



# RESEARCH REPORT

UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER  
FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR)

ADDRESSING THE COLOMBIAN REFUGEE  
CRISIS

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## Basic Overview of the Issue

The Colombian refugee crisis, the world's largest displacement crisis and the largest forced displacement crisis in Latin America, has been perpetuated by uncontrollable violence, rising inflation, frequent gang battles, high crime rates, and a lack of food. Armed conflict, which began in the 1960s, has had numerous non-state actors involved, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), paramilitary groups, and narcotics cartels. Although the peace deal between the Colombian government and FARC in 2016 was a landmark step towards ending the decade of conflict, the crisis still lingers due to the fact that these armed groups still remain active across most parts of the country.

These conflicts have also been fueled by other external forces, such as the illegal drugs trade, unequal land distribution, and political exclusion, resulting in mass violence, human rights abuses, and the systematic displacement of individuals. The challenges are compounded by the limited capacity of Colombia as a nation and of humanitarian organizations to reach conflict-affected citizens with basic assistance and protection. So far in 2025, over 7.8 million Colombians remain internally displaced (87% of which is motivated by violence) with significant numbers seeking refuge in surrounding countries, such as Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama, and Brazil.

Furthermore, the recent influx of Venezuelan migrants into Colombia has added another dimension of complexity to the crisis, tightening resources and exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities. As of mid 2023, there were more than 300,000 Venezuelans registered as refugees, and nearly 1.2 million Venezuelan asylum seekers worldwide. Colombia has generously hosted a majority of these migrants, and has become a lifeline for them- but this comes at the cost of being unable to guarantee them access to their basic needs and rights. (UNHCR, 2024)

## Explanation of Important Terms

### *Refugee*

People who have fled war, violence, conflict, or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country. (UNHCR)

### *Internal Displacement*

The forced movement of people within the country they live in. (iDMC)

### *Internally Displaced Person*

A person who has been forced to flee their homes by conflict, violence, persecution or disasters- however, they remain within the borders of their own country. (UNHCR)

### *Insurgency*

A term historically restricted to rebellious acts that did not reach the proportions of an organized revolution. (Britannica)

### *Violence*

Actions that are intended or likely to hurt people or cause damage. (Cambridge Dictionary)

### *Regional Cooperation*

The political and institutional mechanisms that countries in a general geographical region devise to find and strengthen common interests as well as promote their national interests, through mutual cooperation and dialogue. (IGI Global)

### *Asylum Seeker*

Someone who is seeking international protection. (UNHCR)

### *Guerrilla Warfare*

An irregular war carried out by small bodies of men acting independently. (Oxford English Dictionary)

### *Drug Cartels*

An illicit association of independent organizations formed to limit competition and control the production and distribution of illegal drugs. (Britannica)

## **Detailed Background of the Issue**

### *The Historical Roots of the Internal Conflict*

The conflict involving Colombia is of historical origin, dating back to the mid-20th century and starting due to political exclusion and land inequality. A period known as “La

Violencia” (1948-1958), which was triggered by the assassination of Liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948, was characterized by intense political violence between the Colombian Liberal and Conservative parties, resulting in approximately 200,000 to 300,000 deaths. It set the stage for future conflicts concerning the whole country.

The emergence of guerilla groups such as the FARC and the ELN, and of other smaller paramilitary groups, led to continuous fighting, rape, ransom kidnappings, human rights violations, and many cases of forced disappearances. The only goal of these new armed forces was to overthrow the Colombian government and establish a socialist regime in the country. They organized mainly from rural areas, capitalizing on the discontent of landless peasants and marginalized communities. Their violent acts have forced millions of Colombians to leave their homes, desperate for safety in other parts of the nation.

The drug trafficking activities in the 1970s and 1980s complicated the situation. Drug cartels gained prominence by consolidating economic and political power, and their interference in national governance caused an increase in violence and corruption. Paramilitary groups, generally linked to drug traffickers and landowners, appeared to eliminate the guerillas and protect their own interests. These groups committed human rights abuses such as forced disappearances and kidnappings, notably causing population displacement in the process. President Juan Manuel Santos’ ruling government in Colombia was too handicapped by the matter and was unable to maintain control over the country during this era. Accordingly, the conflict became increasingly worse as multiple actors began to fight for power and for the ownership of resources such as land, eventually leading to a full-blown civil war at last.

## The Impact on Civilian Populations

### *Effect on the Availability of Essential Services*

The Colombian crisis has impacted civilian populations negatively, with millions of people displaced from their homes and refugees/migrants from Venezuela struggling to find safety and security in the country. Forced displacement within the region, due to the actions of armed groups, has resulted in the loss of land and the degradation of social networks, as well as increasing levels of poverty and discrimination. Also, these displaced groups of

people often don't have access to necessities such as food, healthcare, education, and shelter, which are scarce enough already due to the influx of new refugees.

### ***Effects of the Human Rights Violations***

The conflict has also resulted in extensive human rights violations and abuses, including massacres, enforced disappearances, sexual violence, and the recruitment of child soldiers. These crimes against humanity have had a destructive and long-term impact on the psychological and physical well-being of the local populace. They have also made the pre-existing migration crisis harder to handle, seeing as it is difficult to handle both the security of conflict-prone regions, and of transit points such as the Simon Bolivar International Bridge in Cucuta.



*Image 1: Colombian police officers standing in front of people lining up to cross into Colombia from Venezuela*

### ***Environmental Effects***

Lastly, the activities of these armed groups has had a significant impact on the

environment, causing deforestation, pollution, and the deterioration of natural resources. Drug production and trafficking have further contributed to environmental disruption, affecting the livelihoods of rural communities negatively.



*Image 2: FARC-Colombia peace deal being finalized.*

## Major Parties Involved

### Colombia

As the country currently suffering through this crisis, Colombia has the central role of addressing both its own internal displacement, and the issues faced by Venezuelan migrants and refugees. The Colombian government, led by the president Juan Manuel Santos, has to provide fundamental assistance to protect displaced persons, all the while handling the external pressure of being a popular destination for asylum seekers, and settling conflicts with groups such as the FARC and the ELN.

They also have an obligation to maintain order, law, and political stability. However, the government's capacity and capabilities are reduced due to factors like corruption, inefficiency, and a lack of necessary funding and resources, which has proven to be crucial

when working in rural areas.

### *United States of America (USA)*

The United States of America has been a major provider of technical and financial assistance to Colombia, to ease the peacebuilding process and to address the needs of migrants and refugees. It has been providing humanitarian assistance to internationally displaced persons (IDPs) and Venezuelan migrants in Colombia for the past few years. The US government's approach towards both crises has been influenced by the broader foreign policy it applies in the region, which focuses on promoting democracy and human rights. The U.S. plays a leading role in supporting the long-term resolution of the problem, while supporting diplomatic engagement in the process.

### *Venezuela*

The economic and political crisis in Venezuela is one of the major causes of the large-scale migration of Venezuelans into Colombia. The Venezuelan government has been faulted for the handling of its own economic issues, for its controversial human rights record, and for its inability to support neighboring countries harboring its refugees.

### *Brazil*

As Brazil is a neighboring country to Colombia, it also faces similar environmental issues such as deforestation and the depletion of natural resources, especially since the countries share adjacent regions of the Amazon rainforest. Brazil has been deeply impacted by the Colombian crisis in general, and has expressed concerns regarding the spillover of the problem into other South American countries, as was seen around Venezuela.

### *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*

The UNHCR, as the main UN agency responsible for refugee protection, has a crucial role in addressing the crisis and providing assistance to Venezuelan migrants in Colombia. The UNHCR works with the Colombian government and other relevant stakeholders to provide humanitarian aid, and to come up with durable solutions to protect displaced individuals. Its operations in Colombia included hiring over 550 personnel to work over 18 different offices, whose shared goal was to help internally displaced Colombians and other externally displaced individuals to find jobs, access education, and cover their

basic living expenses.

*The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)*

FARC was formed in 1964 as a guerilla group, which aimed to combat the Colombian government and establish a socialist state. Over the years, the FARC expanded to become one of the most powerful insurgent groups in the country, controlling large areas at a time and funding operations through criminal enterprises, such as kidnappings and drug trafficking. Even after the Colombian Peace Agreement was signed in 2016, which ordered the FARC to pull out of the nation, they failed to comply and continued their attacks on the government, hoping to get their hands on more land.

*The National Liberation Army (ELN)*

The other guerilla insurgency group in Latin America involved in the Colombian conflict, and one that has transitioned into a real transnational threat in both Colombia and Venezuela. Alongside the FARC, this group was also found conducting illegal activities in the region, such as forming large drug cartels, who have acted as a major source of funding for other armed groups. The cartels have also played a role in displacing various communities, seeking to seize land for drug production and trafficking.

**Chronology of Important Events**

Date	Description of Event
May 27, 1964	The formation of FARC and the start of Colombia's armed conflict.
July 4, 1964	The National Liberation Army (ELN) is founded as another major insurgent group, trying to defeat the Colombian government.
1980s	Displacement of civilians due to the activities of drug cartels and the violence perpetuated by paramilitary forces.

<b>1999-2002</b>	Launching of Plan Colombia to fight insurgency and drug trafficking.
<b>November 24, 2016</b>	The signing of the Colombian Peace Agreement with the FARC.
<b>2018</b>	A sudden rise in the number of Venezuelan migrants fleeing to Colombia, owing to political developments of the time.
<b>2020-2024</b>	Resurgence of violence as armed organizations fight for power again; internal displacement spikes.
<b>2025</b>	Colombia hosts over 7.8 million IDPs due to the ongoing violence in the nation.

## Relevant International Documents

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 10, 1948, General Assembly Resolution **S/RES/217A**.

[https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_RES\\_217\(III\).pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_217(III).pdf)

The 1951 Refugee Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/refugees.pdf>

UNSC Resolution on Colombia, January 11, 2023, Security Council Resolution **S/RES/2673**.

[https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S\\_RES\\_2673.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_RES_2673.pdf)

## Past Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Plan Colombia, launched in 2000 by President Andres Pastrana and U.S. President

Plan Colombia, was a U.S.-Colombian initiative. Its main purpose was to combat drug trafficking and to weaken insurgency forces like the FARC and ELN. With a funding of almost 10 billion U.S. dollars from the United States, the plan combined military aid and social development programs. While Plan Colombia dealt with FARC through military offensives, it received harsh criticism from the community. The focus on the military aspects of the crisis limited the long-term impact, as inequality only continued to grow in affected regions.

Moreover, to hold direct negotiations with FARC, the Caguán Peace Process took place from 1999 to 2002. The negotiations had to look into rural development and land reform policies, to obey the FARC's strict requests. However, these efforts were made useless when the group violated the process' provisions by continuing to engage in drug trafficking, and reinforcing its military presence in the country. Caguán's failure was memorialized by the kidnapping of Ingrid Betancourt in 2002, which was thought to have been a warning signal by the FARC.

Further negotiations with armed groups were attempted on numerous occasions, with the FARC and ELN being at the forefront. The 2016 peace agreement was a significant milestone for the country, as it directly called for the demobilization of all guerilla fighters. However, certain dissidents refused to disarm themselves, so it cannot be claimed that the agreement was fully effective. Moreover, other groups are also still active and continue to use brutality and intimidation tactics against civilian populations, due in part to the staggered implementation of the agreement- which meant that they were unable to provide security for demobilized fighters, and that discussions on land reform were constantly delayed.

The reintegration of former combatants into civilian life has also been a massive issue, with many seeking to find access to basic services. Additionally, the entry of Venezuelan migrants into Colombia has only added another layer of complexity to the ongoing crisis, for it has limited access to important resources and exacerbated scarcity. The Colombian government simply cannot keep up with the challenge of providing for Venezuelan migrants, while simultaneously combating the armed groups plaguing it.

It is worth mentioning, finally, the "Ley de Víctimas", or Victim's Law, which was passed in 2011 to facilitate the return of displaced populations to their own residences, and to supply them with the necessary financial compensation. Armed groups opposed this law vehemently, which was why it was never truly "passed" in practice.

## Solution Alternatives

One of the major issues is the lack of cooperation between nations. Strengthening international cooperation, one can try to support Colombia in addressing the challenges it faces due to its extensive internal displacement and the large waves of Venezuelan migrants it receives on a regular basis. Another key step may be to expand the presence of the government in affected regions, specifically through the provision of humanitarian aid and the implementation of improved public services. This includes healthcare facilities, roads, and schools, all of which would greatly benefit rural populations.

Local security may be improved by having the United Nations (UN) deploy its own trained officers to Colombian territory, instead of disorganized military groups and organizations. These can help combat the illegal drug trafficking done by armed groups, such as the FARC and ELC. However, a regulatory body (in the form of a committee) may be necessary to ensure that these officers do not cause any additional damage to the humanitarian situation, or to the government's territorial authority.

Regional cooperation is, as always, a priority. Neighboring countries such as Venezuela, Brazil and Ecuador should be called upon to help Colombia in fighting crime and violence, managing the flow of refugees, and securing transnational borders. Technical experts from relevant NGOs could be called upon to assist in these processes, while sharing their own legal or financial knowledge to help out.

Finally, more importance should be placed on economic development programmes to address common challenges faced by the entire country. Youth empowerment, regional coordination and sustainable development should be important goals when designing these initiatives, as well as addressing the needs of displaced populations. Further areas of focus could be determined by conducting surveys and polls, which could collect vital information that would then be presented to the Colombian government.

## Useful Links

UNHCR's Activities in Colombia

(<https://www.unhcr.org/us/countries/colombia>)

CNN News: FARC-Colombia Peace Deal Finalized

(<https://edition.cnn.com/2016/08/24/americas/farc-colombia-final-peace-deal/index.html>)

DW Documentary: The Long Road to peace after Colombia's Civil War

(<https://youtu.be/xO6AnTc0OE8?si=M2NrnQVLZkKv2sgJ>)

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