

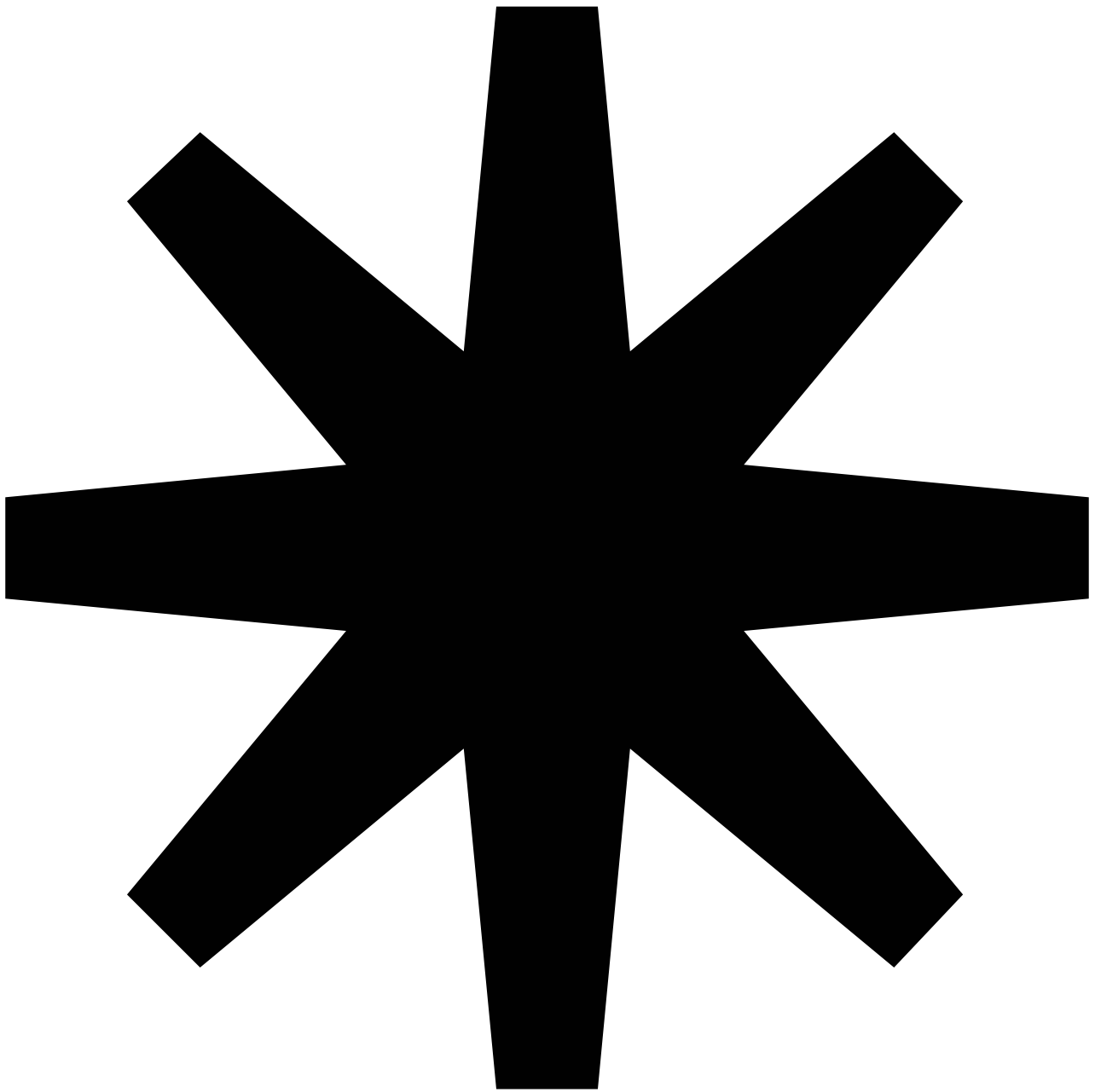
Conflict Watchlist 2025

Conflict Watchlist 2025 | Colombia

Peace talks in Nariño may be a litmus test for Petro's bid to end Colombia's conflict

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President Gustavo Petro has been adjusting [his Total Peace strategy](#) to negotiate an end to Colombia's conflict with the country's main armed groups, resorting to renewed military pressure on actors that disengaged from talks and finding in regional dialogue a successful tool to reduce violence. In the first year or so since Petro took office in August 2022, the country's main armed groups — the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissidents, and the Gulf Clan — took advantage of negotiations with the government to expand their presence and heighten competition among themselves for the control of illicit economies. In 2024, the government resumed exerting military pressure on those groups that have stalled in peace talks and repeatedly violated the ceasefires they agreed to.



After plummeting in 2023, violence between security forces and armed groups rose by 21% in 2024. Most of these incidents involved the Gulf Clan, the FARC-Central General Staff (EMC) faction led by ‘Iván Mordisco’ since it abandoned negotiations in April 2024, and the ELN after a year-long ceasefire with the group ended in August 2024. Renewed confrontation with security forces may have diverted part of the resources these armed groups use to fight each other and target civilians: By the end of November 2024, ACLED records 23% fewer monthly average events of armed groups’ clashes or violence against civilians, compared to the 2023 average. As a result, Colombia slightly improved its ranking in the December update of the [ACLED Conflict Index](#), though is still in 10th place.

However, the reduction in armed groups’ use of violence did not happen evenly throughout the country. For example, Cauca — the country’s most violent department — did not experience a significant drop in violence in 2024. In contrast, in Nariño, the monthly average of violent events in the first 11 months of 2024 plummeted by 52% compared to 2023. The reason for this decrease may lie in the fact that the government is carrying out its first attempt to bring the peace talks to the regional level in the southwestern Nariño department — one of the four departments with the vastest coca crops and a hotbed of armed group activity. In so doing, the governor, local authorities, and civil society play a protagonist role in the negotiations with armed groups in specific locations.

Regional-level peace talks have been applied to two processes in Nariño. One involves 10 prioritized municipalities where the Comuneros del Sur — a former ELN front that detached from

the group in May 2024 — has a greater presence.¹ These municipalities are Andes Sotomayor (Los Andes), Barbacoas, Cumbal, Guachucal, La Llanada, Mallama, Providencia, Ricaurte, Samaniego, and Santa Cruz de Guachaves. [Salomé Beyer Vélez, ‘Can Colombia’s talks with the Comuneros del Sur help achieve ‘total peace’?’, Al Jazeera, 21 November 2024](#) The other focuses on negotiations with the FARC-Second Marquetalia faction in the Tumaco municipality. These talks, together with a non-aggression deal that the FARC-Second Marquetalia dissidents and the Comuneros del Sur struck in early 2024, contributed to reverting violence trends in the department, which had soared in 2023. By the end of November 2024, the monthly average of violent events involving armed groups in the prioritized municipalities dropped by 75% compared to the average recorded in 2023. The improvement also benefited civilians: The number of people exposed to armed groups’ violence in Nariño in the first 11 months of 2024 more than halved from the 1.5 million exposed in the previous 11 months. Not only were civilians less exposed to armed groups’ violence, but they were also less targeted by them. ACLED records a 62% reduction in the monthly average of events of violence targeting civilians in Nariño in the first 11 months of 2024, far greater than the 20% decrease in the rest of the country. As a result, the department is on track to record its lowest levels of political violence since ACLED began covering Colombia in 2018.

What to watch for in 2025

Progress in these regional peace talks could be an important but insufficient step to solving the conflict in Nariño, least so in Colombia. Even if the government manages to demobilize Comuneros del Sur or Second Marquetalia and increase its presence in the prioritized territories, other areas of Nariño and the country could still experience an escalation of violence between active armed groups in 2025. Furthermore, the government’s chances of success also depend on political developments in neighboring Ecuador and Venezuela.

In Nariño, the reduction in armed group activity has been remarkable. However, it has also clustered around the municipalities prioritized in the talks. In other municipalities, such as Cumbitara, Taminango, Leiva, and Policarpa — which have been excluded from the peace talks even though Comuneros del Sur is reportedly active there²[Diario del Sur, ‘Nariño es un infierno por combates y alianzas entre grupos criminales,’ 12 April 2024](#) — clashes between armed groups increased in 2024 and are likely to keep rising. In other department areas, thousands of civilians were victims of internal displacement or forced confinements,³[UNOCHA, ‘Informe Tendencias e Impacto Humanitario en Colombia 2024 | Fecha de corte: Enero – Julio de 2024,’ 3 September 2024](#) as the EMC, other ELN fronts, remnants of the Gulf Clan, and the newly emerged Autodefensas Unidas de Nariño continue to operate and fight for territory.⁴ Interviews with a humanitarian worker and security expert, ACLED, September and October 2024; [Colombia’s Human Rights Ombudsman, ‘Disputa por control territorial y poblacional entre estructuras armadas ilegales tiene en riesgo a comunidades de la cordillera nariñense,’ 5 April 2024](#); [Lina Muñoz Medina, ‘Preocupación por la expansión del Clan del Golfo en Colombia: está en el 75% del territorio nacional,’ Infobae, 6 August 2024](#)

Even if concrete achievements in the Nariño-focused processes could give a new pulse to Petro’s negotiation strategy, the southwestern department is not the only hotbed of Colombia’s conflict, nor are Comuneros del Sur and the Second Marquetalia the most influential actors countrywide. The main drivers of the competition between armed groups are more vivid than ever: Cocaine production and gold mining activities keep increasing.⁵[Lara Loaiza, ‘Colombia’s Coca Crops Grew, But Cocaine Production Exploded, Latest Figures Show,’ InSight Crime, 18 October 2024](#); [Colombia’s Human Rights Ombudsman, ‘Minería ilegal es el nuevo ‘combustible’ para la expansión de los grupos armados ilegales,’ 12 April 2024](#) Subsequently, the departments most affected by these activities, such as Chocó, Antioquia, Cauca, and Valle del Cauca, are likely to continue to experience fierce competition between the Gulf Clan, the ELN, and the EMC for the control of illicit economies. Civilians who oppose the rule of a certain armed group or are believed to collaborate with a rival group or the state in disputed territories are also likely to continue to be caught in the crossfire or directly targeted in these departments.

In addition, internal rifts over the relationship with the government are likely to rekindle violence in some departments. For example, negotiations with Comuneros del Sur contributed to derailing the national peace process with the ELN leadership, which was adverse to these parallel talks. This ended up stoking ELN violence in other parts of the country. In September, it reached levels prior to the start of the year-long ceasefire in August 2023, with notable increases in the Arauca and Norte de Santander departments. If talks with the ELN do not move forward, the group's violence, including the targeting of security forces, is likely to increase again in 2025. Moreover, the scission within the Second Marquetalia between the faction led by 'Iván Márquez' and the units operating in southern Colombia (the Border Command and the Pacific Guerrilla Coordinating Committee) may, similarly to what happened within the EMC, alter conflict dynamics in the country, particularly in the Pacific and Amazon basin departments.

Finally, security dynamics in Ecuador and Venezuela also affect the chances of success in reducing violence in Nariño and Colombia at large. Nariño's neighboring provinces of Esmeraldas and Sucumbíos are some of Ecuador's most violent provinces⁶[Mario Alexis González, 'Pese a la reducción nacional, ocho provincias ecuatorianas registran más muertes violentas,' Primicias, 31 August 2024](#) where Colombian armed groups have long operated and established alliances with local groups to regulate drug trafficking activities.⁷[Arturo Torres, 'El juego del camaleón. Los secretos de las FARC en Ecuador,' Eskeletra Editorial, 2019](#) Recently, however, these alliances have become more volatile, as Ecuadorian groups have been increasingly fighting each other for the control of drug trafficking routes.⁸[Interview with security expert, ACLED, 25 October 2024; Camilo Pardo-Herrera and Mahmud Cengiz, 'From Insurgency to Illicit Trade: Analyzing FARC Dissidents in the Cocaine Market,' Small Wars Journal, 14 October 2024](#) The fragmentation of the conflict landscape and the economic appeal of drug trafficking activities will keep fueling violence on both sides of the border. The evolution of security in that area will also depend on the outcome of the February 2025 general elections and the policies the winner will implement. Similarly, Petro's ability to engage in dialogue and exert pressure on armed groups will depend on political developments in Venezuela, the guarantor of peace talks with FARC dissidents and the ELN, and a safe haven for their leadership. While Petro has said that he will not recognize a new Maduro government — which is due to be sworn in on 10 January 2025 — if vote tallies proving his victory are not published,⁹[Santiago Torrado, 'Petro reitera que ni Colombia ni Brasil reconocerán a Maduro si no presenta las actas electorales,' El País, 26 September 2024](#) severing ties with the administration that is hosting these peace talks may further hamper their progress.¹⁰[Jimmy Nomesqui Rivera, 'Negociaciones con grupos armados podrían caerse por situación política de Venezuela: "Es absolutamente preocupante,"' Infobae, 30 July 2024](#)

Political violence in Colombia

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