reached by sector
Arenal	1,680	Protection: 50.95% Food security: 40.05%
San Pablo	1,519	Health: 100%
Santa Rosa del Sur	873	Shelter: 55.56% Food security: 24.63% Protection: 19.82%
Montecristo	90	Health: 100%
Simití	8	Education: 100%
Morales	3	Protection: 100%
Total	4,173	

Source: ACAPS using data from OCHA (accessed 05/12/2025)

Access of humanitarian organisations to people in need

Humanitarian organisations face numerous obstacles that restrict their mobility and activities. In 2025, threats and violations against personnel and their facilities affected only five humanitarian workers, a sharp decline from 145 cases reported in 2024. This does not, however, indicate improved security conditions; rather, it reflects reduced humanitarian presence and operational capacity given funding cuts, heightened security risks, and access constraints amid the conflict escalation. Reduced field presence and underreporting in high-risk areas likely contribute to the lower number of reported incidents. For example, one attack on a medical mission affected two individuals (OCHA accessed 11/12/2025).

Mobility restrictions and armed actions persist in rural areas. These hinder accompaniments and the activation of protection mechanisms, including continuous risk monitoring related to new eviction orders by NSAGs, early warning and prevention of child recruitment and use, community-based protection systems, the establishment of child-friendly and protective spaces, and the provision of individual and collective psychosocial support to affected populations (OCHA 10/09/2025). Security concerns limit access to the rural zone of Santa Rosa del Sur (GIFMM et al. unpublished). Organisations face increasingly hostile checkpoints from armed groups, requiring humanitarians to maintain a low profile (KII 02/12/2025 d). These include limitations on community engagement, shorter or less frequent field visits, and restrictions on carrying personal items, such as mobile phones or equipment, which collectively constrain needs assessments, monitoring, and the sustained accompaniment of affected communities (KII 03/12/2025 a).

NSAGs are deliberately restricting entry, particularly in Montecristo, and imposing coercive conditions that go beyond access management (KII 10/12/2025). These include demanding detailed personal data – such as full names and national ID numbers – from humanitarian personnel as a precondition for entry, constituting direct interference in humanitarian operations and raising serious protection and security concerns (KII 04/12/2025 b; KII 04/12/2025 d).

Eight documented incidents in Santa Rosa del Sur and Montecristo specifically involved direct hostilities and threats that obstructed the humanitarian response (EHP Colombia/ OCHA 03/04/2025). Separately, 32 access incidents were reported in 2025, including practices such as drone surveillance and confiscation or the scanning of cell phones at checkpoints (KII 03/12/2025 a). These measures suggest systematic monitoring and intelligence-gathering on humanitarian personnel, representing an escalation in operational risks. High-risk situations have led to the abortion or postponement of missions, and clashes or confinements have trapped aid teams providing humanitarian assistance (KII 03/12/2025 a; KII 04/12/2025 a). The exact scale of coverage or assistance lost because of these interruptions is currently unknown, representing an information gap.

Physical, environmental, and security constraints

Physical and security constraints, such as difficult terrain, along with security risks, including checkpoints, drone surveillance, and threats from armed groups, are the main obstacles that decisively restrict humanitarian access. High APM risk near water sources and on paths constitutes a binding constraint on both humanitarian and civilian movement, directly limiting access to essential services and assistance rather than merely representing a background hazard (OCHA 20/08/2025 a). Poor road infrastructure in the high zone of Santa Rosa del Sur and San Pablo (Alto Cañaveral) is a major constraint, severely heightened by the rainy seasons occurring between March–April and again from October–December (KII 15/12/2025; KII 04/12/2025 a). During these periods, access is significantly slowed, reducing the speed and frequency of humanitarian operations. Logistical efforts are highly dependent on fluvial transport, which armed strikes often target and adverse weather affects (KII 04/12/2025 b). The long distance between municipalities and remote rural areas, such as La Marizosa, also makes aid provision extremely difficult (KII 02/12/2025 c). Emergency response can take up to 20 days in extreme cases, as documented in Santa Rosa del Sur (OCHA 21/03/2025). Data for the other municipalities is unavailable.

The freezing of US humanitarian funds serves as a critical aggravating factor, leading to a significant downsizing of international operations (GIFMM et al. unpublished; OCHA 21/03/2025). This reduction in funding compounds existing access constraints, as fewer resources and personnel are available to operate in high-risk areas, further limiting the delivery of assistance to communities most affected. For example, the International Committee of the Red Cross has announced a 30% budget reduction for its Colombia operations in 2026, resulting in the closure of several local structures and a reduction in personnel, though specific programmatic activities affected are not documented (KII 26/11/2025; ICRC 18/11/2025). Similarly, organisations such as the Jesuit Refugee Service have had to scale back their field teams (KII 03/12/2025 a).

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Climate and natural hazards

Extreme weather events aggravate the humanitarian crisis in southern Bolívar by directly amplifying risks of displacement, food insecurity, and humanitarian access constraints. La Niña conditions, which typically enhance precipitation across northern Colombia, were present and favoured to persist from January–March 2026 (NOAA 05/01/2026). Seasonal forecasts for the period anticipate above-normal precipitation in southern Bolívar, increasing the risk of flooding (IRI accessed 06/01/2026).

This exposure reflects a pattern of recurrent vulnerability rather than isolated shocks. In 2024, flooding affected over 65,000 people, with Montecristo alone accounting for 41% of flood victims (43,796 individuals) (EHP Colombia/OCHA 03/04/2025). The high impact in Montecristo is driven by its proximity to the Caribona River, where recurring exposure and limited mitigation capacity signal a persistent flood risk. In Simití, overflowing rivers also damaged homes, infrastructure, and subsistence crops in 2025, although information on the specific crops affected is unavailable (GIFMM/R4V/EHP unpublished).

Climate hazards, such as flooding and landslides, interact with conflict dynamics by further restricting the mobility of already-confined populations. These environmental constraints often create a double barrier: they physically isolate communities, while NSAGs exploit the resulting lack of access to consolidate territorial control and deny humanitarian aid entry (ACAPS 10/07/2025).

Climate-triggered displacement and livelihood losses deepen poverty, creating opportunities for NSAGs to recruit and exploit vulnerable populations (NUPI/SIPRI 03/10/2024). Simultaneously, illegal gold mining used for NSAG financing drives deforestation and contaminates water sources with mercury and cyanide (UNODC 19/11/2023). In San Pablo, this extraction has contaminated waterways, including the Santo Domingo Creek, resulting in the loss of fish, reduced agricultural productivity, and direct health risks (ANLA 06/06/2025). This environmental destruction weakens ecosystems, reducing their ability to withstand future extreme weather.

Challenges of the Total Peace Policy and the electoral context

The instability of the Total Peace ('Paz Total') Policy negotiations and the 2026 electoral context aggravate the humanitarian crisis in southern Bolívar. This policy has faced significant hurdles that have translated into continued violence. Despite being a focal point of the Government's peace agenda, violence in the subregion has escalated. NSAGs continue to maintain territorial control, as the policy faces hurdles that translate into continued violence in rural areas (EE 06/10/2025). These dynamics demonstrate how unstable negotiation processes have failed to disrupt NSAG operations; instead, they have allowed these groups to consolidate territorial control and strengthen their influence, particularly in rural areas.

- **EGC dialogues.** Exploratory meetings resumed in August 2025 in Qatar. Despite these talks, the establishment of formal negotiations remains unlikely, suggesting that these meetings currently serve more as strategic signalling than as a path to peacebuilding. The Government's limited political leverage and the approaching of its term further stall negotiations. This timeline influences NSAG strategic calculations, as these groups may avoid significant concessions, instead opting to consolidate territorial control or escalate violence to strengthen their position ahead of the 2026 elections. Previous attempts from 2023–2024 collapsed following military operations (FIP 15/08/2025).
- **ELN negotiations.** Dialogues were suspended in January 2025 following a major ELN offensive in Catatumbo – which displaced 70,000 people – and discussions on resuming the process only re-emerged in October. The stop-start nature of these talks is increasing civilian risk, as periods of suspension are often marked by escalated hostilities to gain leverage, while the lack of a sustained ceasefire allows for continued social control and confinement in regions including southern Bolívar. Continued clashes between the ELN and the EGC, along with widespread EO use, also highlight a disconnect between the peace discourse in Havana and actions in southern Bolívar (Pares 24/10/2025). EO use serves as a strategic tool to consolidate territorial control and restrict civilian mobility during negotiations, directly contradicting humanitarian commitments made at the bargaining table.
- **Institutional challenges.** A lack of coordination between national and local levels and the absence of clear negotiation pedagogy have resulted in fragmented protection responses (KII 28/11/2025). Materially, these failures delay the activation of emergency humanitarian routes and leave civilians without clear guidance on how to safely navigate NSAG presence, further increasing communities' risk of confinement and displacement.

Peace negotiations with both the EGC and the ELN remain stalled, with no immediate prospects for resumption. This prolonged limbo encourages an escalation of violence as groups use the lack of oversight to expand territorial control and secure strategic corridors in southern Bolívar. In the absence of formal talks, violence is likely to intensify as groups reposition themselves ahead of the 2026 elections.

Civic leaders and social organisations report that security conditions in Arenal, Montecristo, Morales, and Santa Rosa del Sur are inadequate to guarantee a neutral electoral process for 2026 (EE 06/10/2025). Prior to the elections, violence is expected to escalate as NSAGs use coercion to influence voter turnout and candidate platforms. During and after the vote, the risk of retaliatory attacks and renewed territorial clashes remains high, as groups seek to consolidate their local influence regardless of the electoral outcome (DP 22/09/2025).

According to KIIs, NSAGs are profiling individuals to identify those linked to electoral processes to influence their participation (KII 02/12/2025 d). Armed group surveillance of voters limits political activity. Supporting alternative initiatives often leads to threats, forcing many community members to abstain from voting (KII 03/12/2025 b).

There are also reports of vote-buying, with prices reaching up to COP 300,000 (approximately USD 80) (KII 03/12/2025 b). This practice is a documented part of the electoral dynamics in Colombia, where NSAGs use economic coercion to influence results (DP 22/09/2025). Reports from KIIs indicate that NSAGs are co-opting the Peace Seats ('Curules de Paz'), which were intended to represent victims (KII 03/12/2025 b; KII 03/12/2025 c). This co-optation undermines the political representation of conflict-affected people and allows armed groups to exert influence over institutional reparations and local governance.

JACs are also subject to NSAG control, demonstrating the groups' capacity to exercise authority over both territory and population. JACs are among the few local governance mechanisms present across most municipalities, traditionally enabling communities to organise collective processes. This interference directly undermines everyday local governance and community-led initiatives (KII 04/12/2025 c). According to local sources, NSAGs are exerting pressure on JACs' electoral processes and restricting women's mobility and participation (KII 02/12/2025 d). The upcoming JAC elections in April 2026 are considered a high-risk flashpoint for violence and territorial control, particularly owing to potential clashes among NSAGs seeking to assert influence over local leadership and communities attempting to maintain independent governance (KII 04/12/2025 c).