

Rising Cauca violence shows the scale of Colombia's peacebuilding challenge

'Every young person who picks up a paintbrush, an instrument, or a pencil is one less person who picks up a gun.'



On 17 September, fighters from Colombia's largest remaining rebel group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), [fired rockets](#) from the back of a truck into a military base in Puerto Jordán in eastern Colombia.

The incident, which [killed three soldiers and wounded at least two dozen more](#), was the latest in a string of attacks on oil infrastructure and on police and military installations that have rocked the country since the ceasefire between the ELN and the government [broke down in August](#).

It was also a devastating blow to leftist President Gustavo Petro's ambitious "Total Peace" plan, which aimed at moving away from [failed military solutions](#) to decades of conflict and at establishing a dialogue with criminal armed groups in return for their disarmament.

Thanks to the bilateral ceasefire, Petro's flagship policy initially achieved a tense calm in ELN-controlled areas, but after [a series of setbacks](#) this year, the president announced that the attack on Puerto Jordán had "practically" [ended peace talks](#).

Nowhere have the shortcomings of Petro's "Total Peace" plan been more keenly felt than in Cauca, a department on the Pacific coast of southwestern Colombia where the [violence has increasingly hit](#) poor rural communities, aggravating chronic vulnerabilities.

Days before the Puerto Jordán attack, [eight Colombian marines](#) were injured in a similar assault in Cauca, while two people died when members of an armed group [opened fire](#) during a soccer game in an Indigenous town in late August.

These are only a few of the [466 violent incidents](#) registered in the Cauca region in the past year – the highest of all of Colombia's 32 departments, according to the UN's emergency aid coordination body, OCHA.

As the number of people [internally displaced and forcibly confined](#) by armed groups continues to soar, many families struggle to even find food. With little assistance, communities are resorting to [coping strategies](#) to survive.

"The dynamics of conflict, including forced displacement by violence and recruitment [non-state armed actors], have greatly exacerbated long-term problems in the region such as extreme poverty, social exclusion... discrimination and gender-based violence", Pamela Escobar, programme vice president for [Plan International](#) in northern Cauca, told The New Humanitarian.*

A region long neglected

A peace deal with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016 officially ended Colombia's 53-year civil war, regarded as the world's longest-running war. There was hope then that the process would eventually end the other conflicts in the country as well, but it hasn't.

In Cauca, more than [a dozen](#) armed groups that sprung up to fill the vacuum left behind when the FARC disarmed are still fighting for [territorial control](#) over lucrative [illicit economies](#), such as gold mining and drug trafficking. The region is also a [transport corridor](#) to established trafficking routes on the northwestern Pacific coast.

The impact has been devastating: In 2023, the homicide rate in Cauca was 56.1 per 100,000 people – [more even than countries with raging gang violence problems like Ecuador or Haiti](#). In June, Colombia's Ombudsman office [reported](#) nine mass displacements related to conflict in Cauca during the first five months of 2024 alone.

More than half of Cauca's residents [live in poverty](#), while 22.9% are in extreme poverty. They receive little or [no assistance](#) from the state. Although the 2016 peace deal included [billions of dollars in funding](#) for infrastructure and rural development in conflict areas, it was largely misappropriated by corrupt politicians.



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“Northern Cauca is a zone with rich ethnic diversity and includes Afro-descendants and Indigenous communities that face additional challenges in terms of discrimination, access to resources, and to economic development”*

Cauca’s high percentage of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian people plays a role in the region’s long history of neglect. Of Cauca’s 1.8 million inhabitants, 25% belong to Indigenous communities – six times the national average – while Afro-Colombians represent just under 20% (versus 4% nationally).

Samuel Escobar (no relation of Pamela Escobar), a field researcher for Norwegian NGO [PAX](#) and longtime Cauca resident, said the government’s failure to adapt to this diversity and to meet the needs of these communities has made peacebuilding particularly difficult. “Northern Cauca is not hegemonic. There are many cultures and many languages. Each community has their own unique set of challenges,” he said. “Indigenous authorities... have a much better idea [than the national government in Bogotá] of what their communities need.”

A failed approach to peace

Both Petro and his predecessor, Iván Duque, have tried to reduce violence and stimulate economic growth in Cauca. But they have done so via outside investment, rather than taking local perspectives into account.

A common measure has been creating sugarcane plantations, which many Indigenous groups view as a hostile occupation of their ancestral lands. The Nasa people, in particular, have resisted, often [clashing](#) with Colombian police and residents working in the region’s farmlands.

“The state’s strategy for peace has prioritised capitalist development and therefore does not address what many communities identify as the root causes of conflict,” said Anthony Dest, assistant professor of anthropology at Lehman College, City University of New York.

Dest, who has conducted considerable field research in northern Cauca, said that contemporary violence in the region emerged from “the ongoing colonial conquest of land, life, and labour that many communities continue to struggle against”.

“Many are struggling towards forms of peace that do not fit into the state’s paradigm of military and economic security,” he added, referring not only to the land-defence of communities like the Nasa, but also to locally driven efforts to expel narcotraffickers and criminal armed groups.

“Conflicts today are more complex than they were in the past, as there is a multiplicity of armed actors with different structures. The command-and-control structures are not the same. This requires a national analysis of the evolution of this conflict, and also a regional analysis of conflict dynamics.”

Escobar, from PAX, agreed that the top-down approach from Bogotá has been an impediment to progress.

“We have seen instances where communities negotiated processes with armed groups that later collapsed because the government refused to recognise them,” he said.

War on drugs’ efforts also complicate peacebuilding in the region, he added, with farmers often caught in impossible situations: While armed groups demand that they produce illicit crops, government soldiers target them for doing so.

“Conflicts today are more complex than they were in the past, as there is a multiplicity of armed actors with different structures,” Lorenzo Caraffi, former head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) office in Colombia, told The New Humanitarian. “The command-and-control structures are not the same. This requires a national analysis of the evolution of this conflict, and also a regional analysis of conflict dynamics.”

‘That’s how we resist’: Community peacebuilding

With no state solution in sight, communities have long tried to develop their own peacebuilding processes and organisations, such as Colombia’s [Indigenous Guard](#), an unarmed peacekeeping force which, in Cauca, even combats criminal armed groups and narcotraffickers.

“Community-led organisations and *resguardos* [semi-autonomous Indigenous regions subject to local ancestral law] struggling for autonomy have directly confronted drug traffickers trying to impose control over their territories,” said Dest. “And they are doing so at extreme personal risk.”

Residents in Cauca often speak of “resistance”, which takes countless forms. Women's empowerment, youth rights advocacy, art, and community building are just some of them. “For me, art is resistance,” Valery, an 18-year-old student from a small community in northern Cauca told The New Humanitarian during a visit to Cali, the capital of Valle del Cauca department, which neighbours Cauca to the north.

Valery, who asked that her surname be withheld for security reasons, is a violinist whose academic career has been sponsored by Plan International, as part of the NGO’s youth leadership programming in the region.

She leads a band that interprets traditional music from Cauca and performs regionally “to give visibility to [their] situation”. She also views herself as a social leader and hopes to inspire more young people to pursue art or academia rather than fall prey to recruitment by criminal groups.

“Every young person who picks up a paintbrush, an instrument, or a pencil is one less person who picks up a gun,” she said. “That’s how we resist. That’s how we build peace.”



Nelson Pacheco/Plan International

Valery, an 18-year-old violinist from a small community in northern Cauca, views herself as a social leader and promotes art as a way to keep the youth from being recruited by armed groups.

But keeping youths away from armed groups is becoming ever more difficult in Cauca. [Child recruitment](#) rose by nearly 100% in the first six months of this year, compared to the same period in 2023.

Lack of schooling is one of the factors. Confrontations between armed groups and the presence of anti-personnel mines keep students from attending classes, even as forced confinements imposed by armed groups in some areas force schools to shutter.

According to a September [report](#) by the Norwegian Refugee Council, attacks on education in Cauca tripled in the first seven months of 2024 compared to the same period in 2023. And a new Plan International [report on girls and young people living in conflict](#) shows that the lack of safe transportation to and from schools – and the emotional and mental health issues related to conflict – are also reasons for dropout.

Ada Luz, 17, knows all about this. She is from the same town and the same youth programme as Valery. She belongs to a local theatre troupe that performs plays that allow communities to confront their trauma.

“Art allows us to transform the tragedy of war into jokes, or stories that make people laugh,” she told The New Humanitarian. “It allows people who are overwhelmed by the conflict, to smile in spite of it. It’s a release.”

***These quotations were corrected after publication to fix translation errors.**

With additional reporting by Daniela Díaz in Bogotá. The New Humanitarian used transportation and accommodation provided by Plan International. Edited by Daniela Mohor.