



HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES 2017

COLOMBIA REPORT: RESULTS AND PERSPECTIVES

International Committee of the Red Cross



ICRC



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Printed in Bogotá (Colombia) by Espacio Creativo

DELEGATION IN COLOMBIA – Bogotá D.C.

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● Cover photo: View of Manizales neighborhood in San Calixto, Norte de Santander. Andrés Cortés



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Colombia needs ambition to respond to its humanitarian challenges

In 2016, we witnessed a historic event for Colombia: the signing of the Final Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP. Previously, as of the unilateral ceasefire in July 2015, the number of people affected by the conflict dropped significantly, which proves the impact of the decisions made at the negotiating table.

From the very beginning of negotiations, the ICRC recommended not to wait to start working on the mitigation of the humanitarian consequences of the conflict. The interest of the parties to respond to the drama of the victims was materialized in the decision to implement the humanitarian demining, immediate measures to search for missing persons, and the preparation of a protocol to recover underage fighters who belonged in the ranks of the FARC-EP.

However, this goodwill has not been sufficiently translated into substantial progress over the recent months. There is no excuse for postponing the implementation of the Agreement promptly and effectively. It is time to increase the level of ambition and respond to these humanitarian challenges with the urgency that the drama of millions of victims demand.

Nevertheless, the implementation of the Agreement will not suffice to bring violence in Colombia to an end. Building a peaceful country demands the efforts of every individual and it will take decades.

In our role as a neutral intermediary, we stand ready to support negotiations between the government and the ELN, which, if successful, would help alleviate the situation of communities that have not seen the optimism of peace reflected in their daily lives.

The expectation these new talks generate is crucial, but it is not the end of the road.

Armed violence in urban settings, entire populations subject to confinement in areas controlled by armed groups, threats, intra-urban displacement and victims of crossfire are only some manifestations of the continuing violence. This is a growing challenge in a society that seeks to transit from war to peace. We have given all our attention to this phenomenon that causes very serious humanitarian consequences.

Our over-40-year presence in Colombia is the reason to reinforce our commitment to the victims. We will continue to work with them in the most remote areas of the country, as well as in the cities where the consequences of violence remain. We will continue to remind all armed actors of the importance of respecting the rules and humanitarian principles, with the hope that the saddest chapters in Colombian history will not happen again.

Every day, we are encouraged by witnessing the strength of people who, despite having suffered such a long conflict, do not lose hope for a better future when everyone will finally understand that not everything is allowed in war.

There is no excuse for postponing the implementation of the Agreement promptly and effectively.

Christoph Harnisch

Head of the delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Colombia

The breach of humanitarian rules persists in Colombia

During 2016, the ICRC recorded 838 alleged violations of IHL and other humanitarian principles, while observing reconfiguration of armed groups in the field. In this changing context, the organization provided support to more than 152,000 people affected by the conflict and armed violence.



● San Calixto, Norte de Santander (northeast Colombia). The homes in San Calixto have marks of grenade shrapnel and other ammunition.

"I see peace is too far away," Johana replies when asked about her life after the Peace Agreement signed between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP. "There was no calm or cease-fire for us. We never knew what that was," says this resident of San Calixto, in the region of Catatumbo, Norte de Santander, where there is presence of several armed groups. One can see behind her that the wall of her home in the town's main square is full of holes left by bullets and shrapnel from grenades.

Despite the undoubted improvement in the humanitarian situation of the country, the feeling of this mother was also felt in many other regions of Colombia in 2016, where the ICRC recorded 838 alleged violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) and other humanitarian principles that affected more than 18,600 people. The Organization is concerned at the fact that 40% of these incidents affected women and children.

Catatumbo, home to Divanid, also shows the aftermath of crossfire.

One can see also broken roof tiles and traces of gunfire on the walls. Whenever there is a confrontation, she takes her children and leaves town for a while. "But when we can't leave, we stay under the bed ... there is no other way," she says while recalling the August 2016 gunfire that left everyone terrified. "We are afraid to leave the house. We hear a door that closes too hard and we think it's a bombshell," adds Divanid.

For those who have spent their lifetime in Catatumbo, the optimism of peace that is felt in the rest of Colombia is rather limited by the obvious challenges people like Johana and Divanid face every day. In this region, as in many other regions of the country, the presence of armed actors and their effects on the civilian population keep the community amidst a tense calm that when it breaks, it reminds the country that the conflict may have ended for some, but not for everyone.

Therefore, the humanitarian action of the ICRC has not stopped for a second. Last year, 152,000 people benefited from the work done both in the most inaccessible areas of the country and in complex urban centers where victims of the armed conflict and violence also live. Not turning back on our duty to alleviate the suffering of the country is as relevant today as it was when we arrived to Colombia more than four decades ago.

Prospects and challenges for 2017

The bilateral ceasefire between the government and the FARC-EP brought about a significant reduction of armed confrontations. Some areas of the country that used to suffer the effects of constant clashes now witness a situation that has improved significantly.

However, progress in humanitarian concerns needs more speed and concrete actions to respond to the victims. We need sustained political will for those affected by such a long conflict, so they may receive the response and attention they deserve.

Our experience in the field indicates that one of the greatest challenges the country will face in the coming years is the ravages of armed violence in areas where there is presence of different armed groups. Some urban areas where we work such as Medellín, El Bagre, and Buenaventura have been severely affected by this phenomenon.

Another priority, still in effect after the signing of the Peace Agreement is the clarification of the whereabouts of thousands of people who have disappeared and continue to disappear today due to conflict and violence. An aggravating factor is that it is impossible to calculate the real magnitude of the phenomenon. While the National Register of Missing Persons has documented 24,900 victims of alleged forced disappearance, a report by the Center of Historical Memory ensures that there are over 60,600 people missing.

Every war leaves behind unresolved issues. However, disappearances should not be forgotten, even if



Choco (west Colombia). Communities move through Baudó river, an area where there is presence of several armed groups.

they took place decades ago. It is a duty not only for those authorities that are responsible but also for the country as a whole. It is an obligation of every Colombian to be supportive towards the families awaiting news of their loved ones.

Another concern of the ICRC is the silence and fear surrounding victims of sexual violence in the context of conflict and violence. This silence translates into significant underreporting of information; as it is expressed by the victims themselves who shared their stories with the ICRC. The emotional and physical scars left by this practice prohibited by IHL will never disappear. During 2016, there was an alarm on cases of gang rapes and its impact on several generations. Sometimes grandmothers, mothers, and daughters share a tragic history of aggression.

Another consequence thousands of Colombians still suffer is the presence of improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war. This type of hazard is a latent danger in urban and rural areas where the effects of war have been suffered for decades.

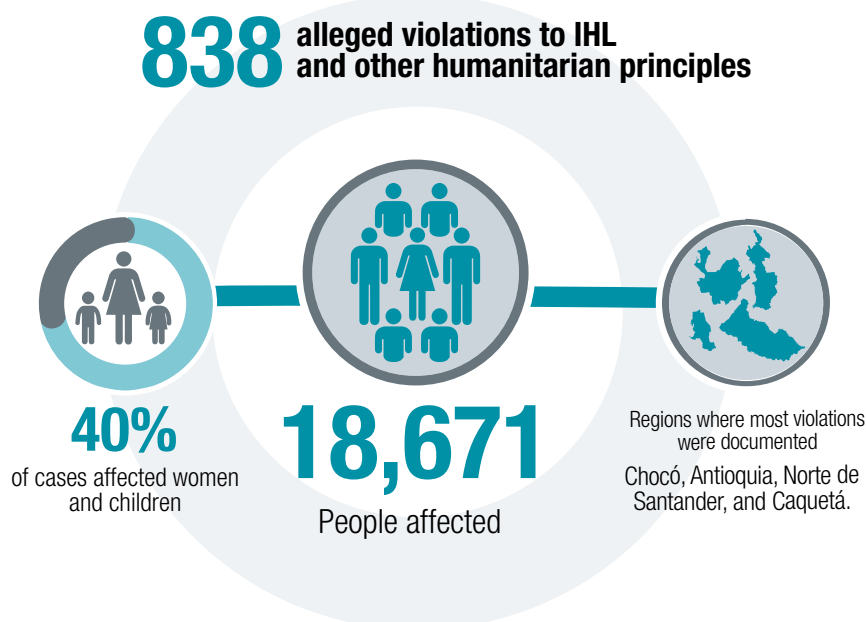
Although some regions in the country have already benefited from demining programs, it will take years to clean the affected territory. Additionally, there is no accurate data on the size and location of these threats; plus, the direct victims and their families need support and assistance throughout a great deal of their lives.

The everyday reality on the ground reminds us constantly that the presence of these artifacts is an ongoing challenge. On September 26, 2016, the same day the country was witnessing the signing ceremony of the Agreement between the Government and the FARC-EP in Cartagena, a child died and another one was wounded as they walked through an area contaminated with explosive devices in a pathway at Algeciras, Huila. Considering the unrest people feel in a country where every step they take can be a risk, it is important to strengthen prevention and humanitarian aid to those who have had to restrict their mobility and change their way of life because of the fear of these artifacts.

We need constant political will so that the victims of such a long conflict receive the response and attention they deserve.

The breach of humanitarian rules in 2016

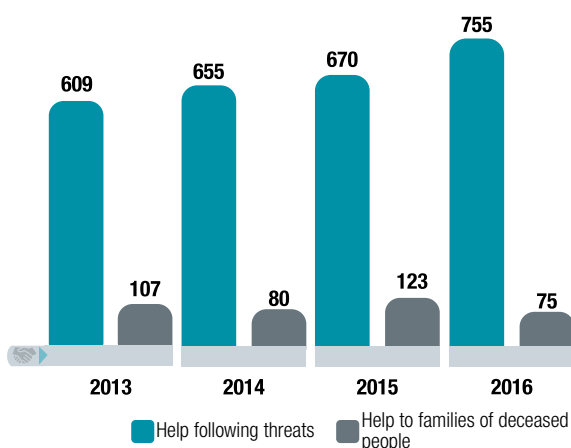
Cases documented by the ICRC on the 22 areas where its activities are focused.
Not all of these incidents occurred during 2016 nor should they be interpreted as a national trend.



A violation of international humanitarian law or other humanitarian principles is a violation of rules such as the protection of civilians. Some of the most serious cases are displacement, sexual violence, homicides of protected persons, or torture, which are considered war crimes and are not subject to amnesty. The ICRC always talks about 'possible' or 'alleged' violations because it is not part of its role to investigate or prosecute those guilty of such acts.

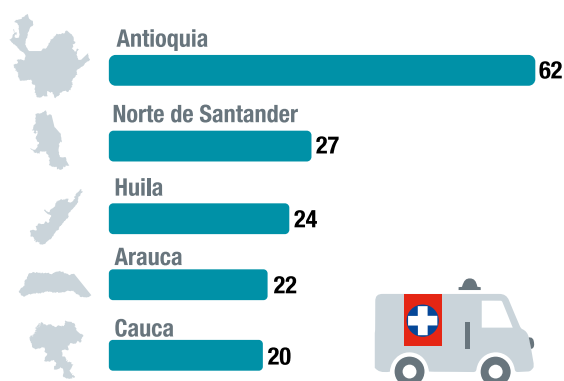
Victims of killings and threats need constant support

During 2016, we continued to help those who have been threatened and have had to flee away from their homes in search of a safe place, as well as the families of people who died because of the armed conflict and violence.



232 Infringements and incidents jeopardized the work of the Medical Mission in 2016

Regions where the Medical Mission was most affected



Source: ICRC Colombia. The data reflects the cases documented by the ICRC in areas where its work is concentrated and do not necessarily reflect national trends of victims' records.

Finally, the Colombian State must promptly address the humanitarian problems arisen from the crisis in the prison facility system. During 2016, the detention conditions of individuals deprived from their liberty in Colombia did not improve, but rather worsened in some cases. This demonstrates the unwillingness of the State when facing its obligations to more than 119,500 detainees in the country.

Beyond words in paper

"Peace is not just to put the guns down, but the State must also help civilians. We don't have any roads or aqueduct here, there are no jobs, there is no work. This all creates violence," said a community leader in Arauca who declined to be named. "What's going to happen to us?" He asked. Many of the communities we worked with in 2016 share this same question.

2017 also marks the beginning of the public phase of the talks between the Government and the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional), a valuable approach in which humanitarian concerns should be at the top of the agenda.

Concerning the discussions Colombia must face as a country, the call from the ICRC is to focus on victims and on the urgent changes needed in areas historically affected by the conflict. Collective indifference towards these issues may turn peace into a fragile promise.

For as long as armed violence remains to be a reality and hostilities continue to affect civilians, we will continue the dialogue with all parties to the conflict to avoid possible humanitarian violations such as what we saw in 2016. Day after day we support people most affected by this violence. People like Johana, in the heart of Catatumbo, who had only one wish when asked about her expectations for the future: "I ask that we be heard, so that these things don't just remain written in paper".

Our role in the Peace Agreement

After more than four years of dialogue between the Government and the FARC-EP, we were pleased to see that in the midst of the political discussion, it was possible to include humanitarian issues.

Throughout this time, we have participated neutrally and independently with logistic support in the development of the talks and the implementation of concrete actions in the field such as the recovery of the underage fighters who had been recruited by FARC-EP.

We also have a role in the humanitarian agreement to expedite the search for the missing. We work with both parties to get information on the location, identification and a dignified recovery of these people.

We will continue to work to streamline and receive more answers to the needs of victims. After more than five decades of confrontation, there is still a long road ahead.



The voices of the victims

"**This war is absurd** because we are all Colombians. Some have their ideals, others have their system, but civilians always suffer the most. Things have happened, many have died, and nothing has improved."

Aristides, Arauca

"My two brothers were killed. My uncles and cousins have also died. It is hard to **re-member so many bitter moments** that we have lived here. I want my children to live the freedom that I haven't been able to live."

Divanid, Norte de Santander

"After the fighting, **there was unexploded devices left in the fields**. We now have a safe place for the community and the risk is lower thanks to the training we received from the ICRC. Thanks to the training, we were able to stay in our lands."

Mario, Cauca

"They threw us out to suffer with our children. We don't have food; don't have anything to cook. **We had to go out and beg**, because we have nowhere to work."

Felisa, displaced from an indigenous community in Arauca



Wheimar Cardona / ICRC

© Vereda Caño Ánimas, Vista Hermosa, Meta. The ICRC intervened to recover the damaged structure of this rural school.

IHL remains in force after the Peace Agreement

While the international humanitarian law (IHL) applies to the parties involved in an armed conflict, these rules may be in force even after the signing of a Peace Agreement. Additionally, the Colombian State remains in conflict with multiple armed actors: the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional), the AGC (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia), and the EPL (Ejército Popular de Liberación).

The conflict with the FARC-EP entered a termination phase with the Final Agreement, and it will end when there is no risk to resume hostilities; and combatants are disarmed. However, it is important to bear in mind that the dissident groups of the FARC-EP could be a source of new conflicts.

On the other hand, the parties have obligations under IHL beyond the end of hostilities, such as the demining of the territory, the search for missing persons or the obligation to investigate and punish those responsible for war crimes. In this context, humanitarian aid will continue to be important to save lives in communities that suffer the consequences of violence.

Therefore, the ICRC avoids referring to this historical moment of the country as “post-conflict” and prefers the expression “post-agreement”. Deeming the conflict as something overcome will take time, considerable resources and political will from all parties.



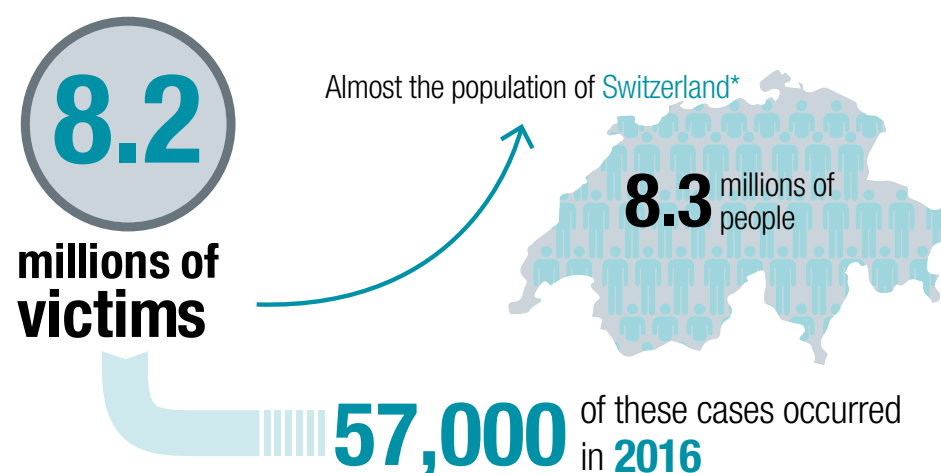
Faruk Saman González / ICRC

© After the cease-fire and a Peace Agreement, the parties continue to have obligations derived from the international humanitarian law.

The Colombian State continues in conflict with multiple armed actors: ELN, AGC, and EPL

TO HEAL THE WOUNDS of millions of people will take decades

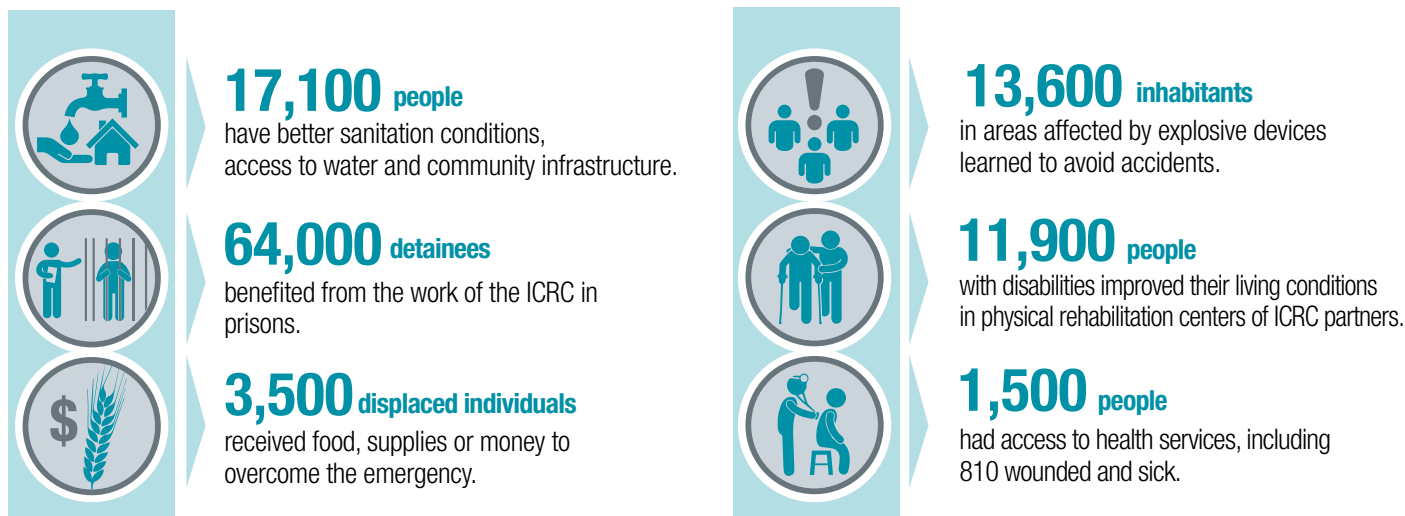
Data from Colombia's Register of Victims (RUV) from events occurred since 1985



Sources: Unit for Victims' Attention and Reparation (UARIV), updated December 1st 2016.

* United Nations (www.esa.un.org) updated December 31, 2016.

The impact of 366 days of work



FROM THE FIELD

Humanitarian convoys during social mobilizations



© Boyacá (center of Colombia). The immediate response was key to respond to shortages of medical centers.

During the social mobilizations the country experienced in mid-2016, health institutions in Cauca, Boyacá and Nariño suffered from shortages of basic medical supplies. In response to the emergency, the ICRC and the Colombian Red Cross worked together to organize humanitarian caravans with oxygen, drugs and blood units, amongst other items.

A similar situation took place in the Caquetá municipalities of Valparaíso, El Paujil and Doncello during the demonstrations of the third quarter last year. The ICRC supported local hospitals, provided guidance, and financial assistance so that people who were injured had access to health services and care protocols.

All these situations served to remind the authorities and social leaders of the limits on the use of force, in addition to the importance of respecting the Medical Mission and to protect the health workers that save lives every day.

Releases eased the suffering of families



© Civilian released on October 6, 2016 in the rural area of Saravena, Arauca.

During 2016

27 people



who were being held by armed groups returned to see their loved ones thanks to ICRC's neutral intermediation. Since 1994, the work of the Institution has facilitated the release of more than 1,620 civilians and members of the security forces.

Our humanitarian action

During 2016, our work in areas affected by the armed conflict and violence benefited 152,000 people. Here are some of the results of a year of intense work, often in conjunction with the Colombian Red Cross.



● Norte de Santander (northeast Colombia). Inhabitants from the Aguadas village improved crop production after receiving organic fertilizers, supplies and technical training.

We guided and assisted

✓ **1,770** boys and girls 

affected by confrontations study in better conditions thanks to the repair or construction of school facilities such as classrooms, lodging, bathrooms, and kitchens.

✓ **750** people 

threatened by armed actors received support to move to safer places.

✓ **770** victims 

of the conflict received psychosocial and psychological support.

✓ **3** communities 

that have lived in the middle of the conflict in Cauca, Caquetá and Norte de Santander have better medical services after the improvement of health centers, where there are 84 consultations a day.

✓ **130,000** people 

in more than 30 municipalities benefited from the support given to official institutions.

Economic security



of displacement and violence improved their income after receiving work training, support for formal employment or resources to strengthen their businesses.



mostly farmers living in areas affected by the conflict and violence, improved food production.



living in conflict-affected areas received food and household items.



Chocó (western Colombia). San Juan River communities affected by violence and floods received humanitarian aid. The intervention benefited 1,900 affected people, mostly Wounaan indigenous and Afro-Colombians.

Training



from health and State entities received training on rights and duties of the Medical Mission and safety standards in conflict zones.



of the security forces and prison authorities were trained in international standards on the use of force and humanitarian rules.



among authorities and community leaders, received training to provide better service and support to victims of the conflict.



of communities, health workers and authorities strengthened their ability to save lives through training, in First Aid and care of the injured.

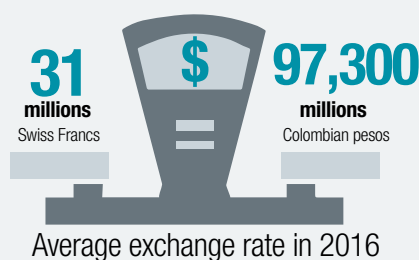


of physical rehabilitation provide a better service to patients with disabilities after receiving additional training.

COLOMBIA, the largest ICRC operation in the Americas



Our budget for 2016



WE COMPLETED

48 years

IN



We arrived in March 1969

Our 1st work was



To visit detainees

Armed violence continues to affect the most vulnerable areas of the country

Violence unrelated to the armed conflict was also the cause of possible violations to humanitarian principles. In urban contexts such as Medellín and Buenaventura, the affected population lives between stigma and fear.



Isabel Orjosa / ICRC

📍 Buenaventura (southwest Colombia). The ICRC provides support to the communities affected by violence outside the armed conflict in urban and rural areas.

Very few live to tell this. “One of the guys came up to me and realized I was not dead because I was breathing, so they beat me and hit me in the hand with a machete several times. It hurt a lot. They began to chop me alive. I could not move until another guy came and hit me again in the back of my head with the machete; I think they wanted to chop off my head”.

We will call him “David” because his life is still in danger. Last year, this young man, who was in seventh grade at the time, survived the attack in an urban area of Valle del Cauca, near the neighborhood where he usually meets with his friends. The group of armed youngsters trying to kill him ran away from the place when they heard noises in a nearby house. David started screaming in pain until people standing nearby heard him and took him to a clinic.

He lost his right hand and has the marks of the attack on his body. He has not returned to school or to his town. “When I see the scars, it hurts, but it’s not physical pain. It’s a pain in my soul. I’ll never be the same, although there is a psychologist who is helping me. He tells me I’ll get through this, but I don’t know how,” says David.

Although scenes like this seem to have been written for a horror movie, the reality of victims in Colombia surpasses all type of fiction. David’s story is that of many other Colombians. During 2016, the ICRC documented alleged violations of humanitarian principles which took place in urban areas or as a result of armed violence. The urban areas where the ICRC recorded more cases were Medellín, El Bagre and Buenaventura.



Voices of the victims

"I'm very **scared to go back to my town** because I'm on my own. The guys who did this to me are still there and I'm afraid they want to find me again."

David, victim in Valle del Cauca

"Insecurity here is terrible. It's even worse in my mom's neighborhood. You can't do anything there. You need to **ask for permission for anything that moves.**"

Johana, small business owner in Tumaco

Even though the growing number of victims of conflict and violence has started to decrease, the conflict has not stopped. In just four years, the State recorded close to 302,000 victims of organized armed gangs under the provisions of the Constitutional Court which mandates the recognition of such victims (Ruling C280 and Order 119 of 2013).

In the field, the ICRC has witnessed the disrespect for the basic principles of humanity. A constant concern is the participation of minors in armed groups, sexual violence, intra-urban displacement; and the confinement of civilians because of invisible borders and disappearances. The fact that the number of victims to the armed conflict is not at the same level as it was five years ago should never be an excuse to ignore this big challenge.

Tentacles of fear

Her words come as a shy whisper, as if the walls had ears.

"Last night there was a shooting. I was very nervous, but we were quiet, without speaking. One is afraid to turn on the light". Luz Marina keeps her voice low for a while, something unusual in this outspoken woman who usually has a big smile. Her mother sits beside her. When asked if she has thought of leaving Tumaco, she answers: "But where would we go? We have nowhere to go".

Supported above the sea with wooden sticks, the colorful neighborhood of stilt houses where Luz Marina lives has been the scenario of deaths that nobody dares to mention; and sometimes the scene of a tense calm only a few can trust.

While the implementation of the Final Peace Agreement between the Government and the FARC-EP progresses, the reconfiguration of other armed actors marks a new geography of changing violence that is full of uncertainties.

Confrontations between government forces and armed groups, in addition to the actions of "combos" and gangs, make it clear that keeping the promise of peace will be a difficult road in 2017. It remains a challenge for the ICRC to reinforce dialogues with armed actors that have a more volatile nature in order to insist on the respect for humanitarian principles.

Similarly, there have been complex forms of violence in Chocó, where most of the population is African-descendant or indigenous. ICRC workers have witnessed that living in decent conditions in this region is a luxury few can afford, especially for people living in areas under the influence of armed groups.

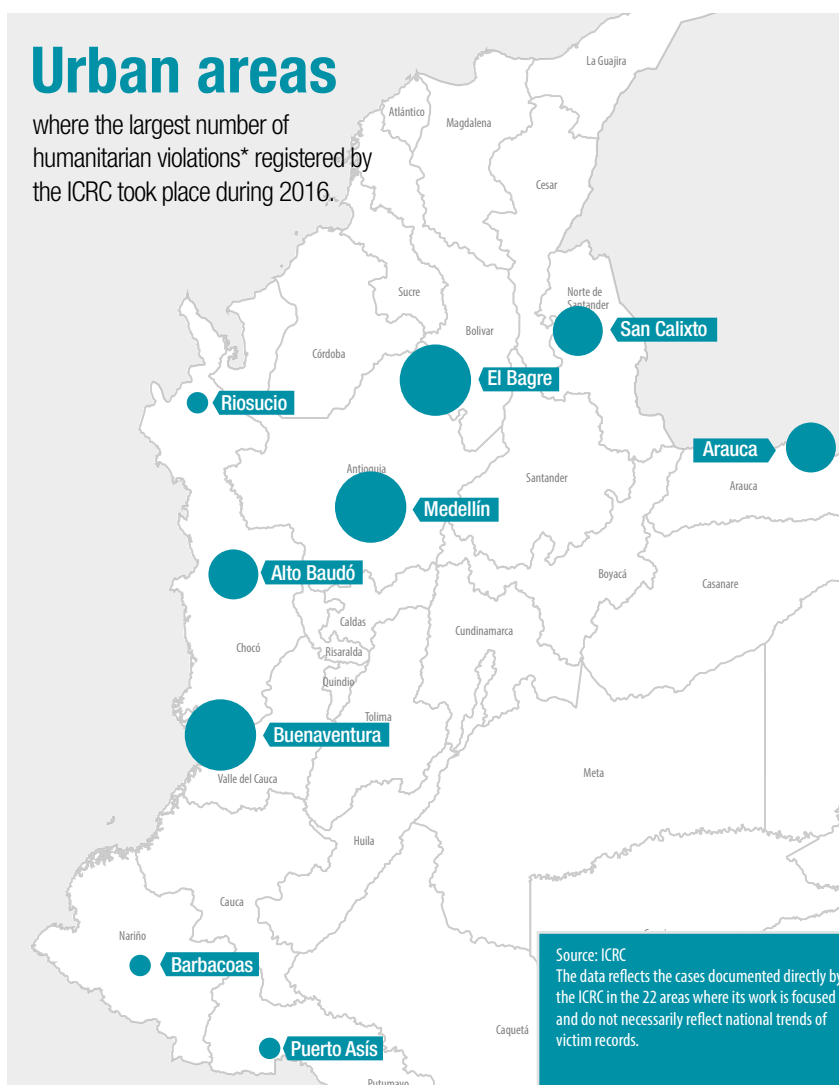
Along the areas that surround the San Juan River in southern Chocó, this humanitarian tragedy is a mixture of inter-related factors: mining-contaminated water sources, few alternatives other than drug production, hunger and diseases derived from the loss of crops, zero access to health, confinement, trails contaminated with explosive artifacts, isolation, and absence of the State.

Fear is not invisible but it has real effects. Parents in areas of the country that are silent victims of armed violence know that raising a new generation in the midst of these adverse conditions is a test of courage. "You can't explain anything to the kids. What for? They live it all themselves. All we can do is lock them up early inside the house. We shut the door at six p.m. and lock ourselves in," says Luz Marina.

The reconfiguration of other armed actors marks a new geography of changing violence that is full of uncertainties.

Urban areas

where the largest number of humanitarian violations* registered by the ICRC took place during 2016.



Source: ICRC
The data reflects the cases documented directly by the ICRC in the 22 areas where its work is focused and do not necessarily reflect national trends of victim records.

What do we call “armed violence”?

Armed violence is different from the violence generated by common crime, such as the theft of a mobile telephone. It is about the actions not directly linked to the armed conflict, but the confrontation and the actions of organized armed groups, “combos”, and gangs. Armed violence has serious humanitarian consequences for the population such as confinement, sexual violence, recruitment of minors, and displacement, among others.



Rebeca Lucía Gaitán / ICRC

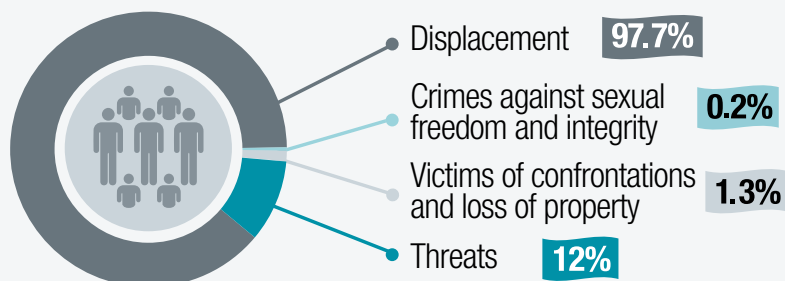
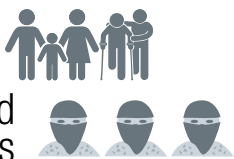
☉ Tumaco (Colombian Pacific Coast). Violence in urban centers is a challenge in several cities.

The impact of violence

Since 2013, there is a record of

301,900
victims

of organized armed actors



(Cases recorded after the Constitutional Court enacted Sentence C280 and Writ 119 of 2013 which demands the recognition of victims of organized armed groups).

Source: Unit for Victims' Attention and Reparation (UARIV), updated December 1st, 2016. * One victim may report various facts

Challenges of the Security Forces' doctrine

In mid-2016, the State began implementing a policy instituted by the Ministry of Defense called “Directive 015” to fight “organized armed groups” (AGC - Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia-, also known as “Clan del Golfo”, the EPL - Ejército Popular de Liberación-, also known as “los Pelusos”, and Los Puntilleros) using military force under IHL rules governing the conduct of hostilities (which may include aerial bombardments).

The explicit militarization of these cases also involves a series of universal obligations, such as the protection of civilians and wounded combatants, and prohibitions such as not to cause disproportionate damage. On the other hand, the State has the obligation to respect human rights at all times.

This is why the doctrine, the procedures, and the training on the use of force should be strengthened in times when the armed conflict mutates rapidly.

Colombia shares this challenge with a big part of the region



Isabel Orjiga / ICRC

☉ Buenaventura has been one of the cities in the Pacific most affected by armed violence.

Due to the corrosive impact of violence, not necessarily linked to an armed conflict, millions of people in Latin America are relegated to basic health and education services and to the economic growth their cities can offer.

For that reason, the ICRC works in countries of the region facing similar challenges to those of Colombia. In Ciudad Juárez (Mexico) and in several cities in Central America, the ICRC constantly discusses with the authorities and provides humanitarian assistance to bring relief to populations most vulnerable to violence.

FROM THE FIELD

Urban greenhouse joins a stigmatized neighborhood

"Come on! Let's go! ...give me some nice tomatoes!" Maria Victoria yells at the plants in the neighborhood's greenhouse. This paradise that always smells like green tomatoes is located in La Loma, on the outskirts of Medellín. It is the result of months of work by neighbors with technical support from the ICRC.

Maria Victoria is one of the neighbors who has managed to improve her economy with this organic agriculture project from the beginning. They have already been able to sell and feed on tomatoes, onion and coriander.

Violence has marked the region, which has led to the stigmatization of its inhabitants and the consequent difficulties for better alternatives to thrive. These crops have given the community the opportunity to work together and have an additional source of income. "It also taught us to have patience in order to enjoy these beautiful plants," says Ramiro.



La Loma, outskirts of Medellín. Neighbors gather around the cultivation of organic vegetables.

Our humanitarian action against armed violence in 2016 in Colombia

Both the victims who move to urban centers and the resident population, suffer the effects of violence and need support. Therefore, we deployed our work along with the Colombian Red Cross.

4,900 victims

of displacement and violence improved their income after receiving training and / or support to receive formal employment.

5,000 inhabitants

from Buenaventura neighborhoods affected by violence have a safer community infrastructure where they can come together.

980 people

living in urban areas improved business productivity thanks to the support program conducted in partnership with the National Training Service (SENA) and the Colombian Red Cross.

260 families

who have been affected by conflict and violence in Medellín have better tools to push their productive projects forward or to access formal employment.



Tumaco. The humanitarian aid for populations affected by armed violence continued during 2016.

The long wait, the daily grief for the families of the missing

To clarify the fate of missing people is an urgent need. The scope of the problem is so big in Colombia that the current whereabouts of 85,900 people are unknown. The families face multiple obstacles: from indifference, to the lack of a comprehensive response to their needs.



◉ Inspired by the true story of a native Colombian family of Guaviare, the comic strip "Enrique's Shadow" told the drama of disappearance and was translated into nine languages.

"Even if there are peace treaties, the armed conflict marked us forever", says Juan Joven. He carries a notebook full of poems and songs in his hands, many in memory of Jaime, the older brother who was last seen fourteen years ago, when an armed group disappeared him in rural area of Putumayo.

Jaime is among the thousands of people in Colombia today waiting for a loved one. Although a new page in the history of the country opens: national recon-

ciliation, it is difficult for the families of the missing to overcome uncertainty. As the country tries to forget war times, the suffering of the families is still present.

The path of reconciliation is about recognizing the right families have to know what happened. Beyond the Peace Agreement, all parties have an obligation that remains in time. Finding out what happened to the missing persons and preventing new cases is not a gesture of goodwill, it is an obligation.



Putumayo (south Colombia). Juan Joven writes songs and poems in memory of his brother Jaime. He says singing helps him heal.

When the government and the FARC-EP committed to search for those who have gone missing in the context of the conflict, the ICRC welcomed the agreement and supported this process. That commitment to help find out what happened to the missing is a top priority for the Institution.

However, the challenge is immense. During 2016, on average, 29 old and recent cases of missing persons in Colombia were reported each day, by both the armed conflict and other situations. In total, today there is no information on the whereabouts of 85,900 people (see chart p. 20).

The lack of centralized documentation, poor coordination among the relevant institutions and underreporting of cases are the reasons for not having consolidated data on conflict-related disappeared people. While the National Registry of Disappearances includes about 24,900 direct victims of enforced disappearance, it would be 60,600 according to the Center of Historical Memory.

The country will never learn from its past if it forgets the dimension of this tragedy. Therefore, it is important to remember that the relatives of the missing are also victims, and that many are still afraid to talk and seek help. "This is a never-ending nightmare," says Juan.

Barriers to finding answers

In our ongoing dialogue with the families of the disappeared, we have noted that there is still a disturbing indifference towards the pain generated by this humanitarian tragedy.

After decades of work in Colombia, we have met people who, after a poor response from the State, decide to search for their loved ones on their own.

They assume the economic burden of the search and sometimes delve into conflict areas. That was the case of Maria Nury, who traveled through the jungles of Guaviare to find her eldest son, who had been disappeared for twenty years. "Many times I was afraid of ending up missing in those searches. Nevertheless, I didn't show my fear whenever I had armed people in front of me. I only asked God to allow me to go back to my children who had been left all alone at home", she says.

The tragedy of disappearance also forces many to move to find a safer place and, therefore, to abandon their jobs and their roots. As a result, these families are living in increasingly fragile economic conditions, with deep psychological scars.

The road to respond to those who wait will be long and full of obstacles. Responsible officials need constant training to provide proper guidance and dignified treatment to the families. "When I filed the complaint, they asked me the same questions again and again. I always cried and got depressed. I never got any response", says Maria Nury on the experience of seeking help in various State entities.

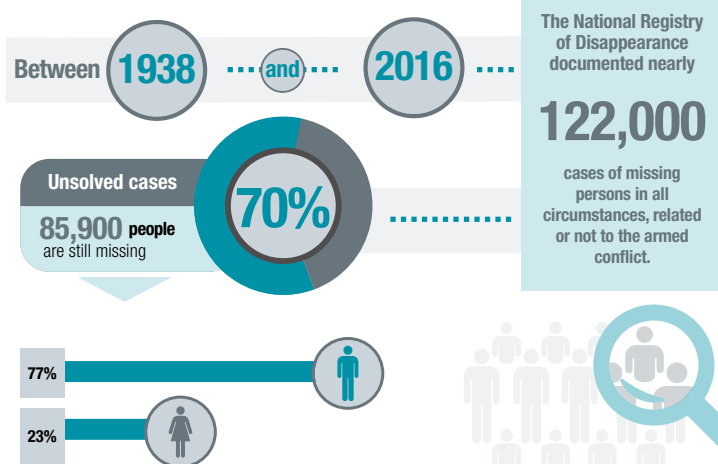
To alleviate the suffering of disappearance, society must become aware and be solidary with the victims and their families. When the country stops seeing victims as "the others" and begins to understand them as part of the full picture, we will be able to step forward and begin to take on this great debt of solidarity.

Families never forget their absent ones and, as a nation, Colombia must not forget the pain that gnaws many of its inhabitants. Ignoring this call is like disappearing these victims again.

Finding out what happened to the missing persons and preventing new cases is not a goodwill gesture, it is an obligation.

The UNCERTAIN dimension

These figures do not represent the full extent of disappearance in Colombia. Many cases remain unreported given the fact that families lack access to authorities or they fear talking about what happened.

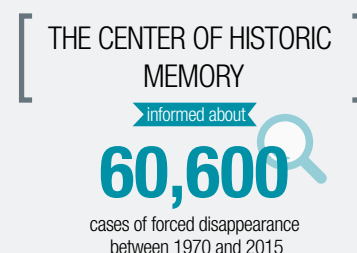


There is no definitive data on forced disappearance



Documented by the National Registry of Disappearance are allegedly forced disappearances

However



Sources: Forensic Medicine, Location of Statistic Forensic Information updated 14 February 2017. "Hasta encontrarlos" (Until we find them) Report - Center of Historic Memory (2016).
*Not all people disappeared during the same year the registry was conducted. Many cases occurred before 2016 but were reported later.

FROM THE FIELD

"It was not a sack of potatoes that got lost, it is my son!"

"Mommy, I'll be right back". Those were the last words Nohemí Agudelo heard from her son Cristian. "But that 'I'll be right back' never happened, it was not possible, I did not see him again," she recalls now, ten years after he disappeared a few blocks from their home in Florencia, Caquetá (south Colombia). He was sixteen.

Some neighbors say they saw him getting into a taxi. Other people say that he was forced into a van, but no one has given answers on those responsible and why he did not return home that day. "It was not a sack of potatoes that got lost, it is my son!" says Nohemí when she shares the fact that many responded with indifference when she asked for help.

After receiving psychological support and becoming an active member of an association of relatives of missing persons, Nohemí does not lose hope to find him, dead or alive. "We, as victims, have to be given an answer. We have the right to know what happened," she concludes.



② Florencia, Caquetá (south Colombia). Nohemí's son disappeared near their home ten years ago. He was a minor then.

FROM THE FIELD

Support networks

We respond to the needs expressed by the relatives of the disappeared through support sessions that are now helping 60 people to establish a solidarity network in San José del Guaviare, Villavicencio and Cali. “With these activities I learned that I must not get carried away by sadness,” says César, who is part of one of the groups.



San José del Guaviare. In 2016, relatives of the disappeared were part of a series of collective activities facilitated by the ICRC and the Colombian Red Cross.

The 72-hour myth



Maria Nury has not had news of her eldest son for over two decades. He was fourteen when he disappeared in Guaviare.

A disappearance can be reported immediately. No authority may require waiting for a specified time (24, 48 or 72 hours) to receive a complaint report of a disappearance.

The ICRC recommends that the existing search mechanisms be used. These include the Urgent Search Mechanism (MBU), which can help prevent further cases of disappearance. To activate it, anyone can file the complaint directly (or through the Public Ministry) before a judicial official (judge or prosecutor), who cannot refuse to immediately consider the request.



Voices of relatives

“The search for my son dies **when I die.**”

María

“I believe **there will not be peace** because we the victims are still waiting.”

Carolina

“I **spent over twenty years in silence** because of fear, but it’s time to speak up. Today I feel that I can get news about my daughter. I’ve always had the hope that she is alive.”

César

“**It seems as if he were on a trip** and he will be back some day. That river is deep and nobody knows how many more have disappeared.”

Viviana

“I did not want anything; **often times I just wanted to kill myself.** I received psychological therapy and now I want to live and I long that one day my son will come back.”

Elsa

What they say is not true: ‘When you are able to tell this story and not cry, it’s because you’ve healed.’ **I want to know the truth.** I can’t live in peace.”

Ruth

“You keep **that pain, that resentment.** You feel so desperate, you don’t know where to run to.”

Cecilia

AquíFaltaAlguien (#SomeonelsMissing) asked to end indifference

The collage consists of nine photographs arranged in a grid-like fashion. The top row features a man holding a sign about water for pregnant women, a woman holding a sign about water for the elderly, and a hand with a tattooed hashtag. The middle row shows a woman holding a sign about water for the elderly, a man holding a sign about water for the elderly, and a woman holding a sign about water for the elderly. The bottom row includes a man holding a sign about water for the elderly, a woman holding a sign about water for the elderly, and a group of children holding a sign about water for the elderly.



22 | International Committee of the Red Cross

FACTS AND FIGURES

Our humanitarian action against disappearance in Colombia

In 2016, we accompanied and helped many families cope with the uncertainty of having a loved one missing. There is still lots to be done.

✓ **540** relatives

of missing persons were guided by the ICRC and received financial support to continue the search and to obtain reparations.

✓ **17** bodies

of people killed in conflict zones were recovered and handed over to the authorities for identification.

✓ **230** relatives

received psychological and psychosocial support or participated in support group sessions developed in cooperation with the Colombian Red Cross.

✓ **280** officials

and forensic experts were trained to provide better assistance to the families of the missing.

✓ **460** coffin vaults

and ossuaries started to be used in the cemetery of Buenaventura to bury the bodies of unidentified persons.

✓ **36** families

reestablished contact with a loved one from whom they had not had any news.



Anita Kader / ICRC

● Rural area of Santander (east Colombia). The ICRC continued its humanitarian work to recover the remains of people so that families can give them a decent burial.



Isabel Ortigosa / ICRC

● Cemetery of Buenaventura. The Colombian Red Cross is an important ally of the ICRC in the work of supporting the families of the missing.

Fear silences the victims of sexual violence in Colombia

Close to 17,100 women and girls have suffered crimes against their sexual freedom and integrity in the context of armed conflict since the 80's. The ICRC is concerned about the recurrence of this phenomenon and the gaps in the attention to victims.



Ana Karina Delgado

☉ According to the Centralized Register of Victims, 153 cases of sexual violence in the framework of the armed conflict and other situations of violence were recorded in 2016.

Three armed men, who were present in the mountainous region where Isabel lived, assaulted her sexually. The fear of her children, who were sleeping in the next room, being hurt, forced her to silence her pain. She was beaten and raped for such a long time that she cannot even remember. A few weeks later, she learned she was pregnant. She decided to run away with her children. She never returned to her home town. She never spoke.

Isabel carried with her the burden of silence for twenty years. Nobody knew her secret. However, a year ago, after being displaced again because of

her work as a community leader, she finally decided to share her story with other women and, finally, with her daughter, the result of that rape.

"What hurts me most is that she suffers. She feels worthless. If I can't even take it myself after so many years, how is she going to take it?" says Isabel. She thought about suicide and attempted abortion to lose that child she never wished for, but her daughter was born. "I love her, of course, but sometimes it's really hard to look at her. She reminds me of what happened to me. I always wonder which of those men is her father."



Isabel Ortigosa / ICRC

The ICRC supports victims of sexual violence through medical and psychosocial assistance. Economic assistance is also being considered.

Isabel's name is not Isabel. She could have any other name. Her story is the same story of many Colombian women, boys and girls who have been victims of physical and emotional violence by the actors of the conflict and armed violence. Their scars, their marked bodies, their courage and fighting ability are part of the emotional geography of this country.

According to statistics from the Unit for Victims, between the 80's and December 2016, about 17,100 women and girls have been recorded to have suffered crimes against their sexual freedom and integrity in the context of the armed conflict. The fact that there is little documentation of male victims or people with other sexual identities does not mean that sexual violence against them does not exist, but the invisibility of the phenomenon is even higher (see chart p. 27).

A sample of 100 cases compiled by the ICRC in Colombia between 2014 and 2016 indicates that various victims suffered more than one episode of sexual violence in their lifetime. 41 percent of cases report more than one perpetrator and collective sexual assaults by three to eight people were common.

It is frequent to find victims who report that their mothers, sisters, daughters and grandmothers have also suffered attacks of this kind. In other words, it is a recurring phenomenon that affects several generations within the same family. The reason for this may be the persistence of the conflict and armed violence in the country.

The victims of sexual violence who approached the ICRC show that most cases involved Afro-Colombian women and female farmers (40 and 35 percent, respectively).

This condition seems to relate to several concurrent factors: firstly, the geographical location in rural areas with little government presence; and secondly, the sources of wealth to finance armed violence are located in these same territories. The interest to control these areas implies that the armed actors exert tight control over the population. Victims are often exposed to retaliation by the perpetrator, which results in more silence.



The voices of the victims

"My children told me: 'Mommy, what's wrong? Why are you sad?' **I never told them** what had happened to me."

Arelis*

"My message to other women is to **continue fighting**, to not surrender, and to know their rights."

Miriam*

"**I locked myself in the house**, I didn't open the door to anyone, and I wouldn't even shower. I felt like my head was not working well."

Julia*

"The fact that armed groups use violence **against the bodies of women** threatens and scares communities, and it makes it easy for them to control the daily life of the communities."

Ana María*

* Names were changed to protect the identity of victims.

One out of every five victims of sexual violence assisted by the ICRC between 2014 and 2016 had an unwanted pregnancy.

Every case is a medical emergency

The ICRC confirmed that there is a high lack of awareness among victims about the fact that every case of sexual violence is a medical emergency. This reason and other factors, such as fear or shame, stopped most victims from approaching the ICRC or health institutions after the events (in less than 72 hours).

One out of every five victims of sexual violence assisted by the ICRC between 2014 and 2016 had an unwanted pregnancy. Willing to terminate pregnancy, many women resort to unsafe abortion practices, which threaten their physical integrity. When children are born, the fact that their mothers had little psychosocial support, in addition to stigma and discrimination, makes children more vulnerable and exposed to neglect and abuse.

Their livelihood is sometimes hindered by the fear of having to walk through insecure areas and the persecution of attack's perpetrators. This is the reason why support given to victims should not be only psychological and physical, but also economic. Economic support allows victims to start a new life project in a safer environment.

Lack of guarantees

Generally speaking, sexual violence is a significantly-underreported phenomenon. The lack of information is linked to two factors: the few cases that

are reported and filed due to the lack of a supportive and confidential program and environment to provide enough guarantees to victims so that they share their experiences and seek support; and secondly, due to a high rate of judicial impunity.

Despite efforts, the humanitarian response from the State is often scarce and victims are alone and without the support from their immediate environment. Victims often do not share their experience with their close ones nor with the support from the State system. There are constant feelings of fear, guilt and shame; and the emotional wounds take just as long or even longer to heal than their physical marks. The taboo that surrounds these attacks on women, men and children covers the abuses with an aura of invisibility.

We firmly believe that sexual violence in the context of armed conflicts and violence can and must be stopped. With a comprehensive response that includes prevention, protection and assistance we seek to ensure that the needs of victims are met.

The psychological support Isabel has received has helped her overcome part of what happened to her. "I have forgiven", she says, "but I have not forgotten". "Tears well up in my eyes when I talk about it." She says that speaking to other women who have suffered similar violence is healing: "I used to stay inside the house; I was scared. I now feel capable of telling my story and supporting other women who have gone through the same situation."

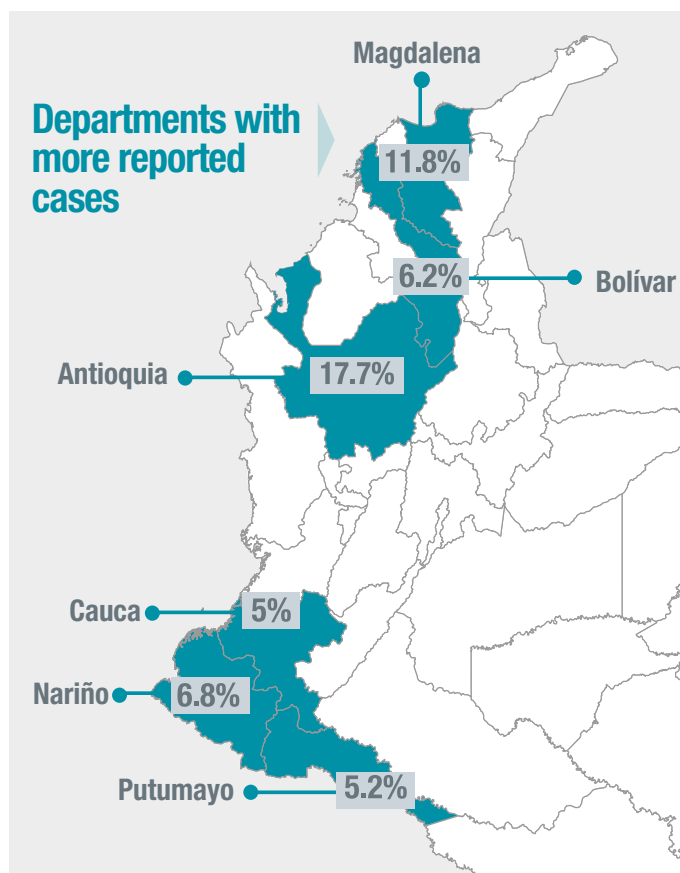
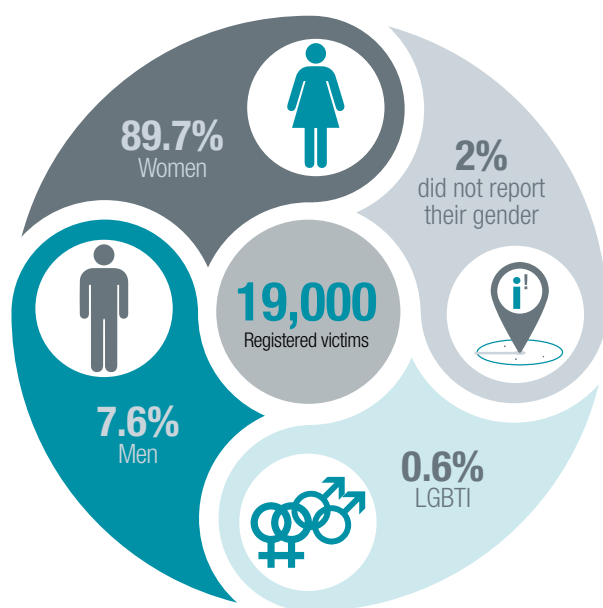


Ara Katrina Delgado

Sexual violence is highly underreported because the victims feel afraid or ashamed; in addition to the inability of the judicial system to catch the perpetrators of such crimes.

Snapshot of SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The Colombian State has recorded about **19,000** victims of crimes against sexual freedom and integrity in the context of the conflict and armed violence. However, underreporting and fear of reprisals are the main reasons why many attacks are kept in silence.



Source: Centralized Register of Victims updated January 1, 2017.

FROM THE FIELD

Scars that last for years

He did not care that she was pregnant. The man who raped Fulvia also hit her and threatened her. "If you speak up, I know where your family lives," she recalls being told. "In armed conflicts, sexual violence is used as a way to generate terror. All armed groups do it," she adds.

Regardless of how much Carolina has specialized in the care for victims, stories such as Fulvia's case always affect her. Carolina is the Colombian Red Cross psychologist in Buenaventura, Valle del Cauca. "We get so many cases that it begins to leave a personal mark. It hurts to see so much damage, so much violence, so much fear in children and women," she says.

The strategy of assistance to sexual violence victims we implemented together with the Colombian Red Cross goes beyond early health care. It also includes psychosocial aid, regardless of how long it has been since the attack.

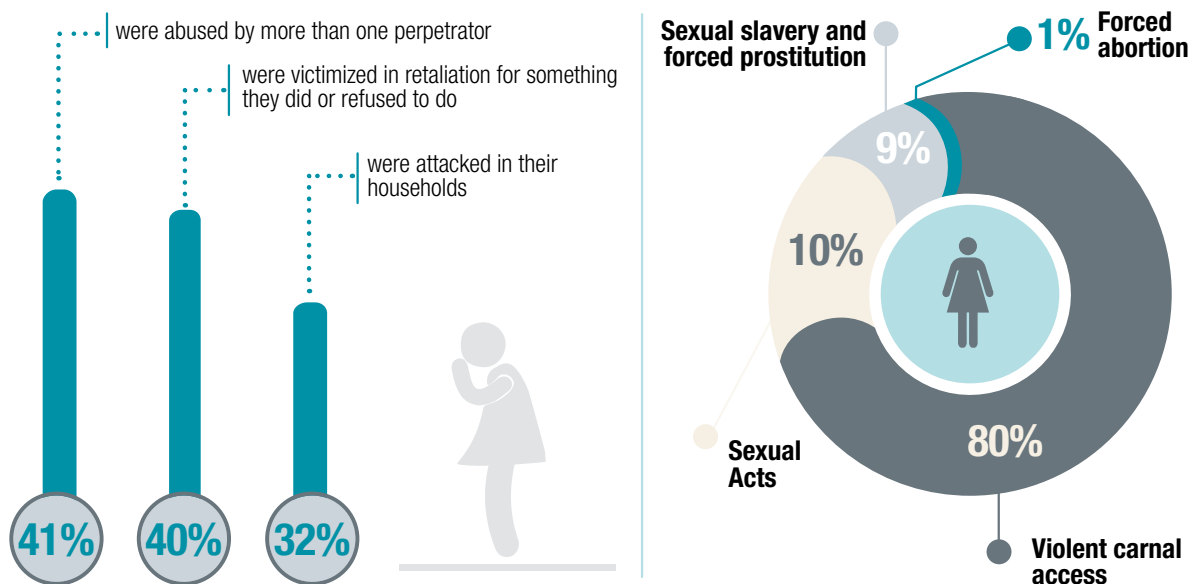
"Sometimes we meet women who fight and become leaders, but their suffering continues. Years go by and every time they tell their story they revive the pain and it touches very sensitive emotional fibers," says Carolina.



☉ Fulvia is a victim of sexual violence and has become a leader of her community.

Most concerning trends in cases assisted by the ICRC

The ICRC followed firsthand the cases of 100 victims of sexual violence that received ICRC's assistance between 2014 and 2016. After detailed study of the cases, these were the concerning trends from the sample.



Source: Sample of 100 victims assisted by the ICRC, jointly with other institutions between 2014 and 2016. These data are not to be considered as the reflection of a national trend. One victim might have reported more than one incident.

Singing to heal

"Sexual violence is so shameful that victimizers do not admit to it. Our bodies are so personal, that women blame themselves," says María Eugenia Urrutia, founder of the Association of Afro-Colombian Women for Peace (AFROMUPAZ).

She had to leave her hometown Chocó after a sexual assault. She is now helping other victims through social activism and collective therapies that include ancestral songs and traditions.

However, it was never easy for María Eugenia to overcome her own experience. After she was abused, she would not stop crying, would not leave home, and removed her children from school. "But one day I started singing... I remembered songs from Chocó. While I sang, I hugged my children. Then, I realized that songs were healing," she narrates.



© Bogotá. AFROMUPAZ groups of women make a symbolic journey through what they call "the vegetable garden". They tell their stories, sing and play instruments.

FACTS AND FIGURES


Our humanitarian actions on sexual violence in Colombia

Along with the Colombian Red Cross, we provide victims with guidance about the State's assistance services and we also support the victims by covering food and transportation expenses when they have to travel to receive medical or psychological aid. This was our response in 2016.



Isabel Ortegosa / ICRC

One way to support the victims of sexual violence is to show them the options of State care services they are entitled to receive.

✓ **170** **victims** 
are undergoing a process to heal their physical and mental trauma by receiving medical and psychological aid. 26 of these victims were under 15.

✓ **800** **members** 
of the military and police forces attended workshops on prevention of sexual violence in the context of the armed conflict.

✓ **210** **students** 
from different universities were trained to offer quality legal aid and guidance to victims of sexual violence.

✓ **100** **public servants** 
of the legal branch strengthened their knowledge on how to enforce the regulations related to sexual violence.

Explosive remnants of war, a challenge for the next decades

The presence of explosive devices (remnants of war and other improvised explosive devices) near populated areas, and the proliferation of weapons in urban areas are some of the threats faced by Colombian civil population.



☉ Cauca (west Colombia). Gérmerson lost his left hand in an accident with a remnant of war. Many minors get injured when they go to get water, firewood or play in the fields.

"I used to be 100% alive, now I'm only 50% the man I used to be... everything has changed and I'm suffering from psychological and physical trauma," says Ángel Córdoba, a Putumayo farmer who lost his left leg after stepping on an explosive device in a rural area of Puerto Asís.

He used to spend his days sowing food in a farm and educating his children, but that changed radically after the accident that made it impossible for him to carry sacs or work in the field.

The ICRC supported Ángel's recovery by providing him with economic aid, which he used to access health services and strengthen his business. He is not afraid of crying when he tells his story because the physical scars are merely a part of his life.

Besides the southern area of Colombia where Ángel lives, there are other critical points of the conflict such as Chocó, Arauca, Nariño, Antioquia, Cauca, Guaviare,

Norte de Santander, Putumayo, and Córdoba where the population has co-existed with armed actors in a land contaminated with remnants of war, improvised explosive devices and anti-personnel mines during the last years.

New cases are recorded every year. The Office for Comprehensive Action Against Anti-personnel Mines (DAICMA) recorded 63 injured and 11 deceased people after the detonation of these devices during 2016. Three out of ten people who died were civilians and the other seven were members of the military forces.

The ICRC worked with 23 direct victims in populated areas only in 2016. 18 of those victims were affected by accidents with improvised explosive devices and 3 were victims of explosive remnants of war.

ICRC technicians were able to verify that in the areas most affected by this phenomenon children are afraid of going to school, families cannot access their crops



Voices of the victims

“The device that exploited in my backyard hurt my knee, my hand and my face. People are afraid of going out in that area because I ran into something that was close to my house. Just think what it is like in the fields.”

Raúl, Norte de Santander

“It’s very hard to live in panic because you don’t know when they’re coming (the armed groups) or if they leave something around.”

Eduardo, Cauca

or water sources, farmers risk their lives to look for firewood and food, and confined communities cannot move freely about their land.

Sometimes they cannot even walk confidently around their own backyards. This was Raúl’s case in 2016. He suffered face and hand injuries when a grenade that had been left in the garden exploded while he was clearing the grass. His house in Norte de Santander (east Colombia) also has bullet marks.

After the Peace Agreement, this problem is one of the most complex concerns for the country. An agreement on humanitarian mine clearance was made by the Colombian government and the FARC-EP as part of the peace negotiations. 207 municipalities had been prioritized in 2017, 22 of them are undergoing mine clearance operations. However, the difficulty is to determine the location of mines with certainty since there is a very large piece of land affected by the presence of these devices.

The civil population that lives in these regions can do little or nothing to prevent their everyday life from being constrained by fear to the presence of these explosive devices. The displaced families that have come back to their land are unaware of whether the explosive hazard has been eliminated or not. As a result, risk mitigation is key to avoid accidents. During 2016 the ICRC and the Colombian Red Cross trained 13,600 vulnerable people so that they learned how to stay safe.

Children are victims too

Gémerson has been learning to live without his left hand for over a year. He lost his hand early in 2015 in Cauca, after picking up a grenade from the floor, mistaking it by a toy.

The consequences of this event divided the boy’s life into before and after the accident. He had to face a physical loss, but also rejection of his classmates at school. Bullying affected him so deeply that he refused to go back to school for months.

The ICRC provided him with a prosthesis and the physical rehabilitation process. Additionally, the Institution supported him through activities that allowed his classmates to put themselves in Gémerson’s shoes and understand the difficulties of being physically challenged. His family says that the psychological support they received helped him face his loss and prevented further bullying.

Gémerson is now a joyful, lively boy, who does not see himself as a victim. “He is more active now, helps us sowing, goes to school and gets dressed by himself because he says he is able to do it himself,” says Viviana, his mother.

The ICRC has worked for several years with the population most affected by this problem. Accompanying families that have suffered the consequences of explosive devices directly -like Gémerson’s- will continue to be a priority for the institution.

In the areas most affected by this phenomenon, children are afraid of going to school and families cannot access their crops or water sources.

Victims of explosive devices

Direct victims between

1990 (and) 2016  11.400




39%
are civilians

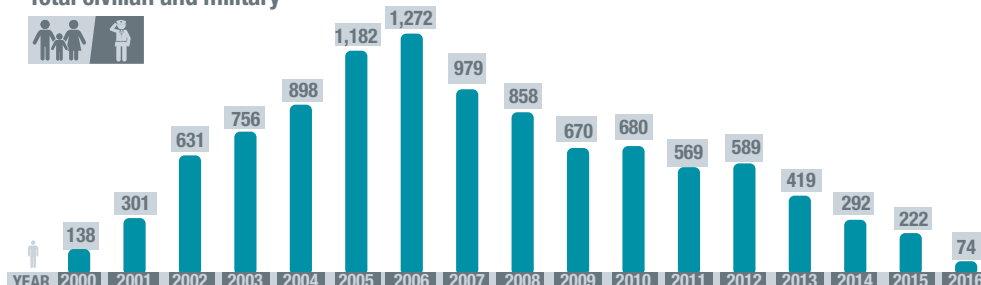
Overview of civilian victims

19%
 died

81%
 survived

26%
 were under 18 years old when the accident occurred

Total civilian and military



Source: Office for Comprehensive Action Against Anti-personnel Mines (DAICMA). Data updated on December 31st, 2016.

Stray bullets are a constant threat

Astrid is one of the 100,000 inhabitants of Catatumbo, located to the northeast of Colombia. Excessive violence among different armed actors in the region has affected the populated areas with crossfire.

As a result of a confrontation in the mid 2016 in the urban area of San Calixto, this 22-year-old young woman was injured in a leg; this has complicated her everyday life. She cannot move as she did before, and had to stop practicing sports at school because running was so painful. "Every time there are clashes, bullets reach my neighborhood and we have to hide," says Astrid.

The ICRC is concerned after observing that civilians are exposed to the proliferation of weapons and their ammunition in many areas of the country, affecting the daily life of the population.

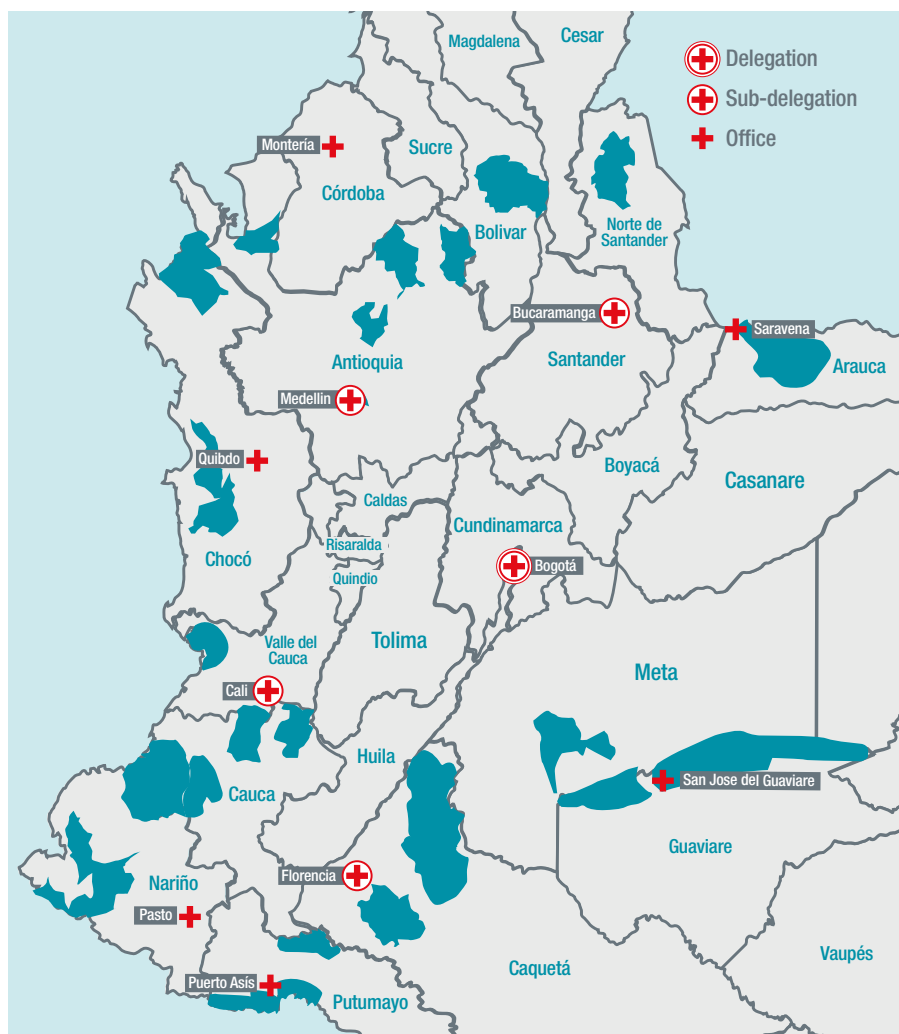
This phenomenon is characteristic not only in populated areas, but also in some of the main cities, where violence constrains people's lives and they are not able to move around freely. Children and adults are also affected psychologically by this threat.



Andrés Cortés

Ⓢ This is the condition of some houses in Catatumbo, N. de Santander, after stray bullet hits.

Areas where ICRC performs activities to mitigate risk



Safe kitchens in Nariño



Patricia Lucía Gordo / ICRC

Ⓢ Aura Marina cooks in a firewood-saving stove she received from the ICRC.

Aura Marina has lived with her family in a rural area of Nariño for sixteen years. She has had to learn how to endure the anxiety produced by being in the middle of the conflict.

In this area, propane gas is unaffordable for most of the population. Additionally, going out to get firewood to cook is a complicated task, since inhabitants have to beware of crossfire, and also make sure they walk through known paths to avoid becoming a victim of explosive devices.

"We were forced to adapt. What else can we do?," says Aura.

In 2016, Aura and 70 other people received a firewood-saving stove from the ICRC. They can use a small amount of firewood to cook for several days. This prevents them from being exposed to accidents caused by walking around unsafe areas.

FACTS AND FIGURES

Our response to this humanitarian issue

Our work continued in 2016, together with the Colombian Red Cross, in order to prevent accidents and reduce risks faced by entire communities.



© Norte de Santander. Raúl walks around his backyard, where he suffered an accident with a grenade that had not been triggered.

What is “weapon contamination”?



Although this contamination phenomenon is frequently associated to anti-personnel mines, it is much broader, as it also implies the presence of explosive remnants of war, grenades, small weapons, projectiles or mortars that were thrown or abandoned and have not exploded.

Accidents with these devices usually occur inside or outside populated areas and are the consequence of armed violence.

The most common devices present in Colombia are improvised hand-crafted explosives that are triggered similarly as an anti-personnel mine, which is industrially manufactured.

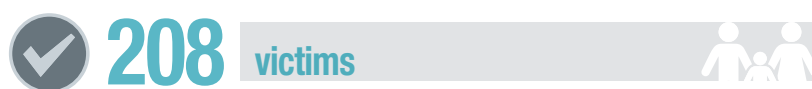
Consequently, when we talk about “mines” in Colombia we actually refer to improvised explosive devices.



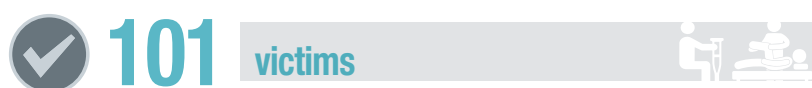
that live in areas affected by explosive devices learned how to stay safe.



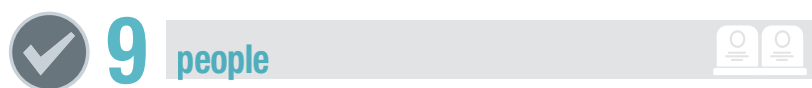
from contaminated areas have better access to water and basic sanitation; as well as renewed school infrastructure.



of explosive devices received economic support.



of weapon contamination were able to move better after receiving physical rehabilitation, prosthesis, or other orthopedic devices.



who died in accidents with remnants of war and improvised explosive devices had a decent funeral ceremony.



Collecting information:

The ICRC continues to be the main provider of information on victims of weapon contamination.

It informs the Office for Comprehensive Action Against Anti-personnel Mines (DAICMA) about old and recent cases. This information is used to guarantee that victims are cared for and have access to their rightful reparation.

Colombian criminal policy requires radical changes

The prison crisis in Colombia goes way beyond overcrowding and the disastrous conditions of detainees. The country is actually facing other great challenges in its approach to detainee overpopulation and legislation design.



After decades of visiting prisons, the ICRC is concerned about the lack of programs to prevent crime and integrate detainees back into society.

Rain would not stop pouring over yard 9 of El Buen Pastor Women's Prison in Bogotá for months, soaking the detainees' belongings, and their mattresses in particular. This specially affected women who sleep on the floor or what they call "the road".

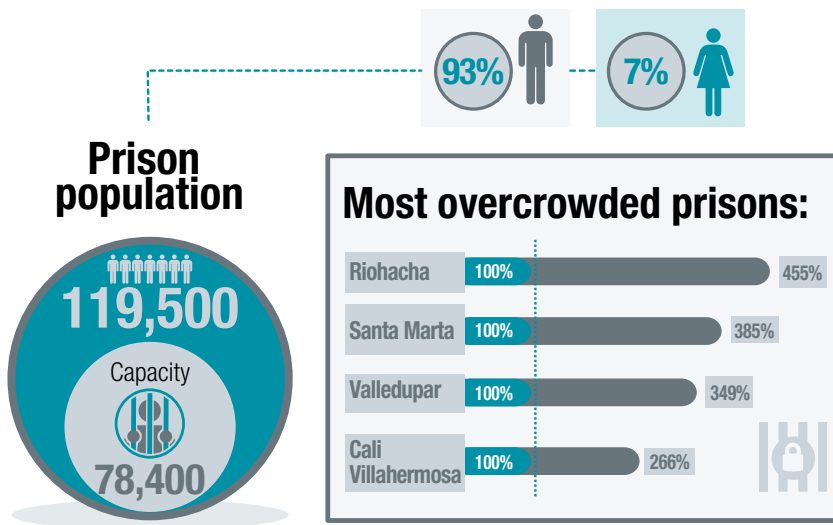
In 2016, this was one of the prison yards where the ICRC implemented waterproof roofs, which improved the detainees' quality of life. However, yard 9 is just an example; there are still places in this and other prisons experiencing leaking, poor hygiene and bad quality in water. The condition of toilets and showers is alarming as the facilities are very old and there are too many detainees.

This is merely a sample of how the lack of coherence in criminal policy impacts the prison policy radically. The number of detainees in Colombia rose from 51,500 to 119,500 in the 2000-2017 period, and overcrowded conditions increased from 35.7% to 52.5%.

Additionally, the lack of staff, an almost completely useless infrastructure, and the improper detention conditions impact the process of social integration negatively.

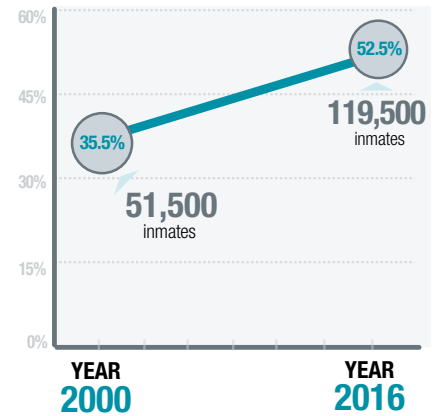
Overcrowding, lack of hygiene and poor medical care, foster the quick spread of diseases such as chicken pox, tuberculosis, and sexually transmitted diseases such as hepatitis B and HIV/ AIDS.

High levels of overcrowding



Sources: National Prison Institute (INPEC). Information updated as of February 14, 2016. *Análisis sobre el actual hacinamiento carcelario y penitenciario en Colombia* (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2016)

Overcrowding level Increase within 16 years



Similarly, the detainees affected by any kind of mental disease are not separate in special cell blocks. This impacts not only the development of their disease, but also makes them vulnerable to attacks from other inmates, or they may hurt themselves.

The Colombian State does not fulfill its obligations to the people it punishes for breaking the law. The Constitutional Court has acknowledged the failures of the Colombian prison system in its laws (Rulings T-388/2013 and T-762/2015), where they state the urgent need for a change in prison policy, which is currently focusing on making punishments even harder, despite being unable to meet the inmates' needs properly in the short and long terms.

Prioritizing social integration

Will the problem be solved by building more prisons? There are about 119,500 inmates today (nearly 40,000 people more than the system's capacity). This places Colombia as the second country with the highest inmate population in South America after Brazil (622,000), based on the reports by the Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR).

Nearly 30% of these people are not even sentenced yet, they are under preventive detention waiting for their legal situation to be decided. The State has to reflect on what kind of people and which types of crimes deserve penalties that deprive someone from his/her freedom, and which do not. Some people should not be in prison, not because they are innocent, but because there are other alternatives for them to pay for their crimes. Although Colombian legislation sets forth alternative punishments, they are rarely enforced.

The ICRC sees that the solution to this crisis implies redesigning the criminal policy to prioritize prevention and integration, and not giving priority to preventive detention in prisons as the only measure against citizen insecurity.

Very few inmates have been granted programs for their effective integration back into society. According to INPEC's statistics issued in December, 2016, there are approximately 18,700 detainees in prisons who re-offended.

The prison problem does not depend on a particular institution; it is a task to be undertaken by the State. Even though it is important to solve overcrowding issues, it is also urgent to address the causes of a crisis that becomes more unsustainable each year, compromising human dignity and respect. Undoubtedly, it is time to look for concrete results and implement a coherent criminal policy.



Voices from the prisons

"Some people deserve the chance to **serve their sentence by working** because some people become worse in prison than out in the streets."

Tyson

"**Overcrowding** does not allow following the classification of the prison code, which states that we must be relocated in cell blocks depending on our condition. That doesn't happen here."

Yazmín

"I struggled a little to handle the prosthesis using the crutch, but I'm able to walk again. Overcrowding is the hardest part of living in prison as a **physically-challenged person**."

José

FROM PRISON

Wandering children

Leaving her three children behind was an experience that marked Gloria forever. When she was detained, two of her children were taken in by the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF).

The only support she received did not come from her family, but from a person who knew her situation well: one of the inmates who had managed to leave and decided to save Gloria's children from their situation. They are now her only support, the only people who wait while she leaves El Buen Pastor Women's Prison, in Bogotá.

Gloria arrived at this prison almost six years ago. She started to work to reduce her sentence. Her job includes tasks such as cleaning chores and calling other inmates in case they are required by legal services. She has managed to reduce her sentence by almost one year.

"I want to get out of here, work in handcrafts, and start a small business, a type of foundation for other people to learn the business and be able to make a living. Those are just dreams; I hope they come true," says Gloria, who must wait for a judge to decide whether she fulfills the requirements to obtain benefits and be free again.



© Gloria says that inmates lack support to recover family ties with their children while in prison.



FACTS AND FIGURES

Our work in prisons

We continue the humanitarian work we started over forty years ago: visiting prisons to attract the authorities' attention to the conditions of detainees and suggest alternative solutions to address the root cause of structural problems.



Juan Sebastián González / ICRC

● Cali. Detainees with any disability face a double challenge to move around, given the overcrowding conditions.

✓ **64,000** detainees 

benefited from our visits to 17 prisons in Colombia, where we observed their detention conditions and the fulfillment of their legal guarantees.

✓ **7,700** people 

deprived from freedom benefited from the improvements made in their yards through six water and sanitation projects developed in detention centers of Boyacá, Bogotá, Valle del Cauca, and Chocó.

✓ **270** public servants 

of the National Prison Institute (INPEC) were trained in international standards on decent treatment of detainees (Nelson Mandela Rules).

✓ **80** detained 

people with disabilities now have new prosthesis, and in some cases, access to physical rehabilitation therapies. Additionally, accesses were improved to facilitate the movement of physically-challenged inmates in Villahermosa (Cali) and La Picota, (Bogotá) prisons.

✓ **17,500** detainees 

have been able to know more about their rights by means of explanatory leaflets designed by University of Los Andes with the support of the ICRC.

✓ **30** minors 

deprived from freedom were able to rejoin their families, who they had not been able to visit due to lack of resources.

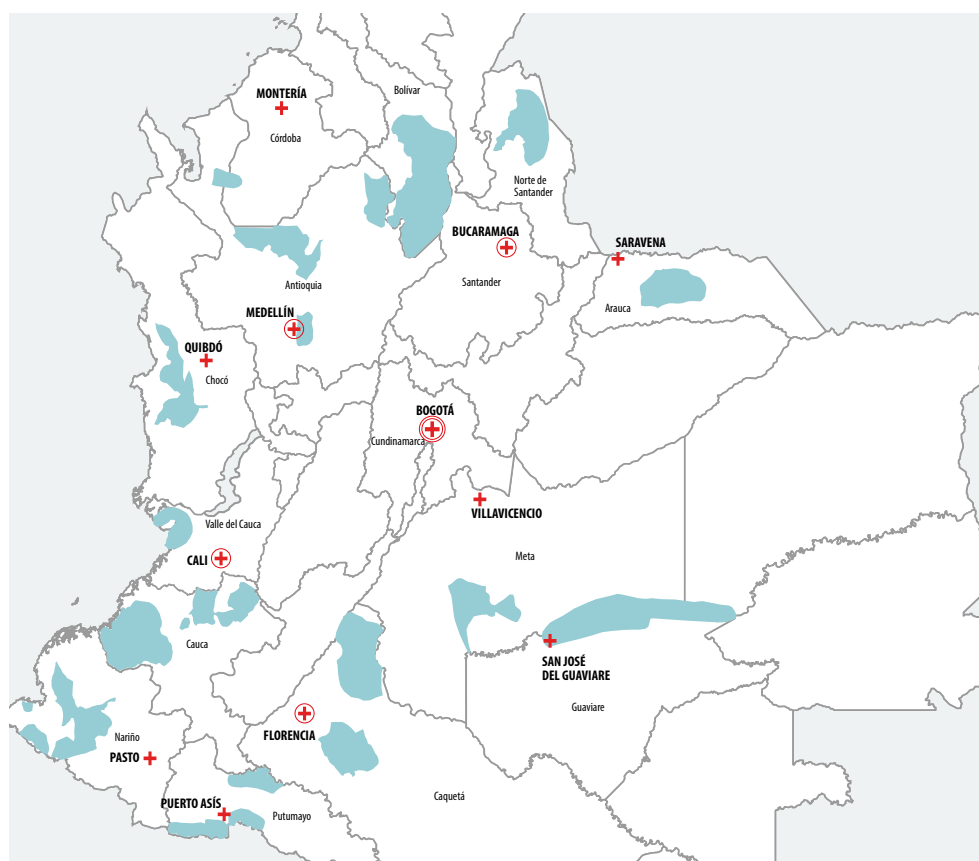


Donato Zuluega/El Colombiano

● Alto Baudó, Chocó (west Colombia).

Where to find us...

The ICRC has twelve operating offices in Colombia.



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MISSION

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflicts and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavors to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movements. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movements in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.

