

Insight Report: Colombia

Panic amid pandemic

March 2021



Colombia Travel Security Risk Rating

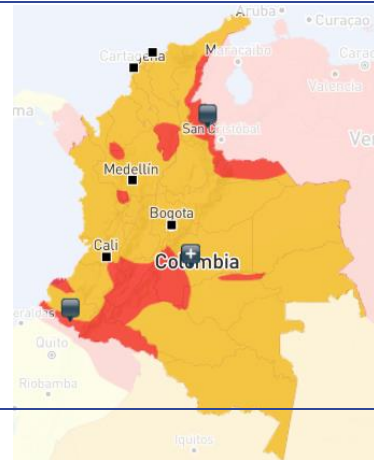


MEDIUM: Colombia



HIGH: Areas affected by guerrilla activity, including border areas with Venezuela and Ecuador; Cali

Evacuation planning level: **PREPARATORY**



Key judgements

- The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions have had a notable impact on the activities of Colombia's armed criminal groups. Although clashes between illicit armed groups and the security forces have declined amid the pandemic, organised criminal activity has persisted and, in some areas expanded.
- As criminal actors vie for territorial control, power dynamics between various criminal groups have shifted in Colombia. Due in part to the government's inability to provide adequate support to the populace during the pandemic, criminal groups have stepped in to reinforce their positions.
- The prolonged economic impact of the pandemic and interruptions to school studies are expected to reduce opportunities for Colombia's youth populations, leaving many vulnerable to recruitment into organised crime. The lack of government protection for demobilised, ex-combatants has also led some of these actors to rejoin criminal groups.
- Managers will need to account for an increase in organised crime activity, particularly in Colombia's rural areas, in the short- to medium-term. Workforce operating in impacted areas should consider journey management procedures, while those operating in mining and forestry sectors should consider security support.

Overview

In an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19, the Colombian government enforced a number of measures restricting movement and activities. In mid-March 2020, the authorities suspended inbound flights, closed land and sea borders and restricted domestic travel to essential purposes only. In some areas, related measures also included nightly curfews, as well as rotating restrictions on mobility based on personal identification numbers or gender.

Criminal groups took advantage of the government's preoccupation with the pandemic and reduced civilian circulation to operate clandestinely. Armed criminal groups also seized this opportunity to expand their influence at the expense of the state, which failed to fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) following the 2016 peace accords. Armed groups have expanded illegal mining operations as smuggling, drug trafficking and extortion became less feasible or profitable due to lockdown restrictions.

Although confrontations between armed groups and the security forces diminished notably in the first half of 2020, according to a University of Melbourne study, skirmishes between rival criminal groups, as well as acts of violence against civilians, continued. Various criminal groups such as the leftist guerrilla National Liberation Army (ELN), the Gulf Clan (also known as 'Los Urabenos') and FARC dissidents clashed with rival elements to establish control over key territories providing them with access to strategic resources and routes.

Expansion of influence

While lockdown measures went into effect in the capital Bogota and other cities, organised criminal groups soon established mobility restrictions in areas under their control. These included curfews, bans on public gatherings and the establishment of informal checkpoints to control the entry of travellers and non-residents. While these measures were likely undertaken, at least in part, to protect members of the armed groups, as well as the communities in which they operate, their primary purpose was to establish those groups as the de facto authority locally.

These measures were communicated to local communities via WhatsApp messaging app, pamphlets, graffiti and forced meetings with local community leaders. In April 2020, the ELN distributed pamphlets threatening of violence targeting those who did not adhere to COVID-19-related mobility restrictions in Bolivar department. In Cauca department, presumed dissidents of the FARC distributed threatening pamphlets – that read 'comply or die' – and left incinerated vehicles on roads leading to entrances of various towns as a warning.

Criminal elements also attempted to use soft power and relation-building tactics with local communities to expand their influence. Criminal groups, in some cases, acted as providers of essential goods and supplies, compensating for the absence of government assistance, in order to gain legitimacy over a certain territory and local support or approval. In Catatumbo region, along the Venezuelan border, members of the ELN distributed goods to the local population and provided with health safety guidelines against the propagation of COVID-19. This helps strengthen criminal groups as it increases their

standing among the local population, who will most likely refrain from cooperating with the authorities and the security forces and may even, in some instances, offer them protection.

Use of violence

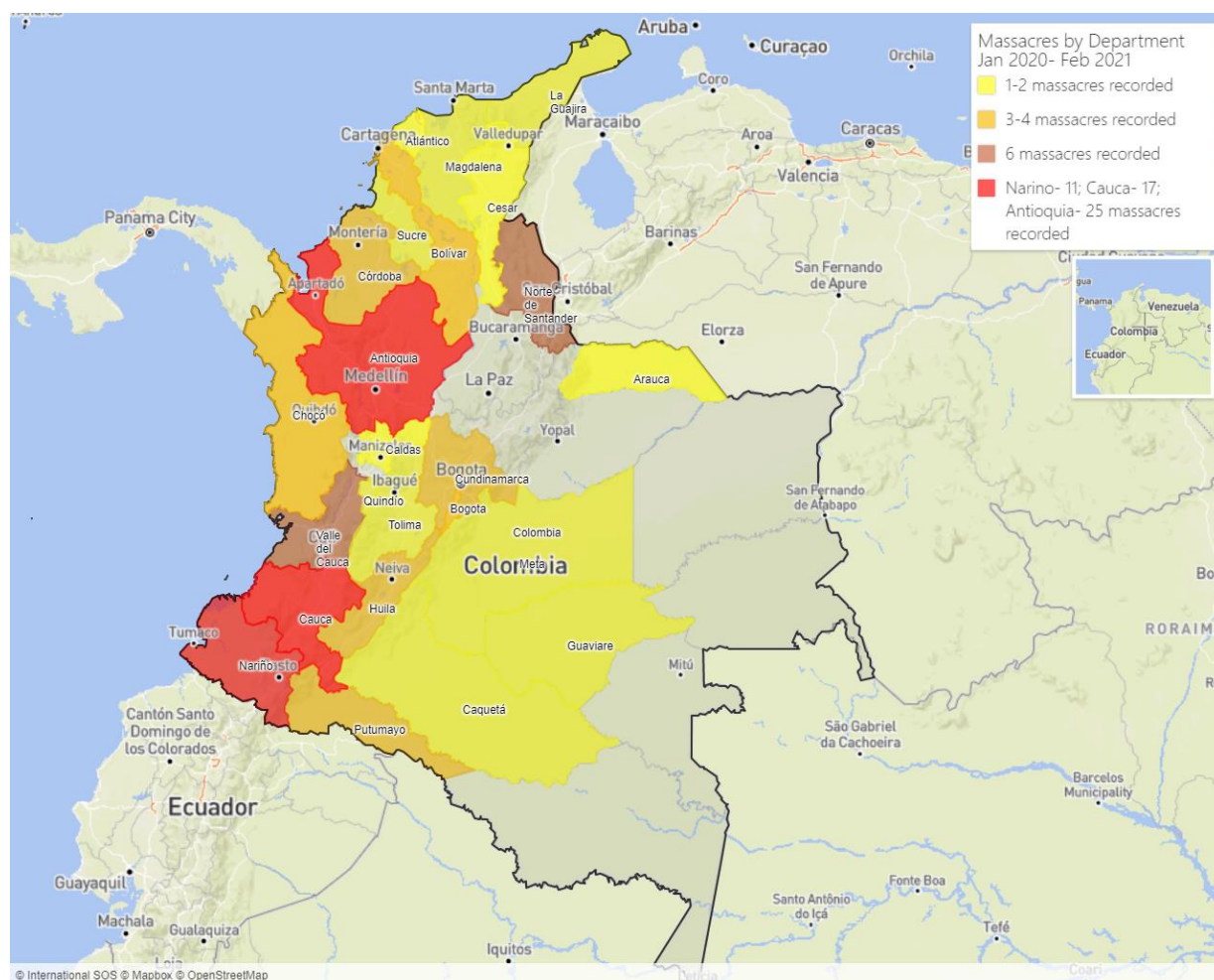
However, anecdotal evidence and statistics suggest that criminal groups have been more likely to use menace in order to establish their authority in their area of operation. In Cauca department, dissidents of the FARC threw grenades and opened fire at a bar that remained open in violation of informal COVID-19 measures. In May 2020, two members of a family travelling on a road in Cauca department despite a guerrilla-imposed curfew were shot and killed. In April 2020, an emergency medical vehicle transporting a patient was attacked on the road for violating a curfew, in Tumaco (Narino province). More than 16,000 people were displaced in the first six months of 2020, nearly double the number of those displaced during the first six months of 2019. The majority of these displaced people come from areas fraught with organised criminal violence such as Antioquia department's Bajo Cauca region, as well as the departments of Arauca, Narino, Norte de Santander and Putumayo.

Civilians located in rural areas of organised criminal activity, as well as demobilised members of the FARC, have been increasingly targeted in extrajudicial killings and kidnappings. According to the Colombia-based NGO Indepaz, 91 'massacres' (defined as three or more people killed by the same perpetrator at the same time) were recorded in 2020, leaving 378 victims; this made it the deadliest year since 2013, in which 71 'massacres' were recorded. In addition, 12 more 'massacres' were recorded between January and 18 February 2021, bringing the total number of such incidents during the ongoing pandemic to 103 (see Map 1 below). The majority of these incidents have occurred in rural parts of the aforementioned departments, which traditionally experience high levels of organised criminal activity. Analysts and local activists have suggested that while at least some of the 'massacres' are the result of criminal rivalries, many have been carried out as intimidation tactics to coerce local populations into adhering to restrictions imposed by criminal groups.

Vulnerable populations

The pandemic has rendered some segments of the Colombian population more vulnerable to the activities of organised crime groups. The government's preoccupation with pandemic response has made addressing issues of underdevelopment in rural areas a lesser priority. Critics of President Ivan Duque's administration have alleged that the inability or unwillingness of the government to establish its presence and authority in areas previously under FARC control following the 2016 Peace Accords has allowed other criminal groups to consolidate power in those areas. Furthermore, the government's incapacity to protect former FARC members – more than 200 of which have been killed since 2016 – has led some to join other criminal groups for protection.

Map 1: Number of killings of three or more people by the same perpetrator (referred to here as 'massacres') between January 2020 and February 2021 by department. Source: Indepaz.



This map is intended as a visual aid only and not a definitive source of information about risk. © 2021 International SOS

Colombia's rural poor are also increasingly vulnerable. Amid lockdown measures, the country's unemployment rate rose from 9.8% to 14.7%. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions, the economic situation for Colombia's rural poor will remain dire in the short-to-medium term. Without viable economic alternatives, more of Colombia's vulnerable poor are likely to feel compelled to engage in illicit mining, forestry, drug production, drug trafficking or other activities overseen by organised criminal groups. Furthermore, many of the approximately 2m Venezuelan refugees that have settled in Colombia in recent years present attractive targets for criminal groups to extort and/or recruit from.

Yet the most vulnerable population to recruitment into organised criminal groups are Colombian youths, particularly those in rural areas. A report from UNICEF showed that roughly 97% of youths in Latin America were not physically present in classrooms at the end of 2020. The rates were even higher in rural Colombia, where internet access is limited, making virtual schooling not viable. The effects of this were seen early on in the year. The Coalition Against the Involvement of Children and Young People in Colombia's Armed Conflict (COALICO) recorded at least 190 instances in which children were recruited by organised crime in the first six months of 2020. This figure was five times greater the number

reported during the same period of 2019. Although both figures are likely far fewer than the number of children actually recruited into organised crime in either year, they do help demonstrate the scale to which the issue has exacerbated during the pandemic.

Armed groups may pose serious security concerns in the medium-to-long term. A recent study from Tulane University (US) suggested that high school graduation rates for Latin America in the coming years could fall from 61% to 46% due to the pandemic. The study indicated that the impact would be even greater in rural areas, where education levels are typically lower, coinciding well with areas of Colombia most beset by organised criminal activity.

Outlook

The pandemic has altered the short- and long-term outlooks for Colombia's ongoing armed conflicts. While economists project that Colombia's GDP will increase between 3% and 4.5% in 2021 as COVID-19-related restrictions ease, improvements are likely to be slower to reach rural parts of the country. Furthermore, during recent years of economic growth, the Duque-led administration has appeared at most lukewarm on fulfilling development initiatives for rural areas outlined in the 2016 Peace Accords. Without a sustained government presence, populations in rural areas are likely to continue to recognise armed criminal groups as the de facto authority. Without viable alternative economic opportunities, many are likely to be compelled to join the ranks of, or otherwise work with, criminal groups.

With a poor short-term economic outlook in rural Colombia, organised criminal groups are likely to continue to further venture out of traditional extortion rackets, which has proven less lucrative during lockdown. Instead, criminal groups may increase illegal mining and forestry operations, particularly in the Bajo Cauca region – a major drug trafficking corridor, potentially putting legitimate businesses operating in the industry at heightened risk of exposure to violence. Massacres, particularly in rural areas, are expected to continue at a relatively high pace throughout the year. At least 12 massacres, claiming 44 lives, have already occurred in 2021. Thus far, the killings have been concentrated in traditional trouble areas, with four recorded in Antioquia and three in Cauca.

With diminished economic opportunities and school services that help keep youth out of the grasp of gangs, organised crime could expand significantly in the next few years. This could present real security challenges to organisations operating in such areas, including by heightening the risk of extortion, kidnapping and other crimes.

Duque-led administration is expected to respond to a rise in organised criminal activity with a traditional militaristic approach. Newly appointed defense minister Diego Molano has indicated that the military will resume fumigation efforts on coca fields. Critics have alleged that such tactics are ineffective in the long term if not coupled with development initiatives – which the Duque administration has thus far eschewed. Confrontations between armed groups and the security forces will likely increase as Colombia, hopefully, emerges from the pandemic in 2021. Attacks on military infrastructure and personnel are targeted in nature but could nonetheless present risks to anyone operating in the vicinity.

Recommendations to managers

Managers with staff and assets in Colombia should closely monitor developments in the coming years. Operations in HIGH risk areas of Colombia, including parts of Antioquia department (particularly Bajo Cauca), most of Arauca and Norte de Santander departments, as well as rural areas of Caqueta, Cauca, Choco, Huila, Meta, Narino, Putumayo and Valle del Cauca departments, should be undertaken with robust security planning. Long-term projects, particularly in the mining, forestry or other related sectors should involve contingency and emergency planning, such as an escalation matrix.

Workforce operating in impacted areas should receive additional training regarding how to prepare for and respond to an incident. They should be trained to maintain a low profile, safeguarding personal and business information. Workforce should also be trained in how to confront issues of extortion or other such threats, with processes for escalation to local authorities as well as up the organisation's management chain clearly defined. Managers should monitor signs of a deterioration in the security environment around project sites, including reported security incidents, particularly those involving or targeting workforce.

New projects in areas of organised crime activity will require carrying out risk assessments, inclusive of a site security assessment. Managers should be aware that criminal groups occasionally enforce so-called 'armed strikes,' during which residents of particular departments or municipalities are ordered under threat of violence to remain at home and not travel on particular routes. These armed strikes, or 'paros armados', have a notable security and economic impact. Managers are advised to monitor media and official channels, as well as International SOS alerts for details of armed strikes, and to minimise movements during such periods.

As Colombia reopens its borders to international travel, managers should ensure inbound business travellers are fully briefed on the prevailing conditions prior to undertaking their trip. Travel to HIGH risk areas should be for essential purposes only and should include robust local and, at times, security support. Journey management procedures should be in place. Managers and business travellers should liaise with International SOS for situation updates as well as itinerary reviews. Physical support, including secure transportation, and other facilities can be arranged upon request through the Assistance Centre in Philadelphia (US).

Organised criminal groups occasionally enforce armed strikes, or 'paros armados.' These periods usually see heightened activity by armed groups. The ELN enforced a paro armado in nine departments on 14-17 February 2020. During those three days, 27 ELN operations were reported, including clashes with the military, a car bomb and a sniper attack. The strike caused a food shortage in Choco department as operations were shut along a key transport river.

Contributors

This Insight Report was prepared by our team in the Americas Regional Security Centre, which includes American and Colombian nationals, with additional input from security professionals in Bogota (Colombia).

For follow-up questions about the assessments or recommendations in this Report, please call your dedicated line and ask to speak with the Regional Security Centre.

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