

The humanitarian impact of the new dynamics of the armed conflict and violence in various regions of Colombia¹

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■ Executive summary

The peace agreement that is expected to be reached between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC-EP) will end more than 50 years of armed conflict. It will highlight new opportunities for the country, and also new violence dynamics that are especially present in remote regions of the country and some urban areas. The role of other armed groups besides the FARC-EP, especially post-demobilisation armed groups, is one of the greatest risks facing the consolidation of a peace process. While the peace talks in Havana were still ongoing, these actors reconfigured their operations and have been responsible for serious humanitarian impacts on some communities.

Despite seeing improvements in many indicators (e.g. the homicide rate, acts of war, etc.), other more surreptitious activities such as threats, individual displacement, extortion and social control have increased, indicating that the humanitarian situation remains alarming. This should be a priority in post-agreement peace planning, since this type of violence has a more subtle humanitarian impact and there is the danger that it could become invisible.

This report analyses these conflict dynamics, their possible evolution during the post-agreement stage, and their humanitarian and social consequences. It also highlights the need to improve monitoring systems and improve protection for affected communities.

Introduction

After more than four years of talks, the signing of a peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC-EP) will be an important step in finalising an armed conflict that has affected Colombian society for more than 50 years. The end of this conflict is without doubt the best news that Colombian society, intensely affected by violence for so long, could receive. A new period is opening up to the country and the hope of establishing a lasting and sustainable peace is the horizon towards which it should progress. With this agreement, Colombia will enter a key transition period in which it will have to implement the agreements reached in the peace process and facilitate changes in structural conditions to promote reconciliation and development while upholding guarantees of truth, justice,

reparation and non-repetition. For millions of Colombians, especially those who have been victims of the conflict and live in areas affected by armed violence, the establishment of peace will primarily mean an end to their suffering of violations, as well as seeing their rights protected and having their needs fulfilled by the government.

During the four years of talks in Havana, however, the social and humanitarian consequences of the armed conflict have continued to be felt (Rey Marcos & Pineda Ariza, 2013; Rey Marcos & Duval, 2015; CODHES, 2016). Only some types of violence have decreased in the most recent period, especially after the unilateral ceasefire declared by the FARC-EP in July 2015 and the so-called “de-escalation” of the use of force by the Colombian Armed Forces. In this period illegal armed groups have reconfig-

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ured themselves at an accelerated rate, especially in certain areas of the country that have strategic importance in terms of controlling resources or that are used as corridors to traffic illegal or illegally extracted products. According to numerous investigations, these armed groups' reconfiguration is an attempt to take advantage of potential gaps left by the FARC-EP in a post-agreement scenario. These groups, and particularly the post-demobilisation armed groups (PDAGs) that arose or became stronger between 2003 and 2006 after the paramilitary groups (the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia, or AUC) were demobilised, are responsible for the majority of human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL) violations. It is foreseeable that in a post-agreement context they will continue to compete for illegal control of territories and illegal economies that the FARC-EP once controlled. Their presence and actions constitute one of the most important obstacles to consolidating sustainable peace. To this we could also add the stalled talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN) and changes in its presence and activity in some areas.

Understanding these new dynamics of violence and their potential social and humanitarian effects is one of the most important challenges that Colombian society must address in the near future. The experience of previous peace processes, both in Colombia and internationally, highlights the fragility of the period that immediately follows the signing of a peace agreement and the need to anticipate potential risks and be prepared to prevent and address them (Rey Marcos & Duval, 2015).

This report analyses the humanitarian impact of this violence in the country and makes recommendations to all national and international actors that are attempting to confront these issues. It focuses on key regions with particular dynamics that could be representative of the social and humanitarian impact that will be experienced in possible post-agreement scenarios. The study is based on quantitative data from various sources, including official data; data from the Unit for Comprehensive Attention and Reparation to Victims (UARIV); UN data, in particular the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Information Management and Analysis Unit (UMAIC); data from civil organisations and other partners; and studies by various Colombian think tanks.² The study is also based on the suggestions, observations and analysis gathered during more than 50 interviews and focus groups held with people from various communities, as well as national and international public and private institutes, between April and May 2016 in Bogotá and the departments of Norte de Santander, Chocó, Antioquia and Putumayo.

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Changes in the dynamics of the armed conflict and violence in the period 2012-16

In over 50 years of internal armed conflict in Colombia a number of changes have taken place in both territorial configurations and alliances between actors, as well as in the diverse forms of and ways of using violence. All studies concur that the actors' capacity to adapt to changing circumstances, together with other variables, explains the long duration and "abnormality" of the conflict when compared with other conflicts in Latin America (CHCV, 2015) and the world at large. Since the peace talks began between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP in 2012, certain changes in the dynamics of the conflict have become evident. The actors have reorganised themselves for reasons that are closely linked to territorial control issues related to resources and illegal economic routes. This reorganisation of local armed groups has been evident throughout the peace process (FIP, 2014a; 2014b; 2016).

These armed actors do not follow a single pattern when repositioning themselves in their territories and establishing alliances with one another. Opportunism is the prime motivator of these alliances, which are largely based on economic and business interests. The increase of the area of land dedicated to illicit crops (UNODC, 2016) and the growing impact of other illegal economic activities, especially mining, has strengthened non-state armed actors and increased their capacity to act, especially in specific territories. We must therefore take regional considerations into account throughout this document. However, some general dynamics can be identified.

From a military perspective, the first finding is that the impact of the armed conflict has decreased due to widespread respect for the FARC-EP's unilateral ceasefire and the government's de-escalation policy. Despite initial doubts about the ability of the FARC-EP Secretariat to make all the organisation's fronts respect the ceasefire that started in 2015, data shows an almost unanimous cooperation that has undoubtedly contributed to the progress of the peace process. All evidence indicates that dissent is minimal and that the majority of FARC-EP combatants will accept what is agreed on in Havana.³

However, in this period violence has also been displaced to remote areas of the country, especially to areas on the border with Venezuela (Catatumbo-Norte de Santander, Arauca, Perijá), and the Pacific coast, Chocó and Putumayo, where various acts of violence have taken place. Additionally, there have been attempts to control corridors that connect these areas, such as Bajo Cauca in Antioquia. Violent dynamics in certain urban areas such as Medellín

² We wish to thank the Ideas for Peace Foundation, INDEPAZ, and MAPP-OEA for so openly sharing their data and reflections. Additionally, reports from the Peace and Reconciliation Foundation, CINEP and CERAC have also been thoroughly consulted.

³ In July 2016 FARC-EP Fronts 1 and 7 declared that they were not going to demobilise, but they appear to be a minority.

or in cities along the Pacific coast such as Tumaco or Buenaventura have been ongoing and represent serious challenges for the future.

Simultaneously with the reduction in military activities there has been a significant increase in social control over and pressure on communities in areas where there is a FARC-EP presence as the organisation continues with its economic activities and repositions itself. In many remote areas of the country, such as Chocó and Putumayo, information on the peace process and the so-called “pedagogy of peace” has reached communities only through information supplied by the FARC-EP. These communities have also at times been subject to pressure through coexistence rules or guidelines, pamphlets that impose mobility limitations, or assemblies. Many indigenous communities and Afro-Colombians have expressed concern about this increased social control by the FARC-EP and its growing illegal economic activities, as well as lawful ones such as the purchasing of land or mining.⁴ Although this may be presented as changes in the focus of its political activities as the FARC-EP prepares for normal political life, the coercive nature of these actions raises questions about the future. The continued FARC-EP presence in these territories has meant that, although tensions have increased in some areas, in general we cannot speak of power vacuums or that other actors have taken control of these areas, although this may be a trend. In fact, in some cases communities have expressed fear over the FARC-EP’s departure and the resulting consequences.

Despite starting talks with the government in March 2016 (which are currently halted), the National Liberation Army (ELN) has increased its activities especially in some departments such as Arauca, Norte de Santander, Valle del Cauca, Cauca, Chocó, Nariño and in areas with a historical FARC-EP presence. ELN activity in relation to FARC-EP activity has not followed a single pattern. Although in some cases joint action has been taken against the Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AGC, Urabeños, Clan Úsuga, Clan del Golfo or any other term used to refer to them) in Truandó, Bajo Atrato, or El Bagre, Antioquia, or in some cases troops have been transferred via so-called “bracelet exchanges” (in Cauca and Chocó), at other times there has been no evidence of collaboration.⁵ At any rate, confrontations are no longer occurring with serious consequences of the kind seen in Arauca or Nariño some years ago. Serious humanitarian and environmental consequences have been experienced due to the ELN’s focus of its armed activities on petroleum infrastructure and the continued practice of kidnapping.

Regarding other non-state armed groups, the Colombian government has recently changed its outlook. While in the

past they were considered criminal groups (in government terminology, BACRIM), the approval of Directive 015 of April 22nd 2016 considered three of them – the AGC, Pelusos (in reality the Popular Liberation Army, or EPL) and Puntilleros – to be organised armed groups under IHL, thus recognising them as actors in the armed conflict.⁶ The case of the EPL, although it is confined to the complex region of Catatumbo, is especially serious. Not only have its activities not declined after the death of its leader, Megateo, but all sources indicate that they have markedly increased. Here we can clearly see the intention to take over areas once under FARC-EP control.

PDAGs have been gaining strength during the peace process and increasing control of criminal and criminalised economic activities, which not only include drug trafficking, but also legal and illegal mining⁷ and other predatory activities such as extortion and threats. Among the groups linked to paramilitary activities, the AGC has become dominant and has been able to use other small groups by establishing alliances with them in what could be called a system of “franchises”. The connection between the macro level and smaller groups changes frequently. The presence of PDAGs, especially that of the AGC, is growing in areas of special economic interest and where there is a need to control corridors used to traffic illicit products. According to the majority of humanitarian and human rights organisations and research centres, these groups are linked in some way with paramilitary activities, although they differ in some of their specific activities. The communities where these groups operate unanimously consider them to be and refer to them as paramilitary or former paramilitary agents, or other terms that highlight this characteristic.⁸

The dynamic of these groups in recent years, especially the AGC, shows both some continuity and a lack of it with paramilitary activity in the 1990s and with that of the AUC (CNMH, 2013; FIP, 2016). Continuity is seen in these groups’ interest in controlling territory and illegal economic activities, including drug trafficking and mining. However, in our opinion there is also an interest in political cooptation and taking control of local elected positions that could benefit them. Among the differences, we can mention the following: they do not perpetrate certain types of especially violent acts such as massacres; they choose other less evident *modi operandi* that are equally violent; and economic interests predominate over counter-insurgent activities. Another difference between these groups and the AUC is their use of new organisational methods in the form of intermediate command structures, unlike former paramilitary groups (INDEPAZ, 2016).

However, some recent acts – such as the armed strike enforced by the AGC in March 2016 that paralysed ten

⁴ In July 2016 the FARC-EP announced that they would stop using extortion. It is hoped that this announcement will contribute to mitigating some pressure on communities.

⁵ On occasions FARC-EP fighters have joined ELN forces and exchanged identity bracelets accordingly.

⁶ This directive allows the bombing of organised armed groups, the possible humanitarian impact of which alarms humanitarian and human rights organisations.

⁷ Legal mining could have criminal connections because it can be used to launder money earned from illegal activities. It also has humanitarian consequences.

⁸ INDEPAZ uses the term “narco-paramilitary”, CINEP uses “paramilitary” and CERAC mentions reports from communities of “regrouping paramilitary groups”; see <<http://blog.cerac.org.co/violencia-politica-en-colombia-creciente-y-cada-vez-mas-selectiva>>.

departments of the country and the cities of Montería, Sincelejo and a large part of Quibdó, as well as certain neighbourhoods of Medellín and transportation routes, and generated high levels of fear – demonstrate these groups' interest in pressurising the government into entering into some kind of political dialogue with them and show their potential strength in possible negotiations. In addition to demonstrating the government's weak capacity against the AGC in some areas of the country, this strike also demonstrated the PDAG's skilful use of "fear management". The violent reputation that earlier paramilitary groups had earned is exploited by present-day groups, which have a debatable connection with paramilitary groups, but take advantage of this fear to control the population. The social and humanitarian consequences of these groups' activities continue to be serious and hinder humanitarian groups' access to areas under these PDAGs' control.

In the framework of the negotiations with the FARC-EP, the Colombian government has assumed that the existence of these groups is a threat – possibly even the main one – to the peace process. This is evident in the inclusion of a specific paragraph (3.4) on the subject under point 3 of the agreement to terminate the conflict signed on June 23rd 2016.⁹

Improvements in some indices measuring the humanitarian situation; new or less visible dynamics

Recent changes in the dynamics of the conflict and its reduced intensity have undoubtedly improved some humanitarian indicators such as the homicide rate, massive forced displacement and attacks. However, qualitative on-the-ground studies have led us to identify a significant increase in other manifestations of illegal activities such as threats and extortion. Although the intensity of the armed conflict has decreased, social control exercised by various non-state groups continues to be alarming and has a huge psychological and social impact on the population.

Improvement in some indices

The decreased intensity of the conflict is above all seen in Chocó, Antioquia and Putumayo. According to local communities, NGOs, and civil society organisations, there has been a decrease in bombings, attacks, confrontations and massive displacements. Of the four regions that were researched, only in Norte de Santander was there no apparent reduction in the conflict, since a decrease in human rights or IHL violations by the FARC-EP was compensated for by an increase in violations committed by other actors (PDAGs, EPL, ELN). In the departments we visited the inhabitants expressed feelings of relief at the decreased intensity of the conflict. In fact, several organi-

sations (OCHA, CERAC, FIP) and official public data have shown that acts of war, homicides, massacres, attacks and massive displacements have decreased significantly in the last few years (OCHA, 2016; CICR, 2016; CERAC, 2016).

Several parameters explain these changes. Firstly, the FARC-EP has declared several unilateral ceasefires that were almost completely respected¹⁰ and the Colombian government has stopped bombing FARC-EP targets. The result is that communities have been less affected by bombing in northern Chocó and attacks in Putumayo. Moreover, other actors (mainly the ELN and PDAGs) have changed their modus operandi and are engaging in less visible actions to avoid attracting the attention of the security forces. Finally, violence has been reduced in certain urban areas like Medellín as the AGC consolidates its power. After a period of confrontation with other PDAGs between 2011 and 2013, it has become the dominant player (McDermott, 2014). However, an increase in homicides in 2016 shows the instability of this situation.

New or less visible dynamics

However, these improvements should not conceal other negative impacts that do not reflect the perceptions of communities in areas of elevated conflict regarding security issues, respect for human rights, freedom of expression and movement, and the enjoyment of their rights.

Despite improvements, violence continues with "concealed weapons",¹¹ and according to several communities and on-the-ground organisations in the regions we visited, fear is a tool used daily by various armed groups to exercise strong social control. The risk is that these new impacts could become invisible or be incorrectly reported. The emergence of these new social and humanitarian impacts means that the way in which acts of violence are monitored by both the state and national and international institutions should change.

The use of fear to exercise social control

Fear was the most common sentiment expressed during the interviews and focus groups held with communities. Fear for their physical well-being (fear of being assassinated, wounded, recruited or raped) permeates the present, past and future. In the present, communities are aware of the threats and violent acts that occur in their immediate environment such as their village or neighbourhood. Fear is also linked to past events, such as paramilitary massacres, the deaths of relatives or the trauma of displacement. The best example is the so-called armed strike ordered by the AGC in March 2016 that affected about 2.2 million people (OCHA, 2016). Although the most affected cities were Córdoba and Sincelejo, in Quibdó the effectiveness of the strike surprised organisations and the

9 Point 3.4. "Agreement on security guarantees and the fight against criminal organizations responsible for homicides and massacres or those that threaten human rights defenders, social or political movements, including criminal organizations that are considered to be successors of paramilitary groups and their support networks, and the persecution of criminal conduct that threatens implementation of agreements and constructing peace."

10 See, for instance, monitoring carried out by CERAC: <<http://blog.cerac.org.co/monitor-de-desescalamiento-del-conflicto-armado-interno-en-colombia-5>>.

11 Expression used in an interview.

order to strike was circulated mainly through social networks. Fear is also expressed when people are faced with a very uncertain future because of a lack of information about the peace talks and their potential impacts on communities. This is the case, for example, regarding areas presently called “*zonas veredales transitorias de normalización*” (transitional demobilisation areas), due to the reconfiguration of non-state actors, which creates insecurity, and due to uncertainty about what will happen in general during the post-agreement period. In Putumayo, however, the main source of fear expressed in interviews regarding the post-conflict period was the potential entry of multinational companies into the mining and energy sectors, which would generate significant environmental and social impacts. In the past these companies have been unable to operate due to the FARC-EP’s presence.

Fear and mistrust destroy the social fabric and undermine communities’ capacity to organise to resist non-state actors or to protest against large mining projects or infrastructure megaprojects. A fundamental task in the post-agreement period will be that of re-establishing trust in communities.

The complexities of forced displacement

The increase of individual or “drop-by-drop” displacement was mentioned in every interview in both rural and urban areas. Individual displacement has been more frequently used by armed actors to pressure and control communities, especially in medium- to large-sized cities. Individual displacement has increased while massive displacement has decreased, which explains why the displacement rate has held steady at 225,000 victims per year according to estimates by CODHES (2016). According to official data from the UARIV, 170,737 people were displaced in 2015.¹² The difference in these figures may depend on when the official records were updated.

Inter-urban displacement has also increased, but it is often not reported to the authorities if people are afraid or do not know how to get help. This type of displacement is particularly common in Medellín and was repeatedly mentioned in interviews. This development could be interpreted as a tendency towards urbanising the conflict.

The causes of displacement mentioned in interviews are often linked to the armed conflict, but extend beyond it:

- the general feeling of fear, anxiety and uncertainty felt in communities, as described above;
- selective threats and homicides that aim to control society. Non-state groups displace individuals who do not respond to extortion or who represent a real or potential threat to their authority: teachers, social leaders, human rights defenders, etc.;

- the recruitment or use of boys, girls and teenagers;
- sexual exploitation and gender-based violence; and
- the looting or forced purchase of land by non-state actors that allows both illegal and legal actors to implement mining, cattle raising, palm or banana cultivation, forest or hydrocarbon exploitation, or megaprojects.

In short, resolving the problem of displacement will not only involve a peace agreement with the FARC-EP or a ceasefire by the actors of the armed conflict, but also structural changes to eradicate its other causes.

Threats, disappearances, selective homicides and kidnapping

The belief that threats, disappearances, and selective homicides have increased was repeatedly expressed during interviews conducted for this report. Threats have increased mainly against individuals who try to defend human rights and do not accept the system imposed by armed actors, e.g. community leaders, indigenous and Afro-Colombian leaders, human rights defenders, land restitution leaders, etc. This finding is confirmed by figures from Somos Defensores (2016). Threats tend to be collective (using pamphlets) or individual (direct, using phone calls or Whatsapp messages, or through letters).

At times these threats lead to kidnapping, selective homicides or disappearances, which help to spread fear throughout the whole community. Disappearances are also under-recorded due to fear, which means that these acts of violence are not widely known. Non-state actors try to make homicides invisible by leaving the bodies of their victims in remote places. During interviews in Putumayo it was stated that non-state groups leave bodies in rural areas in order to give the impression that the homicides are isolated acts, in order to limit the reaction of the security forces.

Forced recruitment and sexual exploitation

These violent acts are very difficult to monitor, but were frequently mentioned in interviews. The ELN forcibly recruits men and youths in areas it is trying to control in Chocó, Antioquia and Norte de Santander, as does the EPL in Norte de Santander (Catatumbo). In urban areas like Medellín, Quibdó, Puerto Asís, Mocoa and Cúcuta criminal organisations, other armed organisations and PDAGs recruit youths involved with drugs to carry out intelligence and micro-trafficking tasks. PDAGs are also responsible for the sexual exploitation of girls, teenagers, and women in mining areas in Bajo Cauca, Antioquia, and Chocó. The fact that these types of crimes are under-recorded is especially significant.

¹² The Single Registry of Victims (RUV) cut-off date of August 1st 2016. Victims of displacement have a period of two years from when the act of victimisation occurs to report it to the Public Ministry. From the time of declaration the UARIV has 60 working days to evaluate it and decide whether or not to include it in the RUV.

Extortion

Extortion has increased greatly in the last few years, above all micro-extortion. The impression that this has increased is unanimous. The so-called “vacuna” (vaccine) extortion method has spread to all sectors, affecting both small and large businesses and even teachers.¹³ Micro-extortion is an easy and quick way to obtain money and establish control in both towns and large cities.

Restrictions on mobility, and the effect of anti-personnel landmines (APMs) and unexploded ordnance (UXO)

Restrictions on mobility are also increasingly used. This includes restrictive schedules, “invisible borders” (especially in urban areas), and the requirement to request permission to enter or leave areas. These restrictions, which are implemented by all illegal actors, allow these actors to control communities and territories so that they can carry out their illegal activities without witnesses (e.g. transport drugs, weapons, contraband, etc.). The presence of APMs and UXO also restricts mobility.

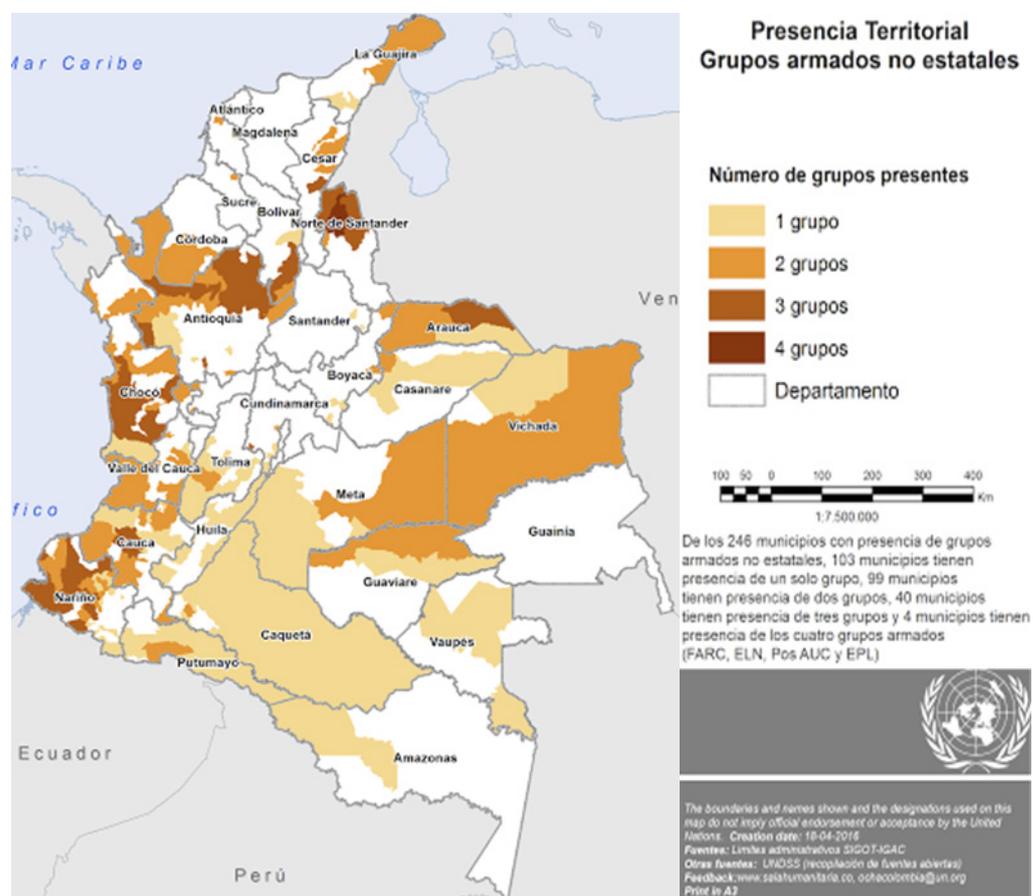
Many of the IHL and human rights violations that we have cited generate marked psychological and social disorders. An example is the case of indigenous communities in Chocó that now fear helicopters due to the bombing they were subjected to in the past. These medium- and long-term psychological and social impacts are generally not treated in the system implemented under the Victims Law (Law 1448).

Possible violent dynamics in the post-agreement scenario

As we have mentioned in earlier sections of the report, it is not expected that the dynamics of violence that have been identified will stop in the post-agreement scenario. In a previous study (Rey Marcos & Duval, 2015) we analysed the possible evolution of these dynamics using the model proposed by Kalyvas (2001), and in the case of Colombia observed critical factors that can affect levels of violence and post-agreement impacts in areas with a FARC-EP presence. In government-controlled areas or territories or areas where there is a strong FARC-EP presence the outlook could be positive and violence could be significantly reduced, depending on other factors such as government presence, institutional capacity, guarantees regarding demobilisation, or the public services offered to the community. Departments such as Putumayo, Caquetá or Meta would be in this situation.

On the other hand, areas where territorial control has been or is being disputed among two or more armed actors would be more violent, with a more pessimistic outlook. The paradigmatic case is Catatumbo, where the government’s presence is weak, the FARC-EP has never dominated the area, the EPL (even after the death of its leader, “Megateo”) has increased its presence, the ELN also has a degree of influence and the AGC has spread out from the border with Venezuela. These circumstances have resulted

Map 1: Territorial presence of non-state armed groups



Source: Internal UMAIC document shared with OCHA, 2016

13 According to this system, if you pay you are protected or “vaccinated” against further violence.

in the formation of unique alliances. Arauca, Chocó, Nariño, certain areas of Antioquia, Cauca and Valle del Cauca would fall into this category.

The presence of these trends and their humanitarian consequences in the regions studied emphasise the need to adopt a regional approach in the post-agreement period.

Chocó and Antioquia

The rural areas of Chocó and Antioquia show similar characteristics in terms of conflict dynamics and humanitarian impact, above all in the areas of north and central Chocó, Bajo Cauca in Antioquia, and Nudo del Paramillo on the border between Antioquia and Córdoba.

Several non-state groups are active in these two regions, mainly the FARC-EP, ELN and AGC. The AGC's stronghold, the region of Urabá, extends between these two regions and ensures the strong presence and significant power of this group. Although there was a strategic distribution alliance for the purposes of drug trafficking between the FARC-EP and AGC from 2013 to 2015 (Verdad Abierta, 2016), the current trend is towards alliances between the FARC-EP and the ELN, with joint actions and "bracelet exchanges" against the AGC, which is attempting to take control of these territories. These confrontations have the goal of controlling strategic corridors where there are illicit crops and mining areas, principally gold mines (the rivers of Chocó connect two oceans and the northern region of Antioquia, while Bajo Cauca connects Urabá in Chocó with the Catatumbo region and runs through the departments of Bolívar and Cesar).

Main humanitarian impacts and possible evolution

- In the past, confrontations between these groups and the security forces led to bombing, massive displacement and harassment that affected communities. This impact could continue and even increase if the security forces decide to use bombing and extensive military offensives against organised armed groups under Directive 015.
- Increased recruitment by the ELN and the use of boys, girls, and youth by PDAGs could continue or even increase further.
- Social control, violations of IHL and human rights, and respect for the autonomy of collectively owned territories could diminish in areas under FARC-EP control. However, the situation could remain the same or worsen in areas controlled by other groups. In each zone it will be necessary to protect and ensure the autonomy of Afro-Colombian community associations and indigenous councils.
- The humanitarian and social effects of mining could continue, as well as sexual exploitation and damage to the environment, with their resulting health consequences.

Medellín and the urbanisation of the conflict

As with other major cities in Colombia, Medellín plays an important role in the armed conflict, because it is a centre for laundering money from illegal activities such as mining and drug trafficking, as well as for the actual trafficking of these products. Communities that live in the legal and illegal peripheries of the city are economically and socially vulnerable, and often comprise people displaced from the countryside by armed conflict. Currently the non-state actors most present in these areas are PDAGs comprising combos (small groups formed to carry out illegal activities) and gangs that belong to their "franchises".

Main humanitarian impacts and possible evolution

- Increased mobility restrictions using "invisible borders" could be imposed.
- The forced recruitment or use of boys, girls, and youth for micro-trafficking and sexual exploitation could continue in connection with drug use.
- These factors combined with social control could increase intra-urban displacement.
- There is the strong possibility that the conflict will become urban and more criminal, which will have a humanitarian impact that will be as great as the armed conflict.

Norte de Santander

Norte de Santander, and especially Catatumbo, is a highly complex area for several reasons. The presence of four non-state actors with a strong social base (the FARC-EP, ELN, EPL and AGC) increases the risk of confrontations in order to take control of key areas. This risk has recently increased as areas controlled by these groups have become fragmented. Faced with this situation, the response of the security forces has been very inefficient and does not inspire confidence in the community. The Venezuelan border, besides being a strategic hub for drug trafficking and smuggling, could be a destabilising factor, especially if the Venezuelan political crisis worsens.

Main humanitarian impacts and possible evolution

- Harassment, attacks and bombing due to confrontations between non-state actors and the security forces could continue and increase due to organised armed groups' desire to control FARC-EP areas.
- In this situation, recruitment by the various groups could continue and increase.
- Social control will continue, with important violations of IHL and human rights, if these areas continue to be controlled by non-state actors.

Putumayo

The almost hegemonic presence here of the FARC-EP gives greater hope for the success of the peace process than in other regions. However, the presence of the PDAG known as “La Constru” in urban areas (Puerto Asís and Mocoa) is an obstacle that should be acknowledged. The group may seek to gain control of FARC-EP areas, and other PDAGs could arrive, attracted to areas with illicit crops and the advantages of being on the border with Ecuador for drug trafficking and smuggling. To date there is no clear evidence of an ELN presence in this region.

Main humanitarian impacts and possible evolution

- An important form of social control by the FARC-EP could continue after disarmament. It will be necessary to ensure the autonomy of communal action boards and indigenous councils, as well as the transparency of their elections.
- It is essential to exclude other non-state groups from the region and limit the expansion of “La Constru”. If not, the region could see a flare-up of violence with confrontations among non-state groups and between them and security forces, as well as increased social control.
- The arrival of new actors in the mining/energy sector to exploit natural resources is a fact. This could have negative effects on the community, since these activities damage the environment and those engaged in them often do not respect the territorial rights of local communities. It is therefore important to protect existing social and political networks in order to guarantee equitable social dialogue.

Conclusion

The dynamics of the armed conflict and other forms of violence are changing in some areas of Colombia, and the various armed actors are adapting to these changes and even anticipating the new situation that will arise after a peace agreement is signed with the FARC-EP. There are highly pronounced regional aspects to this process that follow no single pattern. The growing presence of PDAGs, with the AGC as a widespread dominant group, as well as the local presence of numerous combos or armed bands with varying degrees of connection to the conflict is a reality in many departments and some large cities. Problems with the peace talks with the ELN also constitute an alarming element, especially in some departments.

The impact of the armed conflict has decreased greatly, but the social and humanitarian effects of these new dynamics are very significant and continue to especially affect specific communities and groups such as indigenous and

Afro-Colombian communities and those on the outskirts of some cities. An analysis of forced displacement reveals an alarming continuation of the practice and its relationship with variables not linked to the armed conflict. Other forms of involvement are more subtle than in the past and in many cases are made invisible or under-reported. Armed actors continue to exert strong social control in many areas and communities’ perceptions that violations such as threats, extortion or mobility restrictions are worsening are unanimous.

For many remote areas of Colombia and the outlying areas of large cities the effects of the peace agreement with the FARC-EP will take time to be implemented and perceived by the community as a positive change with clear results. In all the interviews and focus groups that we held we included a question about how participants visualise the period after the peace agreement is signed. Practically all of them stated that they did not expect any relevant change in their territory in the short term, although they were excited and optimistic about the agreement.

The existence of other types of violence and armed groups other than the FARC-EP in the country poses challenges that should be resolutely addressed during the post-agreement period so that they do not threaten the peace process.

Recommendations

The rapid evolution of the dynamics analysed in this report requires a considerable degree of flexibility to address both their specific manifestations and root causes. The social and humanitarian consequences of these new dynamics are also changing. Given that post-agreement contexts are highly fragile, we propose the following:

- **Information systems and tools to monitor the new dynamics of violence and possible risks should be improved.** This includes focusing on variables that have been seriously under-recorded: threats, extortion, mobility restrictions, social control and pressure, and sexual and gender-based violence.¹⁴ Similarly, it is necessary to establish new, wider categories than those of IHL. The government and other responsible agencies should reinforce their monitoring systems, deepen their knowledge of the reality of what is happening in the country, identify critical human rights breaches, and take action so that the law applies in every territory and that human rights guarantees are extended to all citizens.
- **The territorial approach in the post-agreement should be deepened** and adapted to the characteristics and dynamics of each region and the possible humanitarian consequences of these dynamics. This is especially relevant in Afro-Colombian and indigenous areas that

¹⁴ The present monitoring systems used by OCHA and UMAIC are fairly solid. However, here we are referring to the variables that need to be strengthened in a post-agreement context.

are particularly vulnerable and whose inhabitants' collective rights must be respected. Together with the government's primary role, local authorities must increase their capabilities in this area.

- **A national and international humanitarian presence should be maintained**, especially in regions and areas that are more likely to be at risk, including demobilisation concentration areas. The maintenance of this presence on standby in less problematic areas would make it easier to rapidly scale up the response if necessary. International actors should continue to complement one another and add value in such situations.
- **New difficulties that prevent humanitarian access to areas controlled by PDAGs should be carefully analysed.** Similarly, it is necessary to investigate new ways in which control and mobility restrictions are being used.
- **The humanitarian and social impact of legal and illegal mining should be thoroughly analysed.**
- The authorities and international cooperation organisations should more decisively approach specific situations and problems, **focusing on the way in which violence has occurred and affected communities in urban areas.** The peace talks have not included this issue, but it should be a priority.
- Along similar lines, issues such as **child and youth involvement in illegal groups should be specifically considered in post-agreement policies.** Providing them with educational and employment opportunities and protection from exploitation by such groups must be a priority.
- **Protection plans for civilians should be drawn up and adapted to new forms of violence.** Collective protection schemes and even self-protection should be more decisively incorporated into any post-agreement arrangements. Reinforcing social and community networks and making them more resilient should be more rigorously incorporated into humanitarian work.
- **Humanitarian and social assistance to all victims of displacement should be taken into account and guaranteed**, whether they are groups or individuals, inter- or intra-urban, or the victims of any actors (guerrillas, PDAGs, organised armed groups, gangs, the government, etc.). The humanitarian impact on all these victims should be recognised and sustainable solutions should be sought to avoid recurring violence in Colombia.
- **Comprehensive psychological and social care for victims should be increased**, especially in cases where victimisation has long-term consequences.

- **The importance should be emphasised of designing lasting solutions for displaced persons** who have been in a vulnerable condition for years and who have not received anything more than basic care. This group, especially its younger members, could easily be recruited by PDAGs and other armed organisations if its members feel that there are no sustainable opportunities to return to their homes or integrate themselves into the areas to which they have moved.
- **It is essential that national and international agencies responsible for development and peace plans understand the dynamics affecting at-risk areas of the country** so that plans can be adjusted to the reality of what has occurred and respond to any new forms of victimisation.

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