



# Calming the Restless Pacific: Violence and Crime on Colombia's Coast

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*Preventing War. Shaping Peace.*

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## Principal Findings

**What's new?** Violence, coca production and drug trafficking have spiked along Colombia's Pacific coast since the 2016 peace agreement between the government and FARC guerrillas. New and old armed groups battle for control over communities, territory and illegal business, triggering ongoing displacement and low-intensity warfare.

**Why does it matter?** Long one of Colombia's poorest and most peripheral regions, the Pacific's struggles highlight huge difficulties in improving security without addressing economic and political roots of armed group recruitment and the co-option of communities by organised crime.

**What should be done?** Instead of depending on a counter-insurgency strategy or a "kill/capture" policy to dismantle armed groups, the Colombian government should prioritise building a stable, trustworthy civilian police and state presence, demobilising combatants, fulfilling its peace accord promises on local development and coca substitution, and furnishing educational opportunities for local people.

## *Executive Summary*

Colombia's Pacific is struggling to cope with conflict and violent crime festering amid extremes of poverty, squalor and neglect. More than any region of the country, the Pacific states have seen the 2016 peace deal with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) sullied and spoilt by dissident ex-guerrillas, a resurgent National Liberation Army (ELN) insurgency, and a booming drug trade rooted in huge concentrations of coca and easy access to ocean trading routes. For President Iván Duque's centre-right government, the most fitting response to armed violence in the Pacific and elsewhere has been to toughen law enforcement. This approach has led to the killings of several wanted leaders, but has not addressed the conditions that drive underemployed men to criminality or armed groups. Establishing a stable and trustworthy police and state presence, demobilising these groups, fulfilling the peace accord's promises and enhancing educational opportunities are critical steps to stopping the treadmill pushing young Colombians into armed violence.

Places such as Tumaco, a waterside town in Colombia's extreme south-west, the port city of Buenaventura or the department of Chocó have become synonymous with the grisly peaks and troughs of hostilities among armed factions. Since the FARC peace accord, myriad other groups – successor schisms of the guerrilla movement, the ELN, local outposts of the Gaitanista drug cartel and other criminal clans – have exploited local people's grievances toward political elites, provided opportunities in the drug trade or other illegal businesses, and deployed raw firepower to co-opt and coerce communities. A largely Afro-Colombian and indigenous population, already enduring some of the country's highest poverty rates, has borne the cost. High murder rates, mass displacement or forced confinement of populations, sexual violence and the murder of community leaders show few signs of abating.

The Spanish colonial state, whose representatives were primarily located in the country's Andean highlands, long neglected the Pacific and handed it over to mining interests reliant on imported slave labour. Afro-Colombian communities, and to a lesser extent indigenous peoples, make up most the Pacific population, while the state's reach and public services remain feeble: only 0.4 per cent of school students in the region go to university, compared to 30 per cent nationwide, and even then local public universities are oversubscribed. The region has, however, transformed rapidly in one respect. Buenaventura port, which handles 60 per cent of goods coming into and out of Colombia, has undergone extraordinary modernisation and expansion, becoming a major source of tax revenue. At the same time, locals have been exposed to the country's highest rates of homicide and forced disappearances, due mostly to the city's growing drug trade.

Successive governments have recognised the ongoing failings in the state's approach to the Pacific, promising local development, infrastructure improvements and expanded public services. The FARC peace accord added to these pledges the promise of economic investments based on public consultations, as well as a voluntary coca crop substitution scheme. Mass protests against chronic state neglect in Buenaventura in 2017 paralysed the port for three weeks and only stopped after the government pledged a further \$3.5 billion for local development. But the scale of the

economic divide separating the Pacific from the rest of the country, the weaknesses and corruption of local authorities, and the preference of some officials in Bogotá for investments that boost Colombia's trading competitiveness with little regard for their local impact, mean the region is unlikely to see the fruits of these efforts for decades.

Meanwhile, President Duque's government has opted for a tougher approach. Security forces have killed several dissident FARC leaders, while authorities have ended negotiations with the ELN. Bogotá has embraced a return to counter-insurgency through so-called "Strategic Zones of Comprehensive Intervention", involving coordinated civil and military efforts to clear areas of armed groups and entrench state control; Tumaco is one of the first such zones. The government has bolstered forced coca eradication, and is keen to return to aerial fumigation.

But it risks replicating the patchy record of previous interventions unless it can staunch the flow of young men into armed groups proffering status and riches, establish credible law enforcement in violent areas and instil greater trust in state institutions. Essential to these efforts are policies that would ensure a stable presence for civilian police and state institutions; enhance opportunities for combatants from dissident guerrilla or criminal groups to demobilise, as has happened already in Tumaco; fulfil the peace accord's pledges on local development, coca substitution and alternative rural livelihoods; and ensure far greater access to education in a region where it is scant.

Latin America's Pacific rim stands out as one of its fastest-growing, most buoyant regions. Colombia's coastal residents, however, have so far seen few of the benefits from the trading boom and many of the drawbacks. Regrettably, its people are used to hardship and neglect. If the Colombian authorities wish to improve their lives and reduce the region's rampant violence and displacement in more than a fitful fashion, they should train their eyes on reducing the causes that make a life in arms seem so attractive.

**Bogotá/Brussels, 8 August 2019**

# Calming the Restless Pacific: Violence and Crime on Colombia's Coast

## I. Introduction

The 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) is faltering in the nation's conflict-affected peripheries. Nowhere are setbacks clearer than in the Pacific coastal region, which stretches across the provinces of Nariño, on the border with Ecuador, through Cauca and Chocó, and the municipality of Buenaventura. Armed groups including National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas, FARC dissidents, and drug trafficking organisations are battling for control of the area. Colombian intelligence officials estimate that 45 per cent of the country's cocaine exports now depart from the Pacific coast, at a time when drug production within the country has reached historic highs.<sup>1</sup> But the drug trade is far from being the only illicit revenue source in the region. Illegal gold mines and extortion also fill warring groups' coffers and motivate competition among them. Local inhabitants – the majority being Afro-Colombians, as well as a small, but notable, indigenous population – suffer the worst ravages from the fighting.<sup>2</sup>

Climate and landscape partly explain the importance Spanish colonial and Colombian elites have traditionally accorded to the region's extractive economies. Unwilling to live in a region with extraordinarily high levels of rainfall, they instead enabled outsiders, mainly foreigners, to exploit its resources, provided they paid royalties to the government.<sup>3</sup> This legacy of economic outsourcing, combined with the residual effects of slavery on the reach and effectiveness of local state institutions, has meant successive governments paid little heed to the region's needs. Extreme poverty is commonplace; formal state institutions are absent. Where bodies such as Afro-Colombian community councils or indigenous reservations once filled the gap by providing authority, social welfare and judicial redress, illegal armed groups are now taking their place.<sup>4</sup> Only recently has Bogotá begun considering spurring growth and development in the region as part of a larger strategy to make

<sup>1</sup> Crisis Group interview, Colombian intelligence official, Bogotá, 27 February 2019. On record coca cultivation figures in 2017, see "Colombia: Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2017", UNODC, September 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Afro-Colombians make up for 90 per cent of the population in the region; non-ethnic *mestizos* are 6 per cent; and indigenous 4 per cent. "Problemática humanitaria en la región pacífica colombiana", Defensoría del Pueblo, August 2016, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Mario Diego Romero Vergara, *Poblamiento y Sociedad en el Pacífico Colombiano. Siglo XVI al XVIII*, (Cali, 2017). Claudia Leal León, "La Compañía Minera Chocó Pacífico y el Auge del Platino en Colombia, 1897-1930", *Historia Crítica* Vol. 39, No. 1 (2009).

<sup>4</sup> A "governance gap" exists when legitimate authorities are unable to enforce its rules or provide services to local populations that satisfy their basic needs or demands. When other actors fill these gaps, it leads to a "hybrid political order". Boege, V., Brown, M. A., & Clements, K. P. "Hybrid Political Orders, Not Fragile States", *Peace Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2009), pp. 13-21.

Colombia more internationally competitive. These efforts have focused on Buenaventura port – the country's most important export outlet.

The report explores the characteristics of violence, armed group activity and illegal business after the signing of the peace agreement with the FARC, as well as the underlying causes that explain their prevalence along the Pacific coast. It is based on over 110 interviews with government officials, community leaders, mid-level commanders and low-level fighters of illegal armed groups, and UN and aid organisation officials in Bogotá and the Pacific region throughout 2017, 2018 and early 2019. Fieldwork was carried out in municipalities along the coast in Chocó, Nariño and Cauca, and in Buenaventura.

## II. Armed Groups and Illegal Economies on the Pacific

Unlike other parts of Colombia, the history of violence in the Pacific coastal region is comparatively recent. The FARC and ELN, both formed in the mid-1960s and initially concentrated in the country's highlands, only set foot in Chocó, for example, in the mid-1980s and in 1987, respectively, while paramilitaries led by families from outside the region followed in the mid-1990s.<sup>5</sup> In Buenaventura, the FARC's 30th and ELN's Manuel Vázquez Castaño fronts arrived in the mid-1980s as well. The Cali Cartel, one of Colombia's first major cocaine syndicates, was moving drugs through the city by 1975.<sup>6</sup> The FARC arrived in Nariño in the mid-1980s and advanced toward the Pacific coast there and in Guapi municipality in neighbouring Cauca.<sup>7</sup>

By the turn of the millennium, the FARC were assisting coca growers in occupying and sowing land in rural Tumaco through two mobile columns.<sup>8</sup> The ELN formed the Comuneros del Sur front, which gained ground in coastal Nariño, while by the end of that decade it had created the Héroes y Mártires de Barbacoas and the Guerreros de Sindagua columns, the latter of which operates to this day.<sup>9</sup> Helmer "Pacho" Herrera, third in command of the Cali cartel, bought land along the coast of Nariño to process and export cocaine in the early 1980s, while other traffickers also bought African Palm farms to use as routes to the coast.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group interviews, church official, Apartadó, 21 October 2018; human rights defender, Apartadó, 22 October 2018; international organisation representative, 21 October 2018. "Panorama actual del Chocó", Observatorio del Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos y Derecho Internacional Humanitario, April 2003, p. 3; Carolina Rodríguez Lizarralde and David Felipe Gómez Triana, "Bloque Noroccidental" in Carlos Medina Gallego (Ed.), *FARC-EP Flujos y reflujos: La guerra en las regiones* (Bogotá, 2011), p. 130. Camilo Echandía Castilla, "Auge y declive del Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN): Análisis de la evolución militar y territorial de cara a la negociación", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, November 2013. The FARC arrived with the 5th, 34th and 57th fronts, and the ELN with the Hernán Jaramillo and Che Guevara fronts, the latter of which still operates there.

<sup>6</sup> Adolfo León Atehortúa Cruz and Diana Marcela Rojas Rivera, "El narcotráfico en Colombia. Pioneros y capos", *Historia y Espacio*, vol. 4, no. 31 (2008), pp. 169-207.

<sup>7</sup> "Panorama actual de Nariño", Observatorio del Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos y Derecho Internacional Humanitario, November 2002, p. 5. Crisis Group fieldwork, Guapi, Cauca, May 2016. In 1995, the group created the 60th front, which would end up settling a few years later in Argelia and Timbiquí, in Cauca. "Dinámica reciente de la violencia en la Costa Pacífica nariñense y caucana y su incidencia sobre las comunidades afrocolombianas", Observatorio del Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos y Derecho Internacional Humanitario, January 2009, p. 44. Crisis Group interview, Argelia, Cauca, 4 May 2018.

<sup>8</sup> "Dinámicas del conflicto armado en Tumaco y su impacto humanitario", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, February 2014, p. 14. Crisis Group interviews, Community leader, Tumaco, 11 May 2017; international organisation representative, Tumaco, 10 May 2017. A mobile column was a smaller unit than a front in the FARC, and tended to roam over regions carrying out attacks and undertaking economic activities. Fronts were more stable geographically.

<sup>9</sup> Santiago Millán, "Variaciones regionales de la presencia del ELN", in David Aponte and Andrés E. Vargas (Eds.), *No estamos condenados a la guerra: Hacia una estrategia de cierre del conflicto con el ELN* (Bogotá, 2011), p. 114. Crisis Group interviews, government official, Iscuandé, Nariño, 30 January 2019; international organisation representative, Tumaco, 1 February 2019.

<sup>10</sup> "Dinámica reciente de la violencia en la Costa Pacífica nariñense y caucana y su incidencia sobre las comunidades afrocolombianas", op. cit., p. 43.



Armed groups in the region broadly fit into three categories: ELN guerrillas, FARC dissidents and drug traffickers. All look to control territory, profit from and participate in illegal activities, and provide some form of governance. Few have full military control over areas in which they operate such that they can completely prevent other armed groups, especially state forces, from entering.<sup>11</sup> That said, they still exert influence over the population even when state forces enter, owing to members who hide among civilians and threaten reprisals once those forces leave.

#### A. *The ELN*

Set on a course of expansion – albeit fragile – across Colombia and Venezuela, the ELN still espouses a revolutionary ideology, and is the only insurgency left along the Pacific coast.<sup>12</sup> Around 30 per cent of its over 2,300 fulltime fighters are based there, and it has recently stepped up recruitment efforts.<sup>13</sup> The ELN claims to be defending people from the negligent and abusive state in Chocó.<sup>14</sup> In parts of Cauca, it has respected community demands to not operate in their territories.<sup>15</sup>

The importance of illegal business, especially the drugs trade, to the ELN has become increasingly conspicuous. It protects coca farms and processing in El Plateado in Cauca, where major concentrations of crops are located, while trying to regain control of corridors where traffickers move cocaine toward the coast.<sup>16</sup> Local sources report that it has substantial stakes in illegal mining in Chocó, Timbiquí in Cauca, and Iscuandé in Nariño.<sup>17</sup> But these business interests do not always translate into violence against civilians. “With the ELN we do not have any real problems. As long as their business is working, everything is all right”, said one local official in Nariño.<sup>18</sup>

The ELN’s efforts to expand along the Pacific have not always proved fruitful. The guerrillas’ stronghold remains southern Chocó, though its attempts since 2015 to move into the north of the department have recently faltered. The Gaitanistas, a powerful drug trafficking group (see Section C below), have gained an upper hand in

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<sup>11</sup>For a short discussion on varieties of military and political control by armed groups, see Nelson Kasfir, “Rebel Governance – Constructing a Field of Inquiry: Definitions, Scope, Patterns, Order, Causes”, in Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir and Zachariah Mampilly (Eds), *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (New York, 2015).

<sup>12</sup>Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Riosucio, 24 October 2018; government official, Iscuandé, Nariño, 30 January 2019.

<sup>13</sup>Crisis Group interviews, community leader, Quibdó, 13 March 2019; international organisation representative, 14 March 2019; intelligence official, Bogotá, 12 February 2018.

<sup>14</sup>Video sent to Crisis Group, Commander Uriel, 6 July 2018.

<sup>15</sup>Crisis Group interviews, community leader, Argelia, Cauca, 4 May 2018; church official, Timbiquí, Cauca, 29 January 2019.

<sup>16</sup>Crisis Group interviews, community leader, El Plateado, Cauca, 4 May 2018; human rights defender, Guapi, 28 January 2019. Crisis Group fieldwork, El Plateado, 3 and 4 May 2018.

<sup>17</sup>Crisis Group interviews, church official, Riosucio, Chocó, 24 October 2018; community leaders, Riosucio, Chocó 24 and 27 October 2018; church official, Timbiquí, Cauca, 29 January 2019; government official, Iscuandé, Nariño, 30 January 2019; church official, Tumaco, 31 January 2019; community leaders and international organisation representatives, Quibdó, 28 and 29 August 2017, 8 and 9 May 2018.

<sup>18</sup>Crisis Group interview, government official, Iscuandé, Nariño, 30 January 2019. The ELN denies it is involved in the drug trade in Chocó, but it is the only source to claim this. Video sent to Crisis Group, Commander Uriel, 6 July 2018.

the conflict between the two there.<sup>19</sup> In Buenaventura port, the ELN reportedly tried to break into the urban area but its presence remains limited to rural zones north of the city.<sup>20</sup> Similar tentative efforts to expand followed by limited ability to consolidate control have unfolded both in Cauca and in Nariño.<sup>21</sup>

## B. *FARC Dissidents*

Various dissidents from the FARC, which formally laid down its weapons in 2017, have fanned out across the region. These groups also claim to have ideological motives, but in general are unable to identify a set of political objectives to address the grievances over state neglect and maltreatment vented by the communities they claim to represent and protect.<sup>22</sup>

One dissident group is the Oliver Sinisterra front, formerly led by “Guacho”, a well-known commander, who was 29 when Colombian security forces shot him dead in December 2018. The front began as a small group in rural Tumaco in January 2017.<sup>23</sup> In early 2018, it formed an alliance with the People for Order, another dissident group in urban Tumaco, and expanded as far as Barbacoas, El Charco and Iscuandé in a bid to control the region’s main drug trafficking routes.<sup>24</sup> Although media coverage and government attention focused on Guacho’s supposed role in the killing of two Ecuadorian journalists and their driver in April 2018, he was far from being the region’s most powerful armed leader. According to one local trafficker of precursor chemicals, “Guacho has no labs [for processing cocaine], or if he does, he has very few”.<sup>25</sup> The group has begun to receive support from members of the First Front dissident group, present mainly in south-east Colombia but who recently arrived in the area as part of its plan to unite all dissidents in one organised, “refounded” FARC.<sup>26</sup>

Despite losing territory in and around Tumaco before their commander’s death and pressure from Colombian state forces and other armed groups, Guacho’s men have maintained their foothold in areas north and east of the municipality, especially along the Telembí and the Patía Rivers. His successor is another former FARC fighter in his mid-20s, known as el Gringo. Since September 2018, the group has lost ter-

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<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interviews, human rights defenders, Apartadó, 21 and 22 October 2018; community leaders, Riosucioi, Chocó, 24 October 2018; Carmen del Darién, Chocó, 26 October 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Tatiana Duque, “La ruptura del pacto criminal que asusta a Buenaventura”, *La Silla Vacía*, 19 December 2018; Crisis Group interview, government official, Buenaventura, 19 February 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Guapi and Timbiquí, 27 and 29 January 2019; human rights defender, Guapi, 28 January 2019; church official, Guapi, 28 January 2019; international organisation representative, Tumaco, 1 February 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interviews, GUP mid-level commander, Tumaco, 28 September 2018; members of the People for Order, Tumaco, 27 September 2018; community leader, Tumaco, 27 September 2018; government official, Iscuandé, 30 January 2018. “¡Nariño...Presente y Combatiendo!”, Frente Oliver Sinisterra, 6 January 2018. “Comunicado a la opinión pública”, Columna Móvil Jaime Martínezz de las FARC-EP, n.d. “Fuerza Unida Del Pacifico”, video, YouTube, 29 May 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Em6iVX>.

<sup>23</sup> “¡Nariño...Presente y Combatiendo!”, Frente Oliver Sinisterra, 6 January 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government official, Iscuandé, Nariño, 30 January 2019; church official, El Charco, Nariño, 30 January 2019; church official, Tumaco, 31 January 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interview, precursor chemicals trafficker, Tumaco, 24 September 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interview, international organisation representative, Tumaco, 24 June 2019.

ritory in the Alto and Bajo Mira regions of rural Tumaco, and is in conflict with a newly formed armed group in the area.

Another dissident group, the United Guerrillas of the Pacific (GUP in Spanish), was founded in early 2017 in San Pedro del Vino. Many of its members are dissidents led by alias Don Ye until his killing November 2016.<sup>27</sup> After that, Héctor David Segura Palacios, known simply as David, commanded the group until September 2018, when the police tracked him and his sister to a village north of Tumaco and killed them both. The group expanded in Tumaco city by recruiting former FARC fighters and fighting against the People for Order, and later against Guacho's group.<sup>28</sup> Another young Afro-Colombian man in his mid-20s, alias Borojó, currently leads the GUP, which controls most of the estuaries along the Nariño coast and oversees much of the region's drug trade, including cocaine labs.<sup>29</sup> More recently, the group has moved many combatants toward the Sanquianga National Park region and the delta of the Patía river.<sup>30</sup>

Following two years of internecine violence in Tumaco, and under pressure from locals, the People for Order, the Oliver Sinisterra Front and the GUP negotiated a truce in December.<sup>31</sup> Homicides have since fallen sharply in urban Tumaco, but not in rural areas because of the activities of a new armed group excluded from the truce.<sup>32</sup> Tumaco has seen a consistent decrease in homicides and shootouts since the truce was signed. FARC dissidents in the city also state that the truce has led to a significant drop in violence.<sup>33</sup>

Two FARC dissident groups have battled for control of territory and drug routes in rural Buenaventura, López de Micay municipality and along the Naya River in the last year. The United Forces for the Pacific (UFP) comprises former fighters from the FARC's 30th front.<sup>34</sup> It claimed responsibility for killing four community leaders along the Naya River in 2018, stating the victims supported "paramilitary" groups.<sup>35</sup> While claiming to fight for the FARC's revolutionary ideals, it appears mostly focused on drug trafficking.<sup>36</sup> Recently, it has expanded to southern Chocó, where it has been clashing with the ELN in indigenous territory, and Guapi, in Cauca.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group interview, security expert, Bogotá, 4 February 2017.

<sup>28</sup> The GUP had been in open conflict with the People for Order since mid-2017. Crisis Group interview, humanitarian aid worker, Tumaco, 7 March 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interviews, GUP mid-level commander, Tumaco, 28 September 2018; International organisation representative, Tumaco, 25 September 2018 and 1 February 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interview, international organisation representative, Tumaco, 24 June 2019.

<sup>31</sup> At the meeting to agree the truce, on 13 December, commanders discussed how they would deal with violations. Later, on 28 December, they negotiated a truce for their rural areas of operation. Crisis Group interview, community leader, Tumaco, 2 February 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interviews, civil society activists, Tumaco, 2 and 3 February 2019; Crisis Group field work, rural Tumaco, 3 and 4 February 2019. Medicina Legal, "Información preliminar de lesiones fatales de causa externa en Colombia. Enero a febrero de 2019", March 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group interviews, FARC dissidents, Tumaco, 8 and 9 April 2019.

<sup>34</sup> According to the video the group made to announce its existence, it is led by alias Julián Martínez. "Fuerza Unida Del Pacifico", video, YouTube, 29 May 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Em6iVX>.

<sup>35</sup> "Fuerza Unida del Pacifico", video, YouTube, 7 June 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Xgqd09>.

<sup>36</sup> "Fuerza Unida Del Pacifico", video, YouTube, op. cit. Crisis Group interview, human rights defender, Guapi, 28 January 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interview, security expert, Bogotá, 7 June 2019.

Another dissident faction, the Jaime Martínez mobile column, announced in a pamphlet released in May 2018 that the United Forces are not a guerrilla force.<sup>38</sup> Although its leadership and origins are unclear, it too claims to fight for the FARC's values.<sup>39</sup> It recently included "first front" in its name, a reference to a dissident group in Colombia's east involved in trying to unite guerrilla schisms across the country.<sup>40</sup> The UFP has been able to consolidate control of the Naya River, pushing the Jaime Martínez Front up into the mountains of Cauca, while still battling with the ELN for the San Juan de Micay river, described by a local human rights defender as "one huge drug trafficking route".<sup>41</sup>

### C. *Drug Traffickers*

Colombia's largest organised crime group, the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, operates along the coast and is principally interested in the drug trade, arms trafficking and illegal gold mining. The group has fought the ELN in Chocó since 2015, leading to numerous targeted killings and the forced displacement of more than 50,000 inhabitants.<sup>42</sup> Across the department, it acts similarly to traditional Colombian paramilitary groups by combining counter-insurgency operations, illicit economic activities and alleged collusion with state forces (which deny claims of complicity with the group).<sup>43</sup>

Fighting between the Gaitanistas and the guerrillas has shifted geographically, raising the probability of worsening violence. In northern Chocó, the Gaitanistas have been able to push back the ELN by taking control of nearly the whole of Riosucio municipality.<sup>44</sup> To the department's south, the group holds the urban centre of Istmina

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interview, community leader, Buenaventura, 18 February 2019.

<sup>39</sup> "Comunicado a la opinión pública", Columna Móvil Jaime Martínez de las FARC-EP, n.d. "¿Se avecina guerra entre disidentes de las Farc en el Naya?", *Verdad Abierta*, 6 June 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Pamphlet, "Columna Móvil Jaime Martínez FARC-EP Frente Primero", n.d.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interview, human rights defender, Guapi, Cauca, 28 January 2019. One last FARC dissident group exists in the region: the Estiven González front, which operates along the mountains of Nariño and Cauca. The group is also present in the municipality of Magüí Payán, along the Pacific coast in Nariño. It looks to control as much of the Patía River as possible, and has a non-aggression pact with the ELN in the area. Crisis Group interview, international organisation representative, Tumaco, 25 September 2018. Laura Soto, "En Norte de Nariño creció la disidencia coordinada por 'Gentil Duarte'", *La Silla Vacía*, 3 December 2018. More recently, a new group of mainly campesino fighters has moved into the Alto Mira and Frontera area of Tumaco, claiming to represent dissident fronts from other parts of Colombia. Its leadership and size are currently unknown, though its presence is confirmed. Crisis Group interviews, international organisation representative, Tumaco, 8 April 2019; conflict experts, Bogotá, 11 April and 8 May 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Statistics from the National Victims' Unit, Unique Victims Registry, accessed 15 April 2019. "Conmoción por el cruel asesinato de Aquileo, profesor indígena en el Chocó", *Semana*, 13 April 2019. Crisis Group interview, human rights defender, Apartadó, 22 October 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Senior military figures have denied the existence of any policy favouring the Gaitanistas in Chocó, while admitting that internal disciplinary procedures have been opened against certain officers for alleged collusion. "No hay connivencia con Clan del Golfo en el Bajo Atrato": general Ramírez", *El Espectador*, 7 June 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interview, human rights defender, Apartadó, 22 October 2018.

and controls much of departmental capital Quibdó.<sup>45</sup> Recently, fighting from the north reached Bojayá, site of the worst massacre of Colombia's civil war (in 2002 the FARC launched a cylinder bomb that landed in a church, killing at least 79 people). The risk is high that the northern and southern fronts of the conflict converge. The government's targeting of Gaitanista leaders has not dented the group's geographic spread nor its criminal markets in Chocó. New commanders take the place of those killed or captured, often causing sudden changes in the group's treatment of the local population but not undermining the group's ability to pursue its illicit activities.<sup>46</sup>

Other local crime groups compete for one of the most lucrative criminal markets of the coastal region: the port city of Buenaventura. An armed group known as the Locals is battling there a smaller criminal outfit, the Business (Empresa, in Spanish), led by alias Robert. The latter extorts local businesses and is involved in small-scale drug retail, whereas the Locals export drugs via the port and fast boats, carry out sophisticated extortion schemes that inflate the prices of staples, and resolve local disputes.<sup>47</sup> The Locals and the Empresa struck a nonaggression pact in 2015, in which they agreed to respect each other's territory and illegal dealings. Factional infighting among the Locals allegedly lay behind a recent attack, which killed at least three young men, and armed clashes in November 2018, in an episode that urban residents refer to as "the purge".<sup>48</sup> Recently, violence has increased in Buenaventura again, though the reasons behind this spike are unclear.<sup>49</sup>

One notable newcomer in the Pacific region is alias Contador, a drug trafficker whose base is the town of Llorente, in Tumaco. Recently he has teamed up with Mario Lata, a former member of both the Rastrojos drug trafficking group and the FARC, who was released from prison in April 2018 as the statute of limitations for the charges he was facing ran out.<sup>50</sup> He moved back to Tumaco, where he began to entrench himself in the drug trade and strike partnership agreements. He convinced local United Guerrillas commander alias Arete to break ranks with the GUP and join forces in mid-2018.<sup>51</sup> With money from the Mexican Sinaloa cartel, Contador and Mario Lata began battling Guacho in his stronghold in rural Tumaco.<sup>52</sup> Their aggressive expansionism triggered combats, homicides and displacement in Tumaco, though they have recently tried to expand northwards.<sup>53</sup> Minors reportedly make up the majority of the group's foot soldiers.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leader, Quibdó, 13 March 2019; international organisation representative, Quibdó, 14 March 2019; indigenous leaders, Quibdó, 13 March 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interview, church official, Riosucio, Chocó, 24 October 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, government official, Buenaventura, 18 February 2019. "Alerta Temprana N 007-19", Defensoría del Pueblo, 23 January 2019. Crisis Group interview, community leader, Buenaventura, 19 February 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Tatiana Duque, "La ruptura del pacto criminal que asusta a Buenaventura", op. cit. Crisis Group interview, government official, Buenaventura, 18 February 2019.

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interview, security expert, Bogotá, 28 June 2019.

<sup>50</sup> Colombian police intelligence report, 4 October 2018. He is also known as Barrera.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interview, community leaders, Tumaco, 22 and 26 September 2018.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, church officials and international organisation representatives, Tumaco, 25 and 30 September 2018.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interview, drug trafficker, Tumaco, 25 June 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interview, community leader, Tumaco, 9 April 2019.

### III. Life Among Armed Groups

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Since their arrival in the mid to late 1980s, guerrillas, paramilitaries and drug traffickers have turned Colombia's Pacific coast into an operational hub. They have taken advantage of and expanded existing illegal activities, preyed on local communities' vulnerabilities and isolation, and vied for de facto control over territory. Their resulting clashes have had serious humanitarian effects on, and threatened the ways of life cherished by, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities.

#### A. *Illegal Economies*

All armed groups profit from illegal businesses. Such activities influence levels of violence across the region: in the last decade, where there is more coca, there has been more forced displacement; with homicides, though, the relationship with coca cultivation is less obvious.<sup>55</sup> Drug trafficking, illegal gold mining and extortion make up the mainstay of illicit business. The former two constitute the livelihood of many of the area's inhabitants, which reinforce their dependence on armed groups and strain their relationship with the state.

All the rungs of the drug trade exist along the Pacific coast. The region grows Colombia's highest quantity of coca, with just over 62,000 cultivated hectares (out of 169,000 countrywide) recorded by the UN in 2018. In Cauca and Nariño, confined geographic spaces harbour the whole of the drug trade, from farm crops to international cocaine shipments. Tumaco has the largest coca growing area of any municipality in Colombia (at 19,500 hectares in 2017), while also housing processing labs and maritime routes to international markets.<sup>56</sup> El Tambo in Cauca was in 2017 the fourth highest coca producing municipality in the country, with just over 6,600 hectares.<sup>57</sup> Traffickers transport cocaine abroad from there through the three coastal municipalities in Cauca.<sup>58</sup> Coca crops covered 4,600 hectares in 2017 in El Charco and Barbacoas, in Nariño.<sup>59</sup> In the former, the United Guerrillas of the Pacific run cocaine labs and trafficking operations toward Central America and Mexico.<sup>60</sup>

The growing presence of Mexican cartels in Nariño and to a lesser extent in Cauca, with the aim of funding drug production and supervising shipments, is a more recent development. Their presence does not give these two cartels, Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation, greater control over the strategies armed groups adopt to

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<sup>55</sup> See attached Appendices C, D, E and F based on statistics from the Vice Presidential Program for Human Rights, Colombian police and UNODC.

<sup>56</sup> "Colombia: Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2018", UNODC, August 2019, p. 11. For figures on municipal coca cultivation, see "Colombia: Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2017", UNODC, September 2018, p. 27. Crisis Group interviews, precursor chemicals trafficker and military officer, Tumaco, 24 and 28 September 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 27.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interviews, church officials, Guapi and Timbiquí, 27 and 29 January 2019; human rights defender, Guapi, 28 January 2019. "Incautan semisumergible que sería usado para llevar droga a Centroamérica", *Blu Radio*, 10 January 2019.

<sup>59</sup> "Colombia: Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2017", op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interviews, precursor chemicals trafficker, Tumaco, 24 September 2018; international organisation representative, Tumaco, 1 February 2019.

enforce territorial control.<sup>61</sup> However, Mexican resources have exacerbated existing rivalries among armed groups in Nariño. Guacho and his Oliver Sinisterra front received money from the Sinaloa cartel in exchange for allowing cartel-financed drug shipments to pass unimpeded to the ocean through land under his control. His inability to provide safe passage for those shipments, according to sources in the area, led the cartel to increase its financial support for Contador, who proceeded to fight the two groups as part of his plan to monopolise the region's drug trade.<sup>62</sup>

The United Guerrillas of the Pacific reportedly received funding from the cartel Jalisco New Generation, though the Sinaloa cartel reportedly also indirectly finances the group.<sup>63</sup> In parts of Cauca, notably Argelia, El Tambo and Timbiquí, locals also reported the presence of Mexican civilians working in the drug trade.<sup>64</sup> Recently, ten Central Americans and one Mexican were arrested in López de Micay for alleged arms and drug trafficking.<sup>65</sup>

Drug production sites and trafficking routes often see high levels of violence due to armed groups' disputes, although exceptions to this pattern exist. Combat has raged over the Mira, Rosario and Mejicano Rivers in Tumaco, as well as across the coastal city itself, which serves as a departure point for drug shipments.<sup>66</sup> The frequent armed clashes in Riosucio, in northern Chocó, also stem from the area's use as an outlet for drugs toward the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.<sup>67</sup> The Naya River, dividing the provinces of Cauca and Valle del Cauca, is another sought-after drug route with endemic violence. However, the Sanquianga and Patía rivers in Nariño, and the Saija and San Juan de Micay rivers in Cauca, all connect coca-growing areas to the ocean and are coveted sites for armed groups without similar levels of bloodshed, often due to working agreements between armed groups. Recent truces in Tumaco and Buenaventura have also shown that multiple armed groups can operate the drug trade without resorting to violence.

Illegal gold mining is another major source of financing for armed groups and a livelihood for locals. In Iscuandé and Barbacoas in Nariño, Timbiquí and Guapi in Cauca, and southern Chocó, gold mining sustains whole communities. Armed groups are rarely directly involved in mining, instead forcing the outsiders who own the machinery used to extract gold to pay protection money (those outsiders usually also

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<sup>61</sup> Natalia Arbeláez Jaramillo, "Guacho no sigue las directrices del Cartel de Sinaloa", 27 April 2018. Crisis Group interview, human rights defender, Tumaco, 26 September 2018; international organisation representative, Tumaco, 1 February 2019.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interview, international organisation representatives, Tumaco, 25 September 2018; military official, Tumaco, 28 September 2018; intelligence officer, Tumaco, 5 May 2019.

<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group interviews, church official and community leader, Tumaco, 30 September 2018. Juan Carlos Garzón and Andrés Cajiao, "Narcotraficantes mexicanos en Colombia", *Razón Pública*, 20 January 2019.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, El Plateado, Cauca, 9 May 2018; community leaders, Timbiquí, Cauca, 29 January 2019.

<sup>65</sup> "Caen en Cauca 11 extranjeros que serían de carteles en Centroamérica", *El Tiempo*, 26 April 2019.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interview, drug trafficker, Tumaco, 23 June 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Riosucio and Carmen del Darién, 24 and 25 October 2018; church official, Riosucio, 24 October 2018; human rights defender, Apartadó 22 October 2018.

pay the landowners).<sup>68</sup> Foreigners, especially Brazilians, are involved in illegal mining in Chocó and authorities arrested two Iranians on illegal mining charges there in early 2019.<sup>69</sup>

Both the drug trade and illegal gold mining depend not just on locals' acquiescence, but on their active participation. Some towns receive regular payments from owners of large illegal mining operations to compensate for environmental damage or to persuade them to turn a blind eye.<sup>70</sup> Coca growers, as well as young people who make trips on fast boats to Central America, receive large sums for their bit parts in the trade. When these illegal trades suffer, local economies and people's livelihoods do too.<sup>71</sup>

The heavy influx of these resources into communities tends to legitimise the criminal businesses while undermining traditional Afro-Colombian and indigenous practices.<sup>72</sup> Access to large amounts of cash gives locals social status and relatively opulent lifestyles, meaning they can purchase cell phones, more expensive clothes, alcohol and guns. Some spend lavishly: "I know of people who have gone to Cali only to have lunch.... That requires a charter flight, and can cost six or seven million pesos [\$2,000 to \$2,300], just for lunch!", one priest said in reference to newly rich miners.<sup>73</sup> Witnesses agreed that, no matter how they made their money, soon after these same people find themselves back where they started.

Extortion is another important revenue stream. Both the Gaitanistas and the ELN in Chocó "tax" economic activity in areas under their control.<sup>74</sup> FARC dissidents have done the same in Tumaco and rural Nariño, though as part of their earlier truce, these groups halted the practice.<sup>75</sup> The Locals' extortion in Buenaventura is especially sophisticated and apparently responsible for the high cost of basic goods in one of Colombia's poorest cities. The group creates a "monopoly" in which it only allows for one supplier of any essential product, especially food. The provider pays the group according to how much he or she brings into the city. If a new supplier tries to move in, the group impounds the product, issues a threat and prevents the new entrant operating in the city, enabling authorised providers to drive prices up. It is reported-

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<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government official, Iscuandé, 30 January 2019; church official, Timbiquí, 29 January 2019; community leader, Guapi, 28 January 2018.

<sup>69</sup> "Identifican a dos iraníes, 'zares' del oro ilegal en el Chocó", *El Tiempo*, 28 January 2019. Crisis Group interview, international community representative, Quibdó, 14 March 2019; community leader, Quibdó, 13 March 2019. "Los brasileños detrás de la explotación ilegal de oro en Colombia", *Semana*, 3 April 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interviews, church official, Timbiquí, 29 January 2019; human rights defender Guapi, 28 January 2019.

<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Tumaco, 25 and 30 September 2018; government official, Buenaventura, 18 February 2019; Crisis Group fieldwork, Tumaco, 3 and 4 February 2019; government official, Iscuandé, 30 January 2019; church leader, Timbiquí, 29 January 2019.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Tumaco, 22, 24 and 26 September 2018; indigenous leader, Carmen del Darién, 25 October 2018.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interview, church official, Timbiquí, 29 January 2019.

<sup>74</sup> Video sent to Crisis Group, Commander Uriel, 6 July 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Tumaco, 25 and 26 September 2018.



ly sufficiently sophisticated to give one provider the green light to supply bacon while allowing another to bring in pork chops.<sup>76</sup>

### B. *The Battle for Local Power*

Armed groups exercise considerable political authority over communities. Many people mistrust their offers of protection, but the support of just a fraction of locals can be enough for a group to gain control. Within communities, those who accept the group can supply information, while the threat of violence forces the obedience of those who would prefer to resist. Armed groups often resolve disputes among locals and apply their own style of justice, creating an “order” based mainly, but not completely, on coercion. Their role in defending illegal economies creates a relationship of dependency between them and parts of the population.

Armed groups play on national and international politics in their attempts to win public allegiance. The FARC dissidents United Guerrillas of the Pacific argue that they will defend locals against the paramilitary forces that they claim President Duque’s government leads.<sup>77</sup> The People for Order dissident group denounces the state’s corruption and failure to honour its promises.<sup>78</sup> The ELN portrays its role as that of resistance against multinational interests and paramilitaries.<sup>79</sup>

These same groups also claim to protect communities from outside rivals or the state. FARC dissidents insist they are there to protect neighbourhoods and tend not to kill anyone from the area they control.<sup>80</sup> Recently, dissidents in and around Tumaco say they are guarding locals from paramilitaries, in reference to Contador.<sup>81</sup> In Chocó, the ELN claims to shield communities from the Gaitanistas; the Gaitanistas in turn say they protect them from the ELN.<sup>82</sup>

Regulating and protecting illegal businesses also give armed groups sway over local populations, especially where criminal activity is prevalent. When asked what communities would do if the government began to forcibly eradicate their coca, one community leader in Tumaco stated that the people “would look to Guacho for protection”.<sup>83</sup> Armed groups in Timbiquí have gained support from some communities by regulating work days and hours in mines and protecting illegal mining.<sup>84</sup>

Across the region, armed groups resolve local disputes, applying basic and summary justice. They use violence to impose a set of rules as well, looking to maintain

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government official, Buenaventura, 18 February 2019; “Alerta Temprana N 007-19”, Ombudsman’s Office, 23 January 2019.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group fieldwork, Rural Tumaco, 23 September 2018; Crisis Group interview, mother of alias David, Tumaco, 29 September 2018; GUP mid-level commander, 28 September 2018.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group fieldwork, Tumaco, 1 February 2019.

<sup>79</sup> “Acuerdo social y humanitario para el Chocó”, Western War Front, ELN, 7 June 2018.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Tumaco, 22, 24, 25, 26, and 28 September 2018.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group interview, drug trafficker, Tumaco, 23 June 2019.

<sup>82</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Riosucio, 24 October 2018; human rights defender, Apartadó, 22 October 2018. However, some inhabitants’ willingness to allow guerrillas to protect them from the Gaitanistas has fallen recently because of violence meted out by the ELN in the process. Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Riosucio, 24 October 2018; humanitarian aid worker, Quibdó, 14 March 2019.

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interview, community leader, Tumaco, 22 September 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group interview, church official, Timbiquí, 29 January 2019.

some form of order.<sup>85</sup> Despite the fluidity of the conflict between the ELN and Gaitanistas in Chocó, both groups resolve disputes at the request of some locals.<sup>86</sup> Armed groups do the same in urban Tumaco. In one reported case, the United Guerrillas stopped a series of fights among young girls in one neighbourhood where the police had been unable to do so.<sup>87</sup> Along the Pacific coast of Nariño, armed groups impose their “own law”, in the words of one interviewee.<sup>88</sup>

At the same time, instituting their own brand of order comes with high cost. Illegal armed groups have killed numerous social leaders and human rights activists along the coast, adding to a nationwide death toll of leaders and activists that stands out as one of the country's gravest security concerns in the wake of the 2016 peace agreement.<sup>89</sup> Many such leaders are exposed to violent reprisals and are forced to conduct their activism under the watchful eye of armed groups. State protection, which can include the provision of bodyguards, armoured cars and bulletproof vests, is generally insufficient to deter armed groups and other actors who wish to threaten or influence leaders, in part because of the respect and legitimacy they command within their communities.

Finally, illegal armed groups have direct influence over civil society, especially Afro-Colombian Community Councils or indigenous reservations. Because the groups operate in territories belonging to and led by ethnic groups, they can ban local leaders from entering these lands, undermining those leaders' authority. The groups can also displace whole communities, as in northern Chocó, which means ethnic organisations cannot even function in the territory they have the right to rule.<sup>90</sup> With their own rough justice, armed groups undermine those organisations' ability to resolve disputes and operate as the legitimate authorities in their own communities.<sup>91</sup>

### *C. Humanitarian Effects*

Armed groups along the Pacific are responsible for homicides, clashes and forced displacement, especially in Chocó and Nariño. Violence in the region tends to affect

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<sup>85</sup> In both rural Nariño and Buenaventura, armed groups impose rules, including against wayward inhabitants who cause problems in villages. Crisis Group interviews, government official, Iscuandé, 30 January 2019; church official, El Charco, 30 January 2019. Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Buenaventura, 19 and 20 February 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Riosucio, 24 October 2018; community leader, Carmen del Darién, 25 October 2018.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, 24, 25 and 26 September 2018.

<sup>88</sup> Crisis Group interview, church official, El Charco, 30 January 2019.

<sup>89</sup> According to the UN High Commission for Human Rights, 110 human rights activists were killed in 2018. “Informe del Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos sobre la situación de derechos humanos y derecho internacional en Colombia”, UN High Commission for Human Rights, 4 February 2019. The Human Rights Ombudsman's Office reported the killing of 431 activists between 2016 and 2018, including 182 in 2018, with some of the areas with the highest number of murders being northern Cauca, Antioquia and Tumaco. “Defensoría hará seguimiento a acciones para frenar muerte de líderes”, *El Tiempo*, 10 January 2019.

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group interviews, church officials, Apartadó, 21 October 2018 and Riosucio, 24 October 2018; community leaders, Riosucio, 26 October 2018.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Riosucio, 24 October 2018; Carmen del Darién, 25 October 2018.

women and men differently. Sexual violence is rampant, though armed groups are not always the perpetrators.

Armed groups have systematically uprooted communities, as a result undermining the civilian bodies that exercise some form of autonomous rule.<sup>92</sup> Soon after Community Councils were created by law in 1993, paramilitaries began to target communities in northern Chocó, displacing them multiple times over the past 25 years. One goal was to enable large-scale African Palm cultivation by reducing Afro-Colombian communities' real authority over their territory.<sup>93</sup> Levels of displacement in Chocó have varied little over the past two decades, save for 2018, when there was a sharp fall due in part to armed groups' forcibly confining communities. In 2003, fighting displaced just over 15,000 people in the province, and in 2017, a further 15,000.<sup>94</sup> Since 2012, when fighting between guerrillas and drug traffickers began, violence has forced tens of thousands from their homes.<sup>95</sup> By late 2018, in Riosucio, along the border with Panamá, all the Afro-Colombian communities had fled violence between the ELN and the Gaitanistas.<sup>96</sup>

Mass displacements have also affected the indigenous, who number roughly 54,000 people in Chocó.<sup>97</sup> Clashes in Bajo Baudó between the ELN and Gaitanistas displaced nearly 1,150 tribespeople in 2018.<sup>98</sup> To protest the conditions in which their displacement had forced them to live, indigenous groups from northern Chocó marched to Bogotá in late 2018.<sup>99</sup> Fighting among armed groups vying for territory has also continued to displace people in Nariño since the signing of the FARC peace agreement. Clashes between the United Guerrillas of the Pacific and Oliver Sinister-rra front led to the displacement of over 400 people in El Charco in 2018.<sup>100</sup> Open combat between the United Guerrillas and a splinter group led by Mario Lata displaced nearly 650 people in urban Tumaco in July 2018, while early in 2019 clashes

<sup>92</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian aid worker and church official, Apartadó 22 and 23 October 2018; community leaders, Buenaventura, 18 and 19 February 2019; community leaders, Tumaco, 15 May 2017.

<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Riosucio, 26 October 2018; human rights defender, humanitarian aid worker and church official, Apartadó, 22 and 23 October 2018. Ulrich Oslender, "Violence in development: the logic of forced displacement on Colombia's Pacific coast", *Development in Practice*, Vol. 17, No. 6 (2007), 752-764.

<sup>94</sup> Statistics for displacement are available from the Victims' Unit. "Desplazamiento – Personas", as of 1 January 2019.

<sup>95</sup> William Spindler, "Aumenta el desplazamiento forzado en el departamento del Chocó, en el oeste de Colombia", UNHCR, 13 May 2016. Laura Silva, "Chocó, el triste título del rey del desplazamiento", *La Silla Vacía*, 8 March 2017. "INFORME DE DESPLAZAMIENTOS MASIVOS 2018", UNHCR, n.d.

<sup>96</sup> Crisis Group interviews, church official, Riosucio, 24 October 2018; community leaders, Riosucio, 24 October 2018.

<sup>97</sup> "La visibilización estadística de los grupos étnicos colombianos", DANE, n.d.

<sup>98</sup> "Flash Update No. 2 – Desplazamiento masivo en Bajo Baudó (Chocó)", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 22 May 2018. "Flash Update No. 2 – Desplazamiento masivo y confinamiento en Bajo Baudó (Chocó)", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 15 December 2018.

<sup>99</sup> "500 indígenas Embera Dóbida, Katío y Wounaan llegan a Bogotá en Minga por la Vida", ONIC, 11 November 2018.

<sup>100</sup> Tatiana Duque, "El desplazamiento en El Charco muestra por qué el posconflicto no llega a Nariño", *La Silla Vacía*, 4 September 2018.

between Contador and the Oliver Sinisterra front in rural Tumaco forced 700 people from their homes.

Increasingly, armed groups forcibly confine communities. The UN warned in August 2018 that 4,000 indigenous people were trapped in northern Chocó due to restrictions placed by armed actors on their movement and the ELN's use of land-mines.<sup>101</sup> The confinement of indigenous communities in Carmen del Darién, in Chocó, in March 2019 led five babies to starve to death as clashes among armed groups meant locals could not harvest or buy food.<sup>102</sup>

Men make up the vast majority of members of armed groups, and women rarely directly perpetrate violence along the Pacific coast – although the ELN in Chocó has an important female commander, Paola, as well as some female fighters. Some girls in Buenaventura carry out minor tasks for the Locals, such as storing arms or providing information; some in Tumaco look to become commanders' girlfriends in the hope of gaining social status, clothes or cell phones.<sup>103</sup>

There are also numerous cases of sexual violence against women and girls. Two per cent of women in the city sought assistance for sexual violence between 2014 and 2018 according to Doctors Without Borders, but humanitarian aid workers consider this number to be "the tip of the iceberg".<sup>104</sup> They note that sexual violence and prostitution, even of children, is often related to the day-to-day search for money and food. Perpetrators in Tumaco and Buenaventura can be members of armed groups, although they can often be family members or neighbours who use the threat of murder or assault, or leverage their connections to armed groups, to rape women.<sup>105</sup> Sources in northern Chocó noted that ELN members, and especially Gaitanistas, pressure women to have sexual relations with them.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> "El drama de 3.700 indígenas en riesgo de desplazamiento forzado en el Chocó", *Semana*, 17 August 2018.

<sup>102</sup> "Aumentó a cinco el número de niños muertos por confinamiento en Chocó", RCN Radio, 13 March 2019. Various parts of Nariño coast and rural Buenaventura face the same risks. Crisis Group interviews, community leader, Buenaventura, 18 February 2019; government official, Iscuandé, 30 January 2019; Crisis Group fieldwork, Tumaco, 3 February 2019.

<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government official and community leaders, Buenaventura, 18 and 19 February 2019. Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Tumaco, 24, 25 and 26 September 2018.

<sup>104</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian aid workers, 3 March 201.

<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian aid workers, 3 March 2018; community leader, Buenaventura, 19 February 2019. Doctors Without Borders, "Tumaco: Actividades en Salud Mental, Violencia Sexual e IVE", n.d.

<sup>106</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Riosucio, 24 and 26 October 2018; Carmen del Darién, 25 October 2018.

## IV. The Roots of the Pacific Malaise

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Armed groups exploit political and economic conditions along the Pacific coast to gain control.<sup>107</sup> Extreme poverty and inequality, a central state that has mainly been interested in profiting from the region's resources and ensuring easy access to global trade, and fragile political authority are fundamental to understanding the expansion of these groups. These conditions have also spurred the growth of illegal economies, which locals depend on for their livelihoods and armed groups for their power and profits.

### A. *A History of Slavery*

The legacies of colonial rule cast a long shadow over the modern-day Pacific. Afro-Colombians, whose ancestors were brought to the region as slaves or who escaped enslavement and fled there, make up 90 per cent of the population.<sup>108</sup> Statistical analysis shows that the particularly high levels of current poverty in the Pacific region are traceable to the historical presence of slave communities. Municipalities under Spanish colonial rule where slaves lived, generally dedicated to gold mining, are poorer than neighbouring areas without slaves.<sup>109</sup> These entrenched poverty levels are partly due to the stunted development across the region of state institutions. Whether under Spanish rule or after independence, the central state failed to nurture human capital or improve locals' material well-being, and made few efforts to bring economic growth to a region they saw as inhabited by slaves and Afro-Colombians, and where they did not live because the climate was so harsh.<sup>110</sup>

This lack of institutional development turned Colombia's Pacific coast into the country's most impoverished region. Chocó is its poorest department, as well as its most unequal. Poverty rates of 59 per cent there – compared to 27 per cent nationally – are down compared to those of ten years ago by almost 15 per cent. But its Gini coefficient, which measures inequality, has remained constant at around 0.57, considerably higher than the national average of 0.51.<sup>111</sup> Along the Pacific coast of Cauca

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<sup>107</sup> I. William Zartman, "Need, Creed and Greed in Intrastate Conflict", in Cynthia J. Arnson and I. William Zartman (eds.), *Rethinking the Economics of War* (Baltimore, 2005), p. 266.

<sup>108</sup> "Problemática humanitaria en la región pacífica colombiana", op. cit.

<sup>109</sup> Daron Acemoglu, Camilo García-Jimeno, and James A. Robinson, "Finding Eldorado: Slavery and long-run development in Colombia", *Journal of Comparative Economics* Vol. 40, No. 4 (2012), pp. 534-564.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. Jaime Bonet, "¿Por qué es pobre Chocó?", in Joaquín Viloria de la Hoz (ed.) *Economías del Pacífico Colombiano* (Cartagena, 2008). Luis Armando Galvis-Aponte, Lina Marcela Moyano-Támara and Carlos Alberto Alba-Fajardo, "La persistencia de la pobreza en el Pacífico colombiano y sus factores asociados", Banco de la República, June 2016. In 1843, less than a decade before the full abolition of slavery in Colombia, slaves made up 5.5 per cent of the population. Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, "Estadísticas históricas", n.d., pp. 70-71.

<sup>111</sup> "Pobreza Monetaria Chocó", DANE, 6 April 2018. According to the World Bank, Colombia is now the 16th most unequal country in the world. See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/si.pov.gini>. The Gini coefficient is a measure of the level of income dispersion in a given area, with 0 signifying perfect equality while 1 stands for the most extreme inequality, with all income concentrated in the hands of one person.

and Nariño, rates of “unsatisfied basic needs”, according to the most recent data, average over 70 per cent.<sup>112</sup>

Education levels also are among the country's lowest. Availability of and access to schools and universities are limited, and their quality tends to be poor. Illiteracy rates are high: in rural Chocó they can surpass 30 per cent, while in only four of the 44 municipalities that make up the Pacific region are rural literacy rates above the national average.<sup>113</sup> One naval officer involved in operations against Guacho expressed disbelief that in rural schools in Nariño, one teacher must cater to multiple grades, with all the children mixed in the same classroom.<sup>114</sup> If students do graduate – in most rural schools, a full high school education is unobtainable as classes only go to grades eight or nine out of eleven – university is often out of the question. A mere 1 per cent of students from the region are able to study after high school, and only 0.4 per cent go to university, while the rest pursue technical or vocational training.<sup>115</sup> This is not out of any lack of desire for further education: Tumaco hosts the campus of the public National University with the third highest number of applicants, after Bogotá and Medellín.<sup>116</sup>

This mix of poverty, inequality and lack of educational and work opportunities has led many locals to participate in the drug trade and illegal gold mining. In poor neighbourhoods of Tumaco and Buenaventura and rural Nariño and Cauca, the drug trade provides incomes and livelihoods otherwise inaccessible to inhabitants. One precursor chemicals trafficker noted that he can make up to \$700 per month, much higher than the average income in the region.<sup>117</sup> Illegal gold mining is a major income source for countless rural communities in the region looking to survive day to day or to strike it rich.<sup>118</sup> Community leaders in Timbiquí noted that people go to work in illegal mines because of “economic necessities”.<sup>119</sup> Owners of illegal gold mines in Chocó have “taken advantage of the poverty in which local communities live” in order to install their operations in the department.<sup>120</sup>

FARC dissidents in Tumaco, meanwhile, said they joined the violence because they were looked down upon for being black and poor. In the words of one, “if you have no money in my neighbourhood, you are nothing”. Another noted that, “more

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<sup>112</sup> The most recent data on this by municipality is from 2005, while the most recent census data is still being consolidated on a municipal level. DANE, “Colombia. Necesidades Básicas Insatisfechas - NBI, por total, cabecera y resto, según municipio y nacional. Resultados censo general 2005”, 30 June 2011.

<sup>113</sup> DANE, “4ta Entrega: anexos municipales”, 16 March 2016.

<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group interview, Navy official, Tumaco, 28 September 2018.

<sup>115</sup> “Se confirma alianza Universidad de los Andes y W Radio para becar a jóvenes del Pacífico”, *La W*, 16 August 2018. In Colombia, in total 45.5 per cent of young people between the age of 17 and 21 attend some form of higher education; nearly 30 per cent of young people between 17 and 21 go to university. Ministry of Education, “Estadísticas de educación superior”, 30 May 2018.

<sup>116</sup> “Tumaco, tercera ciudad del país con más aspirantes a la U.N.”, *Agencia de Noticias UN*, 1 November 2018.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interview, precursor chemicals trafficker, Tumaco, 24 September 2019.

<sup>118</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Quibdó, 13 March 2019; Tumaco, 2 February 2019; Timbiquí, 29 January 2019.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interview, community leaders, Timbiquí, 29 January 2019.

<sup>120</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, community leader, Quibdó, 25 June 2019.

than one of us joined the group just to get by, to eat, to live". He added that his life would have been different if he had enjoyed more access to education or work.<sup>121</sup>

### B. *An Exclusionary Development Model*

While historically the colonial and Colombian authorities regarded the Pacific region as a remote source of ready income, they also recently recognised its strategic importance for trading routes to international markets, including Asia.<sup>122</sup> The state has shown limited interest in spurring equitable economic development across the region, leaving locals to create and live off their own economic activities with no state help or interference. Instead, political elites have prioritised equipping the region with the means to allow Colombia to integrate commercially with other Pacific Rim countries, above all Asian countries and Chile, Mexico and Peru on the Latin American side.<sup>123</sup> Senior officials have recently set out a series of plans for the Pacific coast featuring both local development and reforms to boost international competitiveness, but these have yet to improve people's livelihoods.

Neither Spanish colonial rulers nor the Colombian state has traditionally shown much interest in crafting strong institutions in the area or tending to local inhabitants' well-being.<sup>124</sup> An extractive Pacific economy has proved resistant to change, notably in the Darién region of Chocó, where national and foreign companies cultivate wood, or in Tumaco, where either Colombians from outside the region or foreigners have been the main beneficiaries of various economic booms.<sup>125</sup> The government is currently considering awarding several mining titles in areas that overlap with territories under the legal authority of Afro-Colombian populations while the state actively promotes the region for its mining potential, especially gold.<sup>126</sup> Many communities reject what they regard as an extractive model of development that does not benefit them, magnifying local repudiation of the central state and enabling armed groups

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<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group interviews, FARC dissident fighters, Tumaco, 8 April 2019.

<sup>122</sup> Claudia Leal and Eduardo Restrepo, *Unos bosques sembrados de aserríos. Historia de la extracción maderera en el Pacífico colombiano*, (Medellín, 2003), pp. 1-37. Jaime Bonet, "¿Por qué es pobre Chocó?", in Joaquín Vilorio de la Hoz (ed.) *Economías del Pacífico Colombiano* (Cartagena, 2008).

<sup>123</sup> Chile, Mexico, Colombia and Peru formed the Pacific Alliance in 2012 to build "an area of strong integration to move progressively towards the free circulation of goods, services, capital and people" and "to promote better growth, development and competitiveness of [their] economies...". Pacific Alliance, "Acuerdo Marco de la Alianza del Pacífico", 6 June 2012.

<sup>124</sup> In the words of one historian, "the constant characteristic has been the presence of extractive institutions with very vertical relationships [toward the local population] and an economic elite barely interested in building social capital in the region". Jaime Bonet, "¿Por qué es pobre Chocó?", op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>125</sup> Crisis Group interviews, church officials, Apartadó, Antioquia, 22 October 2018; Riosucio, Chocó, 24 October 2018. Alfredo Molano, *De río en río* (Bogotá, 2017). Claudia Leal León, "Un puerto en la selva. Naturaleza y raza en la creación de la ciudad de Tumaco, 1860-1940", *Historia Crítica*, No. 30, July-December (2005), pp. 39-65.

<sup>126</sup> This phenomenon is visible by using the government's SIGOT map tool. "Colombia: Exploring Opportunities", Agencia Nacional Minera, June 2018.

such as the ELN to court public approval by denouncing what they brand as the plunder of natural resources.<sup>127</sup>

Mechanisms exist to protect ethnic communities from the effects of mining projects, notably a consultation process that must be carried out before permission for a project is granted. This process, however, does not give communities veto power. Instead, consultations look to reach an agreement between the state or private companies and communities so that projects can be implemented in a way acceptable to all parties. If communities and the state do not come to an agreement, the state can still push ahead with the project. Only in cases in which the courts decide that a project entails “annihilation and disappearance” of an ethnic group do communities have veto power.<sup>128</sup> Nonetheless, many politicians and senior officials still see these consultations as harmful to national economic interests, and look to skirt them, implement them half-heartedly and keep oversight institutions weak. Locals state that the consultation processes are often corrupt affairs that do not adequately consider their interests.<sup>129</sup>

Urban settings along the Pacific also witness recurrent frictions between local people's economic demands and the state's and business leaders' strategies to promote growth.<sup>130</sup> Buenaventura is connected to global trade flows, but its development also displays characteristics typical of extractive industries. It is the country's main port, through which pass 60 per cent of imports and exports, and from which the Colombian state collected around \$1.7 billion in taxes in 2017.<sup>131</sup> However, national authorities have long emphasised the improvement and expansion of port facilities over and above the welfare of a 400,000-strong predominantly Afro-Colombian population, giving rise to bouts of civil unrest and perpetuating social conditions favourable to the expansion of armed groups.

Locals had gained some economic security thanks to union membership while the port was state-owned, but since privatisation in 1993 and the creation of the Regional Buenaventura Port Society the city has undergone an economic decline accompanied by soaring rates of violence. Following privatisation, thousands of local employees lost their jobs while others saw their salaries reduced, generating socio-economic crisis from which the city has yet to recover.<sup>132</sup> Attracted by a booming illicit drug trade in and around the port, armed groups, including paramilitary forces and their

<sup>127</sup> ““Hay un desarrollo a costa de nosotros”: Francia Márquez”, *La Silla Vacía*, 3 January 2019. The ELN guerrillas have used similar arguments to justify their armed actions and rejection of humanitarian initiatives in Chocó. “Acuerdo social y humanitario para el chocó”, Frente de Guerra Occidental, 8 June 2018.

<sup>128</sup> Constitutional Court of Colombia, “Sentencia T-129/11”, 3 March 2011.

<sup>129</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Quibdó, 13 March 2019; Riosucio, Chocó, 24 October 2018; Bogotá, 22 March 2019; church officials, Quibdó, 13 March 2019. ““Hay un desarrollo a costa de nosotros”: Francia Márquez”, *La Silla Vacía*, 3 January 2019.

<sup>130</sup> In urban areas, Community Councils are not present.

<sup>131</sup> “Conpes 3847”, Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 3 November 2015, p. 19. “La triste paradoja del puerto de Buenaventura”, *El Espectador*, 10 December 2017.

<sup>132</sup> “Buenaventura: Un puerto sin comunidad”, op. cit., p. 52. By 2007, the city's unemployment rate stood at 28 per cent. Inge Helena Valencia, Laura Silva Chica and Alejandro Moreno Moreno, “Violencia, desarrollo y despojo en Buenaventura”, Fescol, September 2016. Now 83 per cent of the port is in private hands, mainly business leaders from outside the city and the country.



successors, as well as guerrillas, provided illegal opportunities for locals to gain social status or enjoy a decent living.<sup>133</sup> Whenever these competing groups have looked to take over the city, violence spikes, as it did in 2007 and again between 2012 and 2014.<sup>134</sup> The two main groups in the city came to a truce in 2015, which lowered levels of violence. Recent killings in some neighbourhoods have led to concerns that the truce may fall apart.<sup>135</sup>

Squalid living conditions, violence and the distribution of taxes from the port's activities – 95 per cent of which end up in the central state's coffers – has provoked strong public discontent. Local civil society groups led a 22-day strike in 2017 that paralysed the city and held up trade in and out of the port.<sup>136</sup> Negotiations between the "Civil Strike Committee" and the national government ended in a deal by which the government agreed to invest around \$3.5 billion in the city over the next decade through a series of projects that would be agreed between local civil society and the local, departmental and national governments.<sup>137</sup> Currently, the parties to the agreement are negotiating which projects to implement in eight thematic roundtables. President Duque's government has since stated it will respect these agreements.<sup>138</sup>

At the same time, it remains unclear how the Port Society's plans for expansion will align with investment to honour the strike agreement. Plans for the port over the next 30 years include occupying the whole of the island section of the city, from which thousands of people would presumably have to move to the mainland.<sup>139</sup> Activists argue that the government is preparing for this expansion by focusing public investment, such as infrastructure for drinking water, on the mainland, without factoring in locals' wishes. Resistance to these plans, they fear, could be met with violence by armed actors.<sup>140</sup>

The links between the port's expansion and criminality are a matter of intense local concern. The port is a conduit for traffickers seeking to stash drugs in maritime containers, while groups involved in the drug trade have flourished in impoverished

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<sup>133</sup> "Buenaventura: Un puerto sin comunidad", op. cit. Mauricio Romero, "Buenaventura municipality case study", in Ivan Briscoe, Catalina Perdomo and Catalina Uribe Burcher (eds.), *Illicit Networks and Politics in Latin America* (The Hague: 2014), pp. 93-105. Simon Romero, "Cocaine wars make port Colombia's deadliest city", *The New York Times*, 22 May 2007.

<sup>134</sup> "La crisis en Buenaventura: Desapariciones, desmembramientos y desplazamiento en el principal puerto de Colombia en el Pacífico", Human Rights Watch, 20 March 2014.

<sup>135</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government official, Buenaventura, 18 February 2019; community leaders, Buenaventura, 18 and 19 February 2019. Crisis Group interview, human rights defender, telephone communication, 6 June 2019.

<sup>136</sup> In 2017, the Colombian government received five trillion pesos from taxes on the port's economic activity. It sent just under 250 billion pesos, or 4.8 per cent of the total money the port brought in, to the local government. Nonetheless, the national government did implement projects in the city, though not necessarily with money derived from taxes on the port. Some relied on foreign assistance, for example. "La triste paradoja del puerto de Buenaventura", *El Espectador*, 10 December 2017. "Distribuciones SGP", Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2017, accessed 16 April 2019.

<sup>137</sup> Congreso de Colombia, "Ley 1872 de 2017", 18 December 2017.

<sup>138</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government official, Bogotá, 15 February and 12 July 2019; community leader, Buenaventura, 20 February 2019; diplomat, Bogotá, 27 June 2019.

<sup>139</sup> "La Buenaventura que nos merecemos: Plan Maestro 2050", Findeter, 2016.

<sup>140</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Buenaventura, 19 and 20 February 2019. "¿Para qué sirvió el paro cívico de hace un año en Buenaventura?", *Semana*, 22 May 2018.

urban communities.<sup>141</sup> Historical research and judicial confessions have established that paramilitaries from the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC in Spanish) looked to kill, disappear and displace people in the city in the 1990s and early 2000s in order to facilitate port expansion.<sup>142</sup> Recent patterns of violence are harder to link to port activity, although some 200 social leaders reportedly now have some sort of special police protection in the city, including most of those connected to the strike movement, due to threats against their lives.<sup>143</sup> One leader, Temístocles Machado, was killed in January 2018, allegedly because of his campaigning against the port's expansion. The hitman convicted for his murder belonged to the armed group the Locals.<sup>144</sup>

A succession of governments since the 1980s has sought, on paper at least, to boost economic development along the Pacific in parallel to bolstering the region's connections to international markets, though with limited success.<sup>145</sup> Government efforts to develop Buenaventura include the declaration of the city as a "special industrial port and a biodiverse and eco-touristic district" in 2007; the government has laid out a similar plan for Tumaco in 2018.<sup>146</sup> These plans, though, have had limited impact, as former President Juan Manuel Santos' administration's admitted in its own Pacific development plan, *Todos Somos Pazcífico*. The Santos plan focused heavily on infrastructure in four cities along the coast. Duque's government has pledged to implement it, in part thanks to international funding.<sup>147</sup>

The emphasis of the Colombian state on strengthening international trading facilities and extractive industries rather than local economic development has tended to exacerbate the extremes of poverty in the region upon which armed groups prey. Members of armed groups state that one of the reasons they joined was a lack of economic opportunities.<sup>148</sup> In the words of one community leader, "it is easier to export than to give the communities opportunities".<sup>149</sup> According to another community leader in Buenaventura, armed actors know that: "If they come to a place without jobs, people with nothing to do, without education, it is a great place to fuel their war".<sup>150</sup>

<sup>141</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government official and community activist, 19 and 20 February 2019. Mauricio Romero, "Buenaventura municipality case study", in Ivan Briscoe, Catalina Perdomo and Catalina Uribe Burcher (eds.), *Illicit Networks and Politics in Latin America* (The Hague, 2014), pp. 93-105.

<sup>142</sup> Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *Buenaventura: un puerto sin comunidad* (Bogotá, 2015).

<sup>143</sup> Crisis Group interview, community activist, Buenaventura, 20 February 2019.

<sup>144</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Buenaventura, 19 and 20 February 2019. "Primera condena por el asesinato de Temístocles Machado", *El Espectador*, 2 April 2019. "Buenaventura es una contradicción: Temístocles Machado", *Verdad Abierta*, 29 January 2018.

<sup>145</sup> María Andrea Rueda Páramo, Daniela Morales Cabral and Luisa Fernanda Lema Vélez, "Revisión histórica de proceso de planeación para el pacífico colombiano", Fondo Acción, 2017.

<sup>146</sup> Congreso de la República, "Acto Legislativo 02", 17 July 2018.

<sup>147</sup> This plan includes mainly infrastructure investments for Buenaventura, Tumaco, Quibdó and Guapi including aqueducts, sewage systems and electricity through investments that will cost \$400 million USD over six years. The plan is outlined in: "Conpes 3847", op. cit. Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Bogotá, 11 February 2019.

<sup>148</sup> Crisis Group interviews, FARC dissident fighters, Tumaco, 8 and 9 April 2019.

<sup>149</sup> Crisis Group interview, community leader, Timbiquí, 29 January 2019.

<sup>150</sup> Crisis Group interview, community leader, Buenaventura, 20 February 2019.

The difficulties in getting a decent job are made worse by the scant opportunities to continue studying after high school in urban areas, while in rural areas even finishing high school can be impossible. One answer would be for the government to design and implement a long-term program to strengthen the quality and availability of education in the region. Supporting access in rural areas, improving education quality in urban ones and better funding opportunities for students to go to university should be at the heart of such a plan.

### C. *Weak Governance*

The civilian governing systems along the Pacific coast are generally weak, making them far from able to organise life in local communities. This allows armed groups to use violence and their permanent presence to impose their own form of rule.<sup>151</sup> Armed groups also directly attack civilian governance mechanisms, principally community councils and indigenous reservations, thereby weakening them as a means of taking their place.

Local governments face numerous problems in their efforts to improve the lives of citizens and gain public support, foremost among them a lack of resources. Most oversee “category six” municipalities, meaning they are so poor that the bulk of their budgets stems from national government transfers. In the words of the mayor from a municipality of just over 5,000 people, “in local taxes, we never get more than \$20,000 a year; usually we get \$10,000”.<sup>152</sup> Short of money, local authorities typically lack the means to invest or respond to humanitarian emergencies.<sup>153</sup> Matters are made worse by the high price of gasoline needed for river travel and in some places the economic booms triggered by illegal business, which inflate local prices. Much of the money transferred to municipalities for government functioning ends up spent on local officials’ transport.<sup>154</sup>

Corruption plagues local and departmental authorities. In Buenaventura, the last four mayors have either been found guilty of corruption or are in jail while contesting charges on corruption, and Tumaco’s current and previous mayor also face similar charges, though they too deny them.<sup>155</sup> Toward the end of 2018, national authorities arrested the previous mayor of Quibdó, capital of Chocó, as well as other members of her administration, on fraud charges, which they continue to deny.<sup>156</sup> Historically, elites have been connected to corruption scandals, some to paramilitar-

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<sup>151</sup> There are 117 officially approved Community Councils for Afro-Colombian communities in the region and 280 Indigenous Reservations, with extensive autonomy to govern their territories; as well as offices of national and local government. “Conpes 3847”, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>152</sup> Crisis Group interview, mayor of Carmen del Darién, 25 October 2018.

<sup>153</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian aid worker, Apartadó, 22 October 2018 and Bogotá, 20 March 2019; Tumaco, 3 March 2018; Quibdó, 14 March 2019.

<sup>154</sup> Crisis Group interview, priest, Timbiquí, Cauca, 29 January 2019; mayor, Carmen del Darién, 25 October 2018; humanitarian aid worker, Bogotá, 19 March 2019.

<sup>155</sup> Crisis Group interview, public prosecutor’s office, 19 February 2019. “Excalcalde de Buenaventura fue condenado a 18 años y 9 meses de prisión”, *El país*, 4 August 2015. “Eliécer Arboleda es el cuarto alcalde de Buenaventura encarcelados por corrupción”, *Realidad 360*, 24 April 2018. “Así se esfumaron \$5.300 millones para damnificados en Tumaco”, *La Silla Vacía*, 9 February 2019.

<sup>156</sup> “A la cárcel excalcaldesa de Quibdó por caso de XX Juegos Nacionales”, *El Tiempo*, 12 February 2019.

ies, others to drug traffickers, and a number of them have reportedly used patronage politics to stay in power in Chocó.<sup>157</sup> Communities constantly complain about government corruption, which seriously undermines state legitimacy.<sup>158</sup> In Tumaco and Buenaventura, judicial institutions are overwhelmed with caseloads, and also corrupt. Not crediting state authorities with much legitimacy, many locals prefer to go to armed groups for dispute resolution.<sup>159</sup>

Armed groups also occasionally cite corruption to justify violence. The ELN in Chocó, for example, kidnapped the mayor of Alto Baudó in December 2014, accusing him of corruption and promising to bring him to justice.<sup>160</sup> The group looked to do the same with Patrocinio Sánchez, former governor of Chocó, kidnapped in 2013, and his brother, Odín Sánchez. Both men had already been found guilty by Colombian courts of corruption-related charges.<sup>161</sup> Meanwhile, the United Guerrillas of the Pacific and People for Order in Nariño use the issue to denounce the state and persuade communities to support them.<sup>162</sup>

Illegal armed groups also look to weaken civilian governance bodies, including community councils, the legally recognised governance institution for Afro-Colombian communities, because they are competitors for territorial control.<sup>163</sup> Studies have shown that where councils exist, household income has increased, whereas in Afro-Colombian lands with no council it has slightly fallen; Afro-Colombian leaders also argue that they have become better organised and more able to defend their territories.<sup>164</sup> However, paramilitaries working with political and economic elites in the mid-to-late 1990s displaced members of the first legally recognised Community Councils, and did the same to other councils over the following decade, impairing their ability to provide governance in their territories.<sup>165</sup> The FARC also murdered

<sup>157</sup> See Corte Suprema de Justicia: Sala de Casación Penal, “Aprobado acta No.260”, 27 July 2011. Corte Suprema de Justicia, “Radicado No. 7380”, 20 October 2005. “Corte Suprema dejó en firme condena contra el excongresista Carlos Alberto Escobar por ‘parapolítica’”, *El Espectador*, 3 February 2016. Javier Duque Daza, “El Chocó: clanes familiares, paramilitarismo y corrupción desafiada (primera parte)”, *Razón Pública*, 4 June 2017.

<sup>158</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Tumaco, 22, 24, 25, 26 and 29 September 2018; Guapi, 28 January 2019; Timbiquí, 29 January 2019; Quibdó, 13 March 2019; Buenaventura, 13 and 14 February 2019.

<sup>159</sup> Crisis Group interview, local authorities, Buenaventura, 13 February 2019. “Violencia reciclada”, Human Rights Watch, 13 December 2018. “Capturan a 15 funcionarios de la Fiscalía por corrupción”, *El Tiempo*, 28 March 2017.

<sup>160</sup> Ejército de Liberación Nacional, “Detención y juicio al alcalde de piedepató, departamento del chocó”, 1 January 2015.

<sup>161</sup> “La paradójica figura del excongresista Odín Sánchez Montes de Oca”, *Verdad Abierta*, 2 February 2017.

<sup>162</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community members, San Juan – Pueblo Nuevo, Tumaco, 23 September 2018; GUP mid-level leader, Tumaco, 27 September 2018. Crisis Group fieldwork, Tumaco, 1 February 2019.

<sup>163</sup> The councils were formally recognised in Law 70 of 1993. Crisis Group interview, government officials, Bogotá, 15 February 2019.

<sup>164</sup> Ximena Peña, María Alejandra Vélez, Juan Camilo Cardenas and Natalia Perdomo, “La Propiedad Colectiva Mejora las Inversiones de los Hogares: Lecciones de la Titulación de Tierras a las Comunidades Afrocolombianas”, Documento Cede, July 2016.

<sup>165</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian aid workers, Apartadó, 22 October 2018; church official, Apartadó, 23 October 2018.

legal representatives from the Alto Mira y Frontera Community Council in Tumaco, as did Guacho before he was killed late last year.<sup>166</sup> Some Afro-Colombian leaders and activists say that armed groups, and the money they offer, have “co-opted” other leaders, dividing the Afro-Colombian movement.<sup>167</sup>

Violence and pressure against ethnic governance mechanisms continue to this day. Leaders of Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities are compelled to deal directly with armed groups operating in their territories. While some communities have resisted, others find it more difficult to do so, especially if armed groups portray themselves as protectors and manage illicit businesses from which some locals benefit.<sup>168</sup> Armed groups frequently look to become the prime authorities in these territories. They may threaten the most influential community leaders, forcing them from the territory.<sup>169</sup> When a new armed group seizes control, it often assumes that local leaders collaborated with the previous occupiers, a pretext for targeted killings.<sup>170</sup>

Illegal activities also weaken traditional authorities. Armed groups often bring in outsiders to assist in illicit trades: farmers who are neither Afro-Colombian nor indigenous grow coca or harvest timber illegally in northern Chocó, while in Cauca recent arrivals from Buenaventura and Antioquia mine gold.<sup>171</sup> Armed groups’ support for these outsiders and the backing groups can gain from some inhabitants by allowing them to participate in illegal business make it hard for community bodies to remove these newcomers.<sup>172</sup> These outsiders work for armed groups and can take advantage of these connections in their dealings with local communities by making credible threats of violence.

Protecting and strengthening Community Councils and indigenous reservations along the Pacific coast should be a priority for the government and international actors, especially the U.S. and EU, which already support efforts to bolster local institutions.<sup>173</sup> Some activists seek official support for creating or strengthening collective protection bodies, known as guards, with the indigenous guard in northern Cauca held up as an example.<sup>174</sup> Their belief is that the guards’ collective nature rooted in a

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<sup>166</sup> Crisis Group interview, community leader, Tumaco, 25 September 2018.

<sup>167</sup> Crisis Group interviews, human rights defenders, Guapi and Apartadó, 28 January 2019 and 22 October 2018; church officials, Timbiquí and Quibdó, 29 January and 14 March 2019; Afro-Colombian leader, Bogotá, 22 March 2019; Afro-Colombian community leader, Tumaco, 25 September 2018.

<sup>168</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders and church official, Timbiquí, 29 January 2019; human rights defender, Guapi, 28 January 2019; humanitarian aid worker, Bogotá, 19 March 2019; international community representative, Quibdó, 14 March 2019; Tumaco, 3 March 2018.

<sup>169</sup> Crisis Group interview, community leader, Quibdó, 13 March 2019; Crisis Group fieldwork, Tumaco, 15 July 2017.

<sup>170</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian aid worker, Apartadó, 22 October 2018. Crisis Group telephone interview, community leader, Tumaco, 18 March 2019.

<sup>171</sup> Crisis Group interview, community leaders, Riosucio, 24 October 2018.

<sup>172</sup> Crisis Group interviews, church official, Timbiquí, 29 January 2019; community leaders, Timbiquí, 29 January 2019; human rights defender, Guapi, 28 January 2019.

<sup>173</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Riosucio, 24 October 2018; church official, Tumaco, 1 February 2019; community leaders, Timbiquí, 29 January 2019.

<sup>174</sup> Crisis Group interviews, ethnic leaders, Quibdó, 13 and 14 March 2019. Guards are collective bodies used by mainly indigenous groups, but also by Afro-Colombian and campesino organisa-

shared ethnic identity gives them the authority and power needed to confront armed groups. However, the killing of local leaders has led the central government so far to emphasise individual protection measures, coordinated by the National Protection Unit (or UNP in Spanish).<sup>175</sup> Despite the provision of armed bodyguards, bulletproof vests and cars, local activists insist these offer little deterrence against attacks.<sup>176</sup>

Local leaders also argue that communications infrastructure is vital to enable leaders to maintain regular contact with communities should they have to go into exile, alert authorities in the event of emergencies, and mitigate armed groups' efforts to oversee information flows in and out of inaccessible rural areas. Better communication among villages in rural areas could help warn of movements by armed groups.<sup>177</sup>

Finally, armed actors' ability to operate is partly related to chronic weaknesses in judicial institutions. In Tumaco, only one "specialised judge" can handle cases such as homicides.<sup>178</sup> His backlog is over 500 cases. The only prosecutor who investigates extortion, forced disappearances and displacement in the city had over 1,600 cases as of August 2018.<sup>179</sup> In Buenaventura, according to local authorities, there are 25 prosecutors for 17,000 cases, and a woeful lack of police to support or lead investigations.<sup>180</sup> The government and foreign donors such as the U.S. and EU should focus on strengthening local judicial authorities' capacity to act and resolve cases by creating career incentives for prosecutors work in these areas, or providing funds to hire more staff in local attorneys general offices.

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tions, as a way to protect their territories. Armed only with wooden, decorated batons, they confront armed actors to try to protect their land from violence, with variable levels of success.

<sup>175</sup> The National Protection Unit, created in 2011, is in charge of analysing the levels of risk social leaders or movements face and providing them with some sort of protection, if necessary.

<sup>176</sup> This occurred in the case of José Jaír Cortés, in Tumaco, in October 2017, for example, who had received a bulletproof vest from the UNP, but was still killed.

<sup>177</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Tumaco, 10 July 2017; Timbiquí, 29 January 2019; Riosucio, 24 and 26 October 2018.

<sup>178</sup> "Violencia reciclada: Abusos por grupos disidentes de las FARC en Tumaco, en la costa pacífica de Colombia", Human Rights Watch, 13 December 2018.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Crisis Group interview, government official, Buenaventura, 19 February 2019.

## V. Security and Beyond

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Along the Pacific coast, national government policy focuses on three core issues. The first of these, and the government's paramount concern, is security, with Tumaco one of five "Strategic Zones of Comprehensive Intervention". The second involves initiatives deriving from the peace agreement that the Duque administration has decided to support: the local development plans, called Development Plans with Territorial Focus (PDETs in Spanish), and the illicit crop substitution plan. Finally, the government continues to emphasise economic development in the region, while considering it subordinate to the quest for greater international economic competitiveness. As it pursues these objectives, the government should focus on strengthening state and ethnic institutions while effectively protecting the local population.

### A. *Security as a Means and Not an End*

Current government policy rests on the assumption that improving security is a prerequisite to building peace and a stronger state across Colombia. President Duque's approach is an "updated version" of the counter-insurgent clear-hold-build model adopted under Presidents Uribe and Santos between 2006 and 2014.<sup>181</sup> This relies on the military or police clearing territory of an armed group, establishing control and later enabling civilian state institutions to move in. This is a prominent part of the approach embraced in the new government's plans for "Strategic Zones of Comprehensive Intervention", which will feature a variety of phased interventions according to the threat level posed by armed groups.<sup>182</sup> So as not to undermine initiatives related to the 2016 peace accord, the government has accepted that these zones will run alongside local development schemes, or PDETs, and coca crop substitution, in areas where they overlap. This process has already begun in 66 hamlets in Nariño, for example.<sup>183</sup>

According to military officials, clearing the territory of an armed group starts with killing or capturing leaders of armed and criminal groups; they point to the killing of David, United Guerrillas of the Pacific commander in September 2018, and Guacho, Oliver Sinisterra Front commander, three months later as evidence of success.<sup>184</sup> Leaders are easily replaced, however, while their death does not necessarily lead to a more secure population or more stable state presence. David's death in no way affected his group's control of the area where he was based. Two weeks after the operation that killed him and his sister, there was still no state presence in the town, not even a police deployment. Instead, his armed group's control was visible, with

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<sup>181</sup> Crisis Group interview, government official, Bogotá, 12 March 2019.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Crisis Group interview, government official, Bogotá, 12 March 2019. "Ley 1941 de 2018", Congreso de Colombia, 18 December 2018. "Congresistas abren más oportunidades para la Paz", Ecos políticos, 20 November 2018. The PDETs and coca substitution program both stem from the peace deal with the FARC that the Duque government has said it will honour. The first involves sixteen special development plans, designed with the help of local civilian participation, covering 170 municipalities affected by the armed conflict. The illicit crop substitution program provides subsidies and technical assistance to mainly coca farmers in exchange for eradicating their crops.

<sup>184</sup> Crisis Group interview, military official, Tumaco, 28 September 2018.

men with radios and guns walking openly throughout the town. Alias Borojó, who replaced David as head of the armed group, currently lives and operates in the area.<sup>185</sup> After Guacho's death, the main reason the Oliver Sinisterra front has weakened is because of its war with the rival drug trafficker Contador.<sup>186</sup>

Real protection of civilians requires a permanent police presence. Security forces have a short window of opportunity to establish themselves after the state conducts large-scale military operations since armed groups often retreat during these operations but return soon after state forces leave. Colombia's rural police, known as the DICAR (Dirección de Carabineros y Seguridad Rural), are in theory best suited to play this role. However, the DICAR has been unable to expand its presence sufficiently in post-conflict territories due to lack of staffing, underfunding and the military character of a significant part of its forces, which undermines its objective of providing protection and police services to rural populations.<sup>187</sup> The U.S. has already been working on strengthening the DICAR, and should continue to do so.

Furthermore, as Colombia looks to build the state's presence as part of its security policy, establishing civilian institutions that the local population considers legitimate should remain the goal. The police, when or if they move in to zones cleared of armed groups, should seek a balance between winning public trust and its traditional law enforcement role, especially in areas where illegal economies provide income for inhabitants.<sup>188</sup> If the police, for example, move in to a village only to arrest residents for making coca paste or taking part in illegal mining, they may well be repudiated by locals who could turn to armed groups to kick out the authorities.<sup>189</sup> Police and other state bodies should instead combine law enforcement with programs that allow low-level participants in illegal economies to switch to legal activities. In illegal mining areas, for instance, public forces could connect locals to an existing program establishing legal mining rights for small-scale artisanal miners, thus fulfilling their obligations without undermining public support. It could do the same with crop substitution and other development schemes.

Another government objective should be to convince groups of combatants, including FARC dissident and Gaitanista fighters, to demobilise collectively and take part in some form of reintegration program.<sup>190</sup> This would provide young fighters, who are paid the least but risk the most, with a way out of the conflict, and aim to prevent their re-entry into armed violence by assuring them of a sustainable liveli-

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<sup>185</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community representatives, San Juan-Pueblo Nuevo, 23 September 2018.

<sup>186</sup> Crisis Group interviews, drug trafficker, Tumaco, 23 June 2019.

<sup>187</sup> "Situación de los derechos humanos en Colombia", Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia, 4 February 2019, p. 14.

<sup>188</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leader, Tumaco, 22 September 2018; counter-narcotics agent, Tumaco, 5 May 2019.

<sup>189</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leader, Tumaco 22 September 2018; church official, Timbiquí, 29 January 2019; humanitarian aid worker, Quibdó, 14 March 2019.

<sup>190</sup> Colombia has an individual reintegration program, led by the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalisation, into which over 60,000 former combatants have entered since 2003. Additionally, Colombia has a law for "*sometimiento*" (submission) to justice, which implies a de facto disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process.



hood.<sup>191</sup> At present, members of both groups are ineligible for individual reintegration programs.

Moreover, the Duque government has expressed misgivings about expanding potential avenues for armed group demobilisation. In particular, senior officials are concerned about according “political status” to armed groups by permitting their collective or individual demobilisation. Currently, the government rejects a 2018 law on the terms and benefits of surrender by armed groups, which was to have been applied to the Gaitanistas at that time as a result of the progress they had made in negotiations with the government.<sup>192</sup> As a result, there is no politically acceptable legal framework under which any armed group besides the ELN – which, as the FARC were previously, is recognised as a party to an internal conflict – could collectively demobilise. In order to prevent the recurrence of armed conflict along the Pacific coast and the recycling of combatants in emergent factions, the government or Congress should define as soon as possible the means by which FARC dissidents and criminal groups can hand over their arms as a whole.<sup>193</sup>

Doing so should not in principle cause the government great ideological or practical dilemmas. It already recognises these groups as organised armed actors that should be fought according to humanitarian principles of war, and thus, according to Colombian law, they should theoretically qualify for demobilisation.<sup>194</sup> Collective demobilisation by FARC dissident groups also has a precedent. In April 2017, 128 members of the People for Order in Tumaco joined the state’s official reintegration program.<sup>195</sup> Due to continuing violence against them by their former comrades who did not demobilise and a wavering government commitment to the reintegration process, the vast majority of them returned to fighting shortly afterwards.<sup>196</sup> But the desire of some armed group members to demobilise still prevails across many of the armed groups operating in Tumaco, and should help shape future policy.

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<sup>191</sup> This was the case with the FARC under the Uribe and Santos administrations, as ex-combatants in general demobilised by handing themselves over to military or police forces, where they provided information in exchange for benefits. See, for example, Gerson Iván Arias, Natalia Herrera and Carlos Andrés Prieto, “Mandos medios de las FARC y su proceso de desmovilización en el conflicto colombiano: ¿Una apuesta para la paz o para la guerra?”, Fundación Ideas para la Paz, September 2010.

<sup>192</sup> Crisis Group interview, government official, Bogotá, 12 March 2019.

<sup>193</sup> Recently a group of twelve dissidents demobilised in Arauca, though four were minors. They were able to do so, according to press reports, by negotiating a plea bargain with the attorney general’s office, an option that would be challenging to extend to high-level commanders and entire armed groups. See “Se desmovilizan 12 guerrilleros de disidencias de las Farc en Arauca”, *El Tiempo*, 16 July 2019.

<sup>194</sup> “Directiva 15 de 2016”, Ministry of Defence, 22 April 2016. “The War Report: Armed Conflicts in 2017”, Geneva Academy, March 2018. That said, the Duque government is pressing to change the characterisation of Colombia’s security threats from that of an internal armed conflict to a “complex situation”. “El giro que quiere Duque en su relación con la Oficina de DD.HH de la ONU”, *El Espectador*, 20 July 2019.

<sup>195</sup> This process was possible in part because it took place during FARC demobilisation following the peace agreement, and because the fighters were required to show that they had actually belonged to the guerrillas.

<sup>196</sup> Crisis Group interviews, church officials, Tumaco, 2 February 2019; members of People for Order, 1 February 2019.

The current government stance that all doors are closed for now to FARC dissident groups and that some new policy may be devised in the future fosters uncertainty, making it less likely that armed group members will abandon their fight. Dissident fighters cannot demobilise and reintegrate individually under current government policy since they are not recognised as belonging to armed groups with political goals. Finding an acceptable and viable way to allow fighters to demobilise collectively should be a priority.<sup>197</sup> The government should avoid past mistakes from similar processes by providing sustained political support for these initiatives, and ensuring ex-combatants are safe from attack.

Lastly, military and police corruption and collusion with certain armed actors impede progress toward lasting improvements in security, and require stronger judicial oversight if operations are to prove successful over more than the short term. Community leaders point to failures by some military and police officers to fight the Gaitanistas in Chocó due to alleged collusion between officers and the criminal group, though both forces deny this corruption extends to more than a small number of individuals who now face disciplinary proceedings.<sup>198</sup>

Locals and activists in Nariño have also aired serious allegations of collusion between the public forces and drug traffickers, which the armed forces deny as well.<sup>199</sup> Disputes among armed groups can generate such ties, since state forces may opt to ally with one side or another. Indeed, recent reporting by *The New York Times* suggest that such tactical alignments in the battlefield may have enjoyed top military approval.<sup>200</sup> Stronger independent judicial oversight of security forces would buttress efforts to reinforce state legitimacy and the focus on propagating the rule of law promoted by President Duque.<sup>201</sup> The ombudsman has opened investigations into

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<sup>197</sup> Crisis Group interviews, church leader, Tumaco, 2 February 2019; community leader, Tumaco, 1 February 2019.

<sup>198</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Riosucio, 23 and 24 October 2018; Carmen del Darién, 25 October 2018; international organisation representative, Quibdó, 14 March 2019; community leader, Quibdó, 13 March 2019. “¿‘Gaitanistas’ avanzan en Chocó sin freno de la Fuerza Pública?”, op. cit. For the military response to these claims, see “No hay connivencia con Clan del Golfo en el Bajo Atrato: general Ramírez”, *El Espectador*, 7 June 2019.

<sup>199</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Tumaco, 28 September 2018; precursor chemicals trafficker, Tumaco, 24 September 2018; military officer, 28 September 2018.

<sup>200</sup> Military leaders allegedly made this recommendation to other officers. “Colombia army’s new kill orders send chills down ranks”, *The New York Times*, 18 May 2019. The article revealed the statements allegedly made by certain military officers in meetings with subordinates recommending working with armed groups to fight rival groups when necessary. It also revealed a series of directives that, when combined with the existing pressure for results from superiors, threatened to recreate the perverse incentives that led members of Colombia’s armed forces to kill thousands of civilians and present them as guerrillas killed in combat, mainly between 2002 and 2010. Also, the government reportedly lowered the threshold of certainty based on which members of the armed forces could carry out an operation to kill someone from 85 per cent certainty to 60 per cent. The Ministry of Defence rescinded the directives, but there is no information that it has reestablished previous levels of certainty needed to justify an operation.

<sup>201</sup> Legality and the Rule of Law are one of the pillars of the Duque administration’s political goals. “Unidad, legalidad y emprendimiento: el propósito del gobierno de Iván Duque”, *Las 2 Orillas*, 7 August 2018.

the security forces regarding possible connections with assassins in the killing of social leaders, and should do the same regarding collusion with armed groups.<sup>202</sup>

### B. *Honouring the Peace Agreement*

President Duque's administration has pledged to honour the local development plans created by the 2016 peace accord, the PDETs, although officials working on the issue warn that it would be impossible to implement them completely due to their complexity and financial constraints.<sup>203</sup> The government has finalised these plans and incorporated them in the country's four-year National Development Plan; the authorities are now in the process of creating a list of "viable" projects out of the 32,000 initiatives proposed by communities.

The exact criteria the Office of the High Counsellor for Stabilisation, in charge of implementing the PDETs, will use to decide on the viability of these projects are unclear, but do include overall cost as well as the connection between each initiative and other policy priorities.<sup>204</sup> Although there are no plans at present to involve local communities in deciding which projects should get the green light and state funding, improving relationships between communities in post-conflict zones and the state will hinge on regular dialogue between the two over issues of local economic development.<sup>205</sup> The funding of the PDETs is a crucial issue: after being pressured politically, the government budgeted around \$12 billion to implement aspects of the peace agreement over the course of the Duque administration.<sup>206</sup> The PDETs, over fifteen years, will cost about \$25 billion, or roughly \$1.66 billion per year.<sup>207</sup> Currently, the Office of the High Counsellor for Stabilisation is looking for international funding to complement state funds. Given that the government argues that the main factor fueling security problems is lack of a state presence, it would do well to increase its allocation for state building in upcoming annual budgets.<sup>208</sup>

Crop substitution is another crucial initiative created by the peace accord, with great relevance to the Pacific coast. Although the government has opted to back the program, albeit with reservations, substitution has confronted logistical and political obstacles, including delays in support for alternative livelihoods for families who have signed up.<sup>209</sup> Following shifts in the program's management, it is now under the

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<sup>202</sup> In Spanish, La Procuraduría and La Fiscalía respectively. "Procuraduría investigará supuestos vínculos de Fuerza Pública con crímenes a líderes sociales", *El Espectador*, 11 July 2018.

<sup>203</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Bogotá, 12 March 2019, 26 June 2019.

<sup>204</sup> Crisis Group interviews, church official, Iscuandé, 31 January 2019; government officials, Bogotá, 26 June 2019. Some of these projects may not be possible to implement within three years, but still can be carried out in the ten- to fifteen-year timeline for the PDETs. It is unclear what will happen with projects considered "unviable".

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> "Conpes 3932: Lineamientos Para La Articulación Del Plan Marco De Implementación Del Acuerdo Final Con Los Instrumentos De Planeación, Programación Y Seguimiento A Políticas Públicas Del Orden Nacional Y Territorial", National Planning Department, 29 June 2018, p. 65. The sums are calculated at current exchange rates of 3,200 COP for \$1 USD.

<sup>208</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Bogotá, 12 March 2019, 26 June 2019. The total annual budget for Colombia for 2019 is around \$81 billion, at an exchange rate of 3,200 COP per dollar.

<sup>209</sup> Crisis Group interview, drug policy expert, Bogotá, 14 September 2018.

control of Emilio Archila, High Counsellor for Stabilisation. The government hopes this will speed up its implementation and correct flaws in its design by centralising efforts under one institution.<sup>210</sup>

At the same time, the program has sparked tensions in some communities and with armed groups, imperilling the security of community leaders spearheading the scheme: various such leaders in Tumaco have been killed by armed groups and even by community members due to frustration over lack of progress in the program, for which they were blamed.<sup>211</sup> To avoid further bloodshed and to continue weakening the illegal economies that fund violence, the government ought to speed up substitution efforts by employing more staff in the field, prioritise technical assistance for farmers' alternative livelihoods, and decide what to do with communities whose subsidies are set to end but that have yet to establish other means to earn a living.

President Duque's drug policy aims to eradicate the largest amount of coca crops possible, first by increasing the target for forced manual eradication of the crops, and second by envisaging the introduction of an adjusted aerial fumigation program. The Constitutional Court recently clarified the conditions it had established in 2017 for the fumigation program to be reinstated, which the government seemed eager to do even before the court's statement.<sup>212</sup> For both enhanced manual eradication and a reintroduction of aerial fumigation, Duque has received the U.S. government's full support. While Colombian authorities expect that forced eradication and voluntary substitution of coca can proceed simultaneously, as they have for the past two years with difficulties, the government and the U.S. prefer to rely on enhanced eradication due to its short-term effects on crop sizes.<sup>213</sup>

In reality, however, the substitution program has achieved far more sustainable results: only 0.6 per cent of those who participate in substitution schemes go on to replant coca, while the proportion of those who replant coca after forced eradication is 40 per cent.<sup>214</sup> Substitution, even with its inherent risks, is more likely to achieve a lasting change in the practices of rural inhabitants in Tumaco and other coca-growing zones on the Pacific. Moves in the direction of enhanced manual and aerial eradication also run the risk of discrediting the state in coca-growing communities without

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<sup>210</sup> "¿En qué va la sustitución de cultivos ilícitos? Desafíos, dilemas actuales y la urgencia de un consenso: Informe 6", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, April 2019.

<sup>211</sup> In 2018, nineteen community activists involved in illicit crop substitution were killed. In Tumaco, two have been killed this year so far, both along the road from Tumaco to Pasto. One version around the killing of an activist was that locals murdered her due to delays in the implementation of the program, for which she was blamed. In 2018, five community activists were killed in Tumaco. "La Naranja Mecánica", Somos Defensores, April 2019. Crisis Group interview, community leader, Tumaco, 2 February 2019.

<sup>212</sup> Crisis Group interview, counter-narcotics police, Tumaco, 5 May 2019. "Auto 387/19", Constitutional Court, 18 July 2019. "Por avión que sea Duque, difícil que el glifosato despegue este año", *La Silla Vacía*, 27 June 2019.

<sup>213</sup> As of February 2019, the 67,500 families in the program who grew coca had eradicated around 35,000 hectares. During 2018, the armed forces forcibly eradicated 60,000 hectares. "¿En qué va la sustitución de cultivos ilícitos?: Desafíos, dilemas actuales y la urgencia de un consenso", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, April 2019. "Logros de la política de defensa y seguridad", Ministry of Defense, May 2019, p. 41. Juan Carlos Garzón, "A Duque no le cuadran las metas de reducción de la coca ¿cómo ayudarlo a ajustarlas?", *La Silla Vacía*, 21 February 2019.

<sup>214</sup> "Nueva polémica por énfasis del Gobierno en erradicación forzada", *El Tiempo*, 14 June 2019.

addressing the reasons that farmers turn to cultivating coca, notably a lack of viable alternatives. Communities could also be nudged closer to armed groups offering protection against eradication, thus limiting the government's plan to strengthen institutions.

### C. *International Actors*

Foreign countries and international bodies, notably the U.S., EU, the UN Mission and agencies, and the Organization of American States' Mission to Support the Peace Process, can help the Pacific coast overcome its chronic violence. Fundamental to this is support for local development that is not circumscribed to improving Colombia's international commercial competitiveness, but aims to implement the peace accord and improve economic livelihoods, state and ethnic community governance, and education.

Education in particular is an area where international actors can provide significant support. Long-term projects in the region have improved access to and the quality of education for students in rural areas, helping prevent recruitment by armed groups and participation in illegal economies. These projects, however, have only been able to work with a handful of schools, and by themselves are unable to address flaws in the region's entire educational system. Even so, they are worth considering replicating.<sup>215</sup> The government has a strategy to create "protective environments" for schools as a way to prevent recruitment, which donors should consider supporting.<sup>216</sup> Given the difficulties students face in accessing higher education, donors should offer scholarships to those looking to study in universities. Foreign assistance enabled the construction of the National University campus in Tumaco, and could support existing initiatives such as that led by the University of the Andes providing scholarships for students from the Pacific coast.<sup>217</sup>

Outside stakeholders should also increase their backing for indigenous reservations and Community Councils.<sup>218</sup> Their support needs to be negotiated and designed with local ethnic communities, and should go beyond simple training in issues such as human rights and the Colombian constitution, as in the past.<sup>219</sup> It should continue to work with these communities to strengthen their ability to govern their territory, and help communities choose effective self-protection mechanisms and measures for endangered leaders and activists. Foreign donors should also consider supporting state entities that do the same, including the attorney general's office and the Directorate of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous Issues in the Ministry of the Interior, which oversees consultation processes and looks to strengthen Community Councils.<sup>220</sup> They should also continue financial support for the PDETs, while urging the government to find a way to increase its own funding.<sup>221</sup> It should also urge the Office of the

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<sup>215</sup> Crisis Group fieldwork, Quibdó, 13 March 2019.

<sup>216</sup> Crisis Group interview, government official, Bogotá, 12 July 2019.

<sup>217</sup> "Quiero estudiar pacífico", University of the Andes, n.d. "Historia", National University Tumaco Campus, n.d.

<sup>218</sup> Crisis Group interview, foreign diplomats, Bogotá, 18 and 27 June 2019.

<sup>219</sup> Crisis Group interview, humanitarian aid worker, Bogotá, 19 March 2019.

<sup>220</sup> Crisis Group interview, government official, Bogotá, 15 February 2019.

<sup>221</sup> Crisis Group interview, foreign diplomats, Bogotá, 27 June 2019.

High Advisor for Stabilisation to prioritise projects, and include local communities as much as possible in the process.<sup>222</sup>

Coca crop substitution likewise deserves greater international backing, although both the U.S. and EU have so far been unwilling to provide this. The former is concerned money could end up indirectly supporting the FARC, which is still on the U.S. foreign terrorist organisations list. The EU has mainly backed other rural development initiatives. Given that the substitution program as currently designed will end under the Duque administration, the government and international actors – especially the U.S. – should design an alternative development policy that they can use to complement their current focus on eradication. The policy should not start from zero, but build on the progress of the current crop substitution program, and crucially include community participation to guarantee the legitimacy of the project at a local level.

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<sup>222</sup> Crisis Group interview, government official, Bogotá, 26 June 2019.

## **VI. Conclusions**

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The Pacific coast has failed to turn a page on its recent history of conflict and violence despite the landmark peace agreement with the FARC. Proliferating armed groups in Nariño and Cauca, the increasingly dynamic and violent dispute between the ELN and Gaitanistas in Chocó, and booming coca cultivation and illegal gold mining make clear that the promises of ending the conflict and expanding state services to the region have not yet been met.

Poverty, marginalisation and weak government – underwritten by the long-term social and institutional legacies of slavery in a region where Afro-Colombians remain the majority – account for the vulnerability of communities along the Pacific coast to armed groups and illegal economies. International trade has brought a boom to Buenaventura's port, but little of the revenue and employment has trickled down to locals. Instead, in this city and elsewhere along the coast, young people without hope of personal advancement in the formal economy or via the education system have proved easy pickings for armed groups and criminal activities that can offer unrivalled riches and status.

Public and government discontent with the peace accord's perceived failings have in turn generated a shift back to previous militarised approaches. President Duque's policy prioritises dismantling groups and killing leaders, but on the ground should do far more to ensure a respectful, permanent law enforcement presence in conflict-affected areas. The approach toward drug trafficking, meanwhile, rests largely on a return to more intensive crop eradication and counter-narcotic policing, despite the lack of evidence as to its previous success in Colombia and the likelihood that coca-growing communities will feel even further estranged from the state as a result.

The Pacific malaise's roots can best be addressed through the patient work of equitable development conceived in tandem with local communities, institution-building and investment in infrastructure to connect these peripheral areas with the rest of Colombia. The state's official objective of stabilising and pacifying the region through tough security measures ought not lose sight of the conditions that have enabled the spread of armed and criminal groups. Establishing a stable and trustworthy local police presence, enhanced opportunities for combatant demobilisation, fulfilment of the peace accord's pledges on local development and coca substitution, and greater access to secondary and higher education, are all important in reducing violence across the region.

The inhabitants of Colombia's Pacific have coped over years with bloodshed, considerable hardship and the flaws and vices of their politicians. But their resolve is wearing thin. While sustainable change for the region will require the central government's and local leaders' commitment over decades, preventing violence from escalating further will depend on reducing the attractions of a life beyond the law.

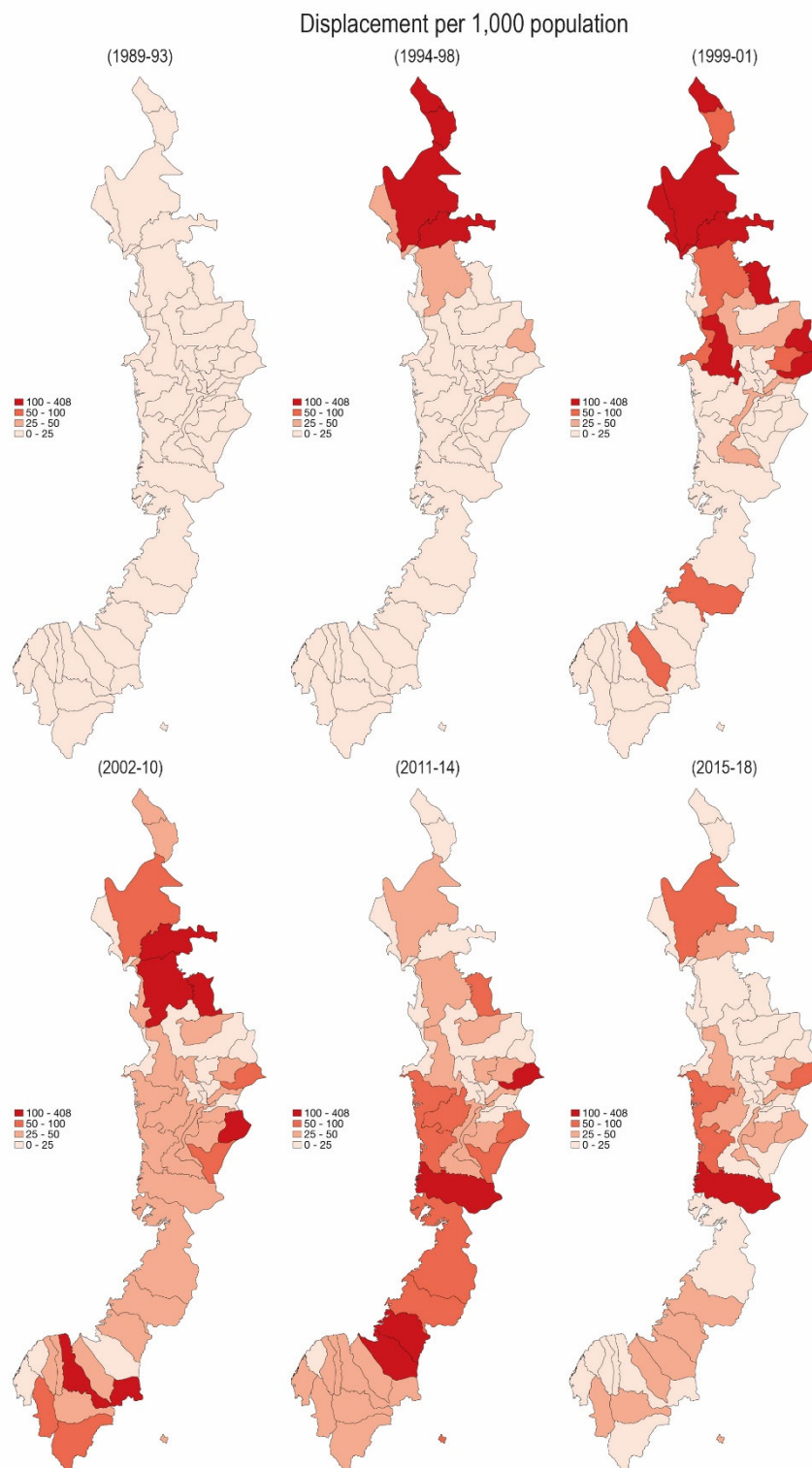
**Bogotá/Brussels, 8 August 2019**

Appendix A: Map of Colombia





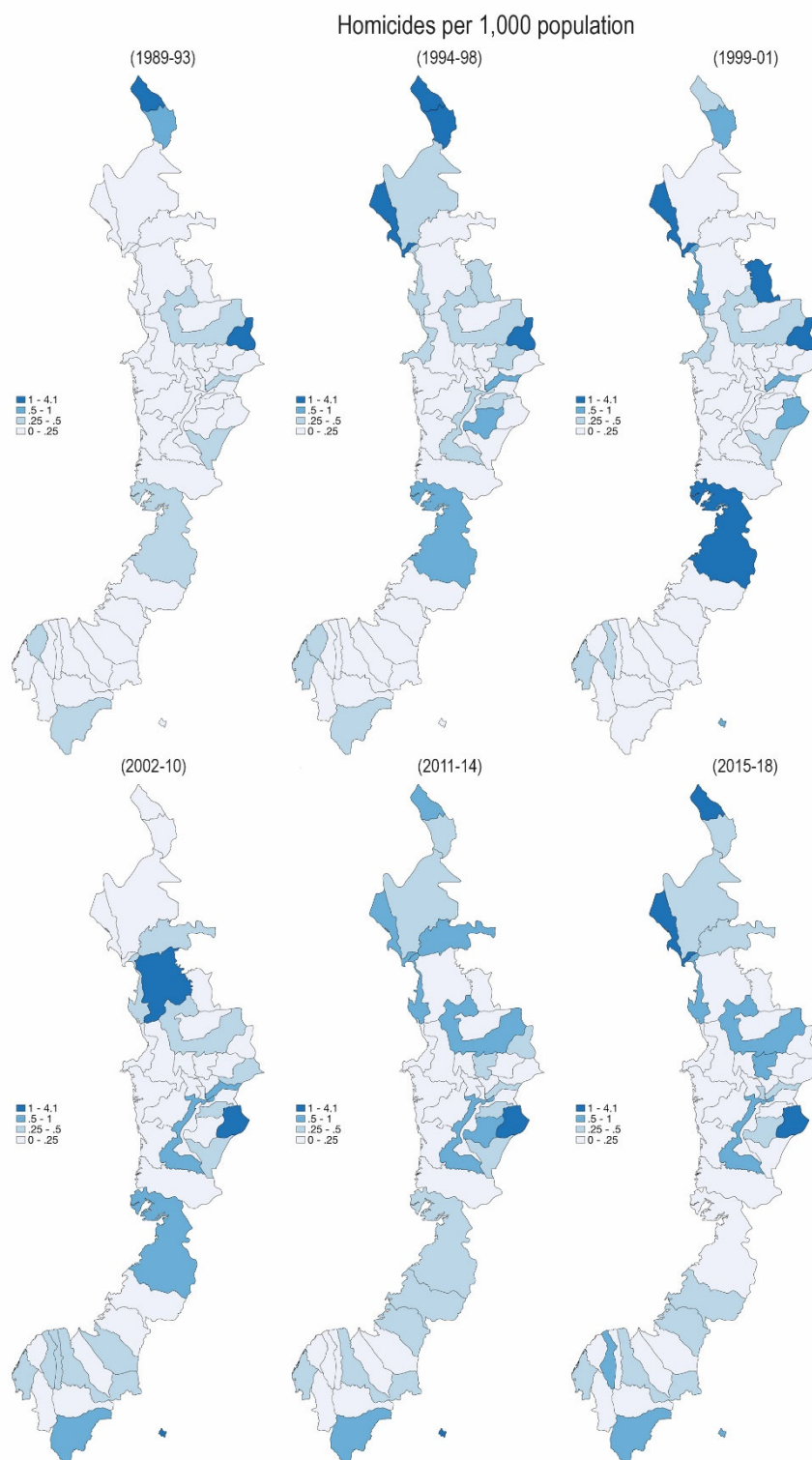
## Appendix B: Displacement Rates in Colombia's Pacific Region 1989-2018



Map generated by Renard Sexton.

Source: "Reporte Ocurrencia Hecho Victimizante", Unit for Comprehensive Attention and Reparation for Victims

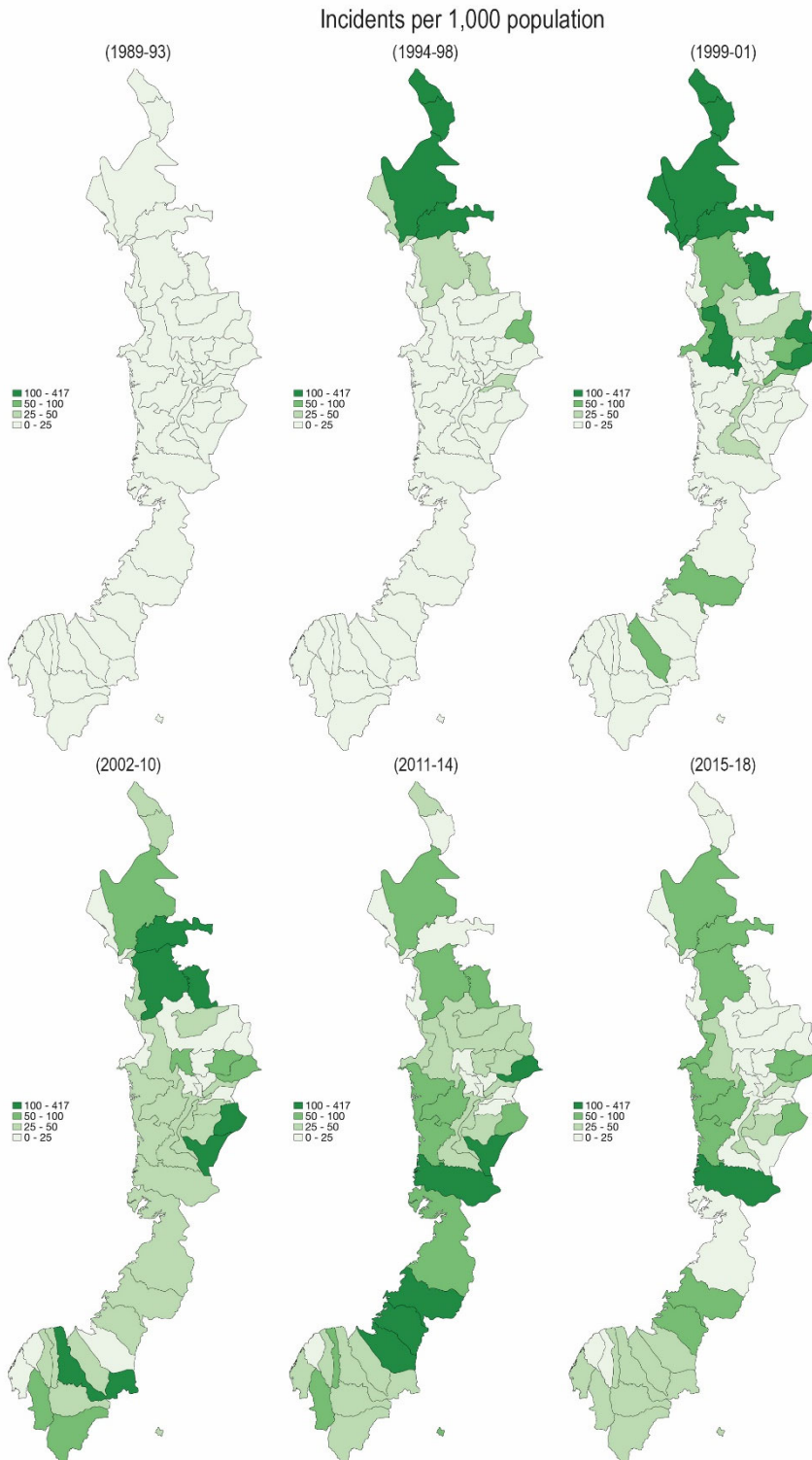
## Appendix C: Homicide Rates in Colombia's Pacific Region 1989-2018



Map generated by Renard Sexton.

Sources: Vice-Presidential Human Rights Program and National Police of Colombia

## Appendix D: Conflict Impact Rates in Colombia's Pacific Region 1989-2018

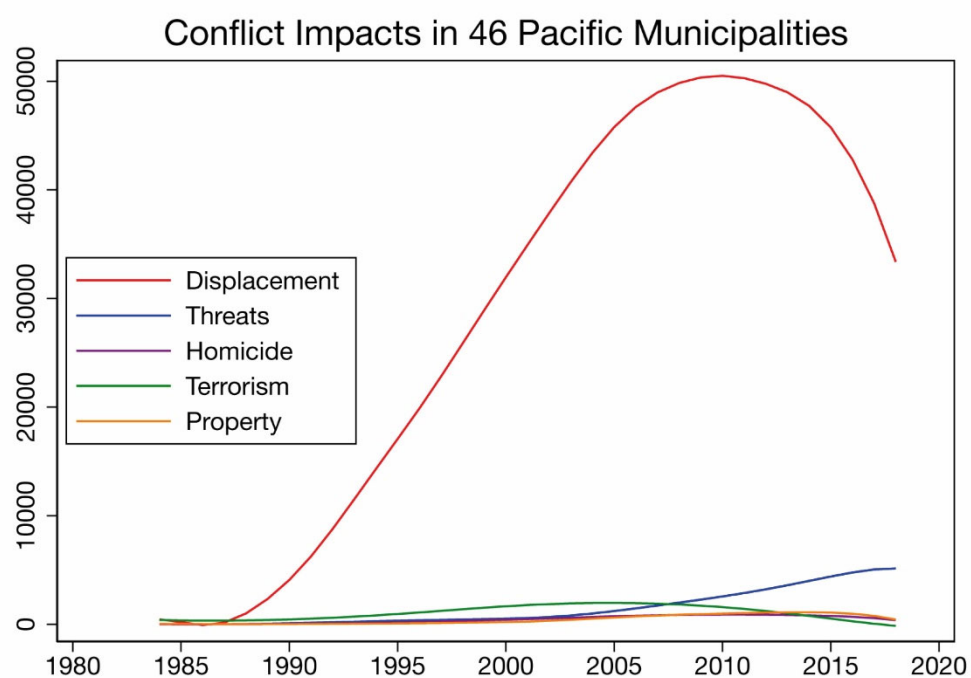


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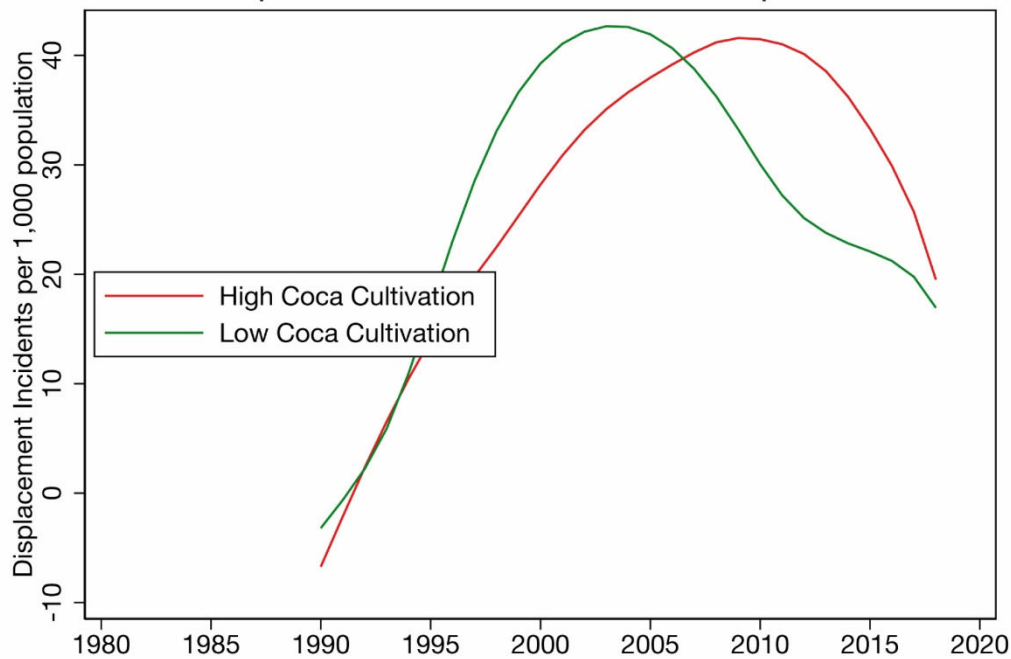
Source: "Reporte Ocurrencia Hecho Victimizante", Unit for Comprehensive Attention and Reparation for Victims.

Appendix E: Homicide, Displacement, Terrorism and Conflict Impact in Colombia's Pacific Region

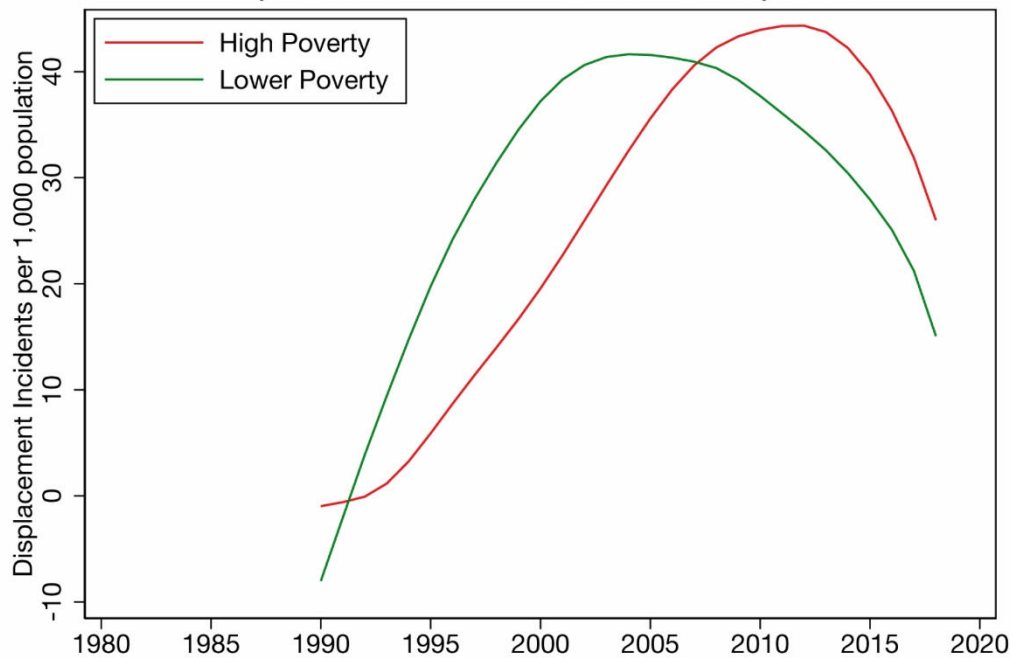
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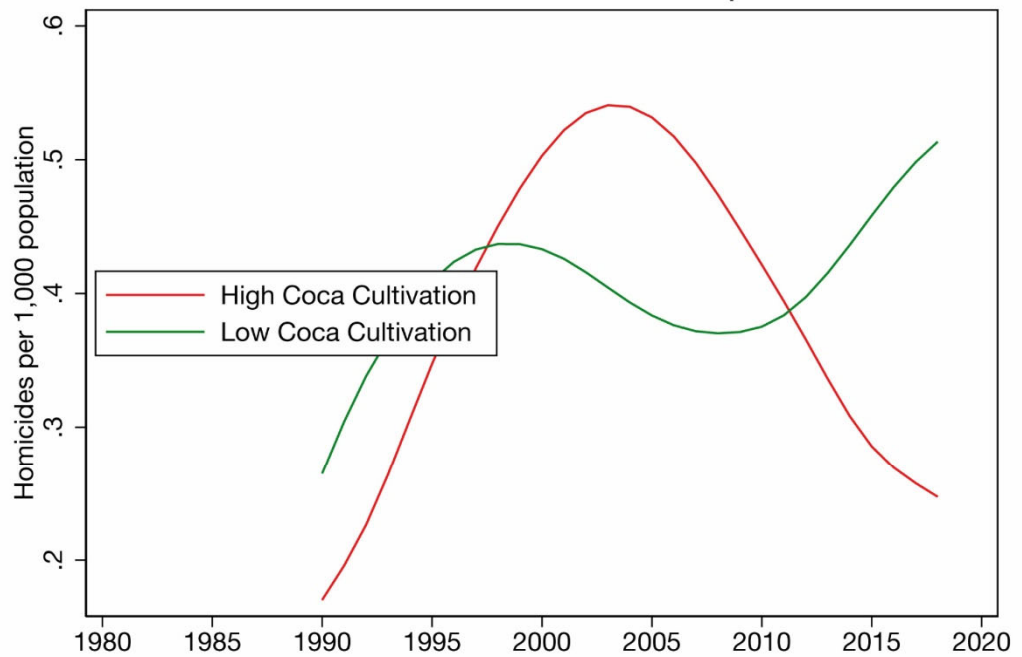
Displacement in 46 Pacific Municipalities



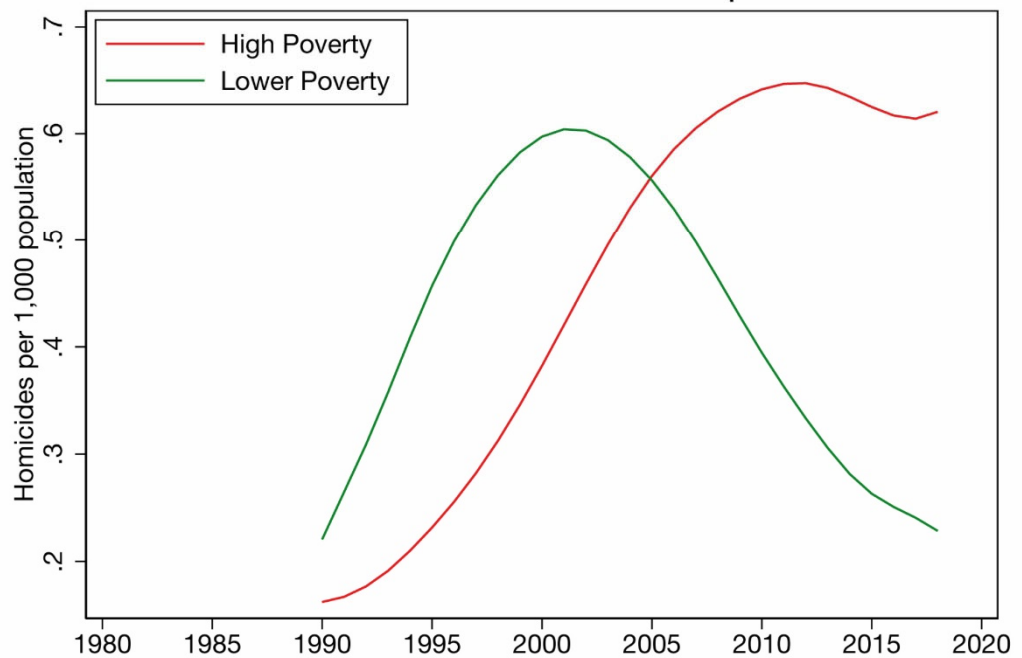
Displacement in 46 Pacific Municipalities



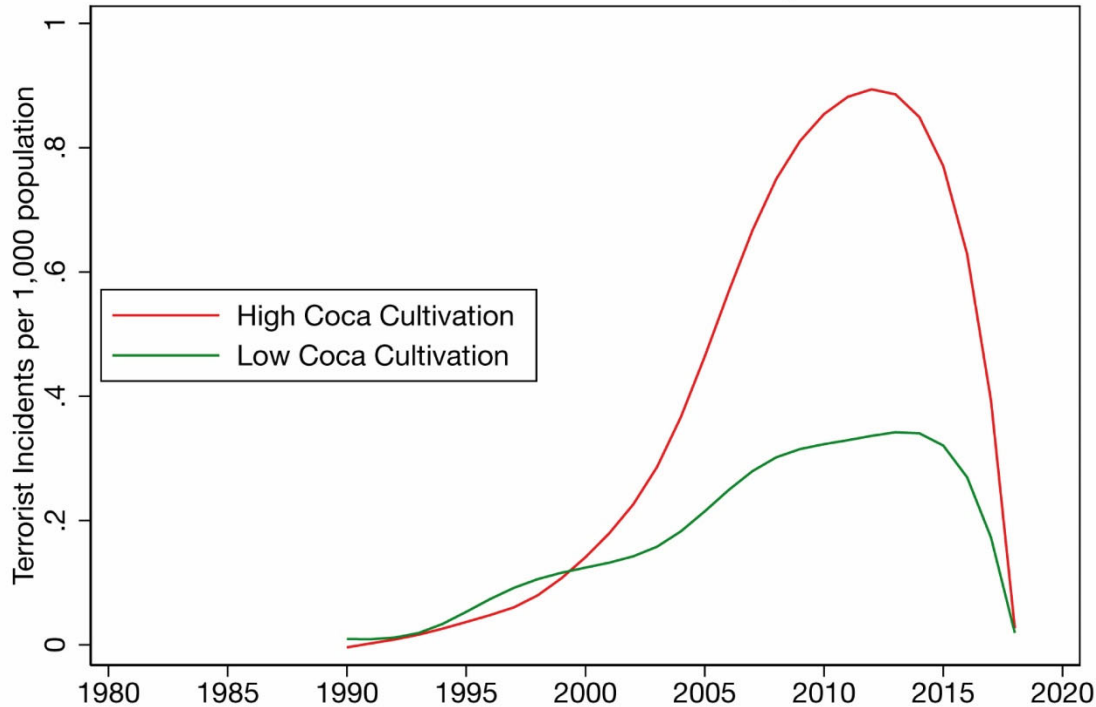
### Homicide in 46 Pacific Municipalities



### Homicide in 46 Pacific Municipalities



### Terrorism in 46 Pacific Municipalities



Graphs generated by Renard Sexton.

**Sources:** Displacement data from Unit for Comprehensive Attention and Reparation for Victims; coca crops data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime; homicides data from Vice-Presidential Human Rights Program and National Police of Colombia; poverty data from National Statistical Administrative Department (DANE); terrorism data from Vice-Presidential Human Rights Program.

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## Appendix F: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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**August 2019**



## Appendix G: Reports and Briefings on Latin America since 2016

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### Special Reports and Briefings

*Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action*, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

*Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

*Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy*, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

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*Crutch to Catalyst? The International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala*, Latin America Report N°56, 29 January 2016 (also available in Spanish).

*Venezuela: Edge of the Precipice*, Latin America Briefing N°35, 23 June 2016 (also available in Spanish).

*Easy Prey: Criminal Violence and Central American Migration*, Latin America Report N°57, 28 July 2016 (also available in Spanish).

*Colombia's Final Steps to the End of War*, Latin America Report N°58, 7 September 2016 (also available in Spanish).

*Venezuela: Tough Talking*, Latin America Report N°59, 16 December 2016 (also available in Spanish).

*In the Shadow of "No": Peace after Colombia's Plebiscite*, Latin America Report N°60, 31 January 2017 (also available in Spanish).

*Veracruz: Fixing Mexico's State of Terror*, Latin America Report N°61, 28 February 2017 (also available in Spanish).

*Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America*, Latin America Report N°62, 6 April 2017 (also available in Spanish).

*Power without the People: Averting Venezuela's Breakdown*, Latin America Briefing N°36, 19 June 2017 (also available in Spanish).

*Colombia's Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace*, Latin America Report N°63, 19 October 2017 (also available in Spanish).

*Venezuela: Hunger by Default*, Latin America Briefing N°37, 23 November 2017 (also available in Spanish).

*El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, Latin America Report N°64, 19 December 2017 (also available in Spanish).

*Containing the Shock Waves from Venezuela*, Latin America Report N°65, 21 March 2018 (also available in Spanish).

*Mexico's Southern Border: Security, Violence and Migration in the Trump Era*, Latin America Report N°66, 9 May 2018 (also available in Spanish).

*Risky Business: The Duque Government's Approach to Peace in Colombia*, Latin America Report N°67, 21 June 2018 (also available in Spanish).

*The Missing Peace: Colombia's New Government and Last Guerrillas*, Latin America Report N°68, 12 July 2018 (also available in Spanish).

*Building Peace in Mexico: Dilemmas Facing the López Obrador Government*, Latin America Report N°69, 11 October 2018 (also available in Spanish).

*Saving Guatemala's Fight Against Crime and Impunity*, Latin America Report N°70, 24 October 2018.

*Friendly Fire: Venezuela's Opposition Turmoil*, Latin America Report N°71, 23 November 2018 (also available in Spanish).

*A Road to Dialogue After Nicaragua's Crushed Uprising*, Latin America Report N°72, 19 December 2018 (also available in Spanish).

*Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South*, Latin America Report N°73, 28 February 2019 (also available in Spanish).

*A Way Out of Latin America's Impasse over Venezuela*, Latin America Briefing N°38, 14 May 2019 (also available in Spanish).

*The Keys to Restarting Nicaragua's Stalled Talks*, Latin America Report N°74, 13 June 2019 (also available in Spanish).

*A Glimmer of Light in Venezuela's Gloom*, Latin America Report N°75, 15 July 2019 (also available in Spanish).

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