

HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES IN 2018



ICRC



Isabel Ortigosa/ICRC

It is not too late

Colombia is now living through hopeful yet uncertain times: progress has been made in implementing the Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People's Army (FARC–EP); there are high expectations for the negotiations with the National Liberation Army (ELN); and the country will soon go to the polls, with the newly formed Common Alternative Revolutionary Force (FARC) political party taking part in the elections for the first time.

While there has been a significant reduction in armed violence in some parts of the country, we still have a long and complicated journey ahead of us before we can say that Colombia has overcome war. What's more, **there are ongoing armed conflicts** with the ELN, the People's Liberation Army (EPL), the Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AGC), and structures of the FARC–EP Eastern Bloc that did not join the peace process, and many people are still in urgent need of assistance.

Implementation of the Peace Agreement has not progressed as quickly and as broadly as expected. **Greater commitment and political will** is required if the Agreement is to be fulfilled. After 50 years of conflict, victims deserve much more than what has been achieved so far. We are particularly concerned about the situation of the most isolated populations. The Colombian State has not been able to fill the power vacuum in these regions and needs to increase its presence through development opportunities and the provision of basic services.

The search for missing people is still one of our main concerns. While the measures adopted in the Peace Agreement will no doubt help to speed up processes, they do not go far enough, given the tens of thousands of relatives awaiting answers. **The Missing Persons Search Unit** (UBPD), which will have an extrajudicial and a humanitarian role, urgently needs to be operational. The delay in getting the unit up and running is inexcusable and only serves to make an already dramatic situation more painful for many families.

Another issue that must be addressed is the crisis in the prison system. We are concerned that certain hardliners are calling for harsher punishments, even for children, despite the fact that there is no evidence to suggest that such measures make people safer. Following the upcoming elections, the new government will have to commit to making concrete progress towards resolving this critical humanitarian situation. Such a massive prison crisis cannot be left to drag on for another four-year term.

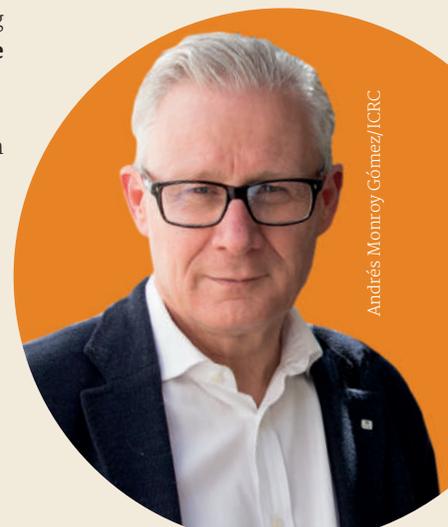
Regardless of who wins the parliamentary and presidential elections, and what their corresponding agendas are, we – as a humanitarian organization – **call for each candidate to put the victims of the conflict and the armed violence at the centre of their political agenda.**

These elections are a historical opportunity to give a voice back to over 8.5 million victims. I am confident that Colombians will be able to meet this challenge head on.

Christoph Harnisch

Head of the ICRC Delegation in Colombia

“Implementation of the Peace Agreement has not progressed as quickly and as expected”.



Andrés Monroy Gómez/ICRC



Isabel Ortigosa/ICRC

Our Current Concerns In Colombia

In 2017, we followed up on **more than 550 cases of recent violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law**, both in historically vulnerable areas and places where armed groups have reorganized. We are particularly concerned about the departments of Chocó, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Cauca, Guaviare, Antioquia, Arauca and Caquetá.

It is worrying just how many cases of such violations continue to occur. They include disappearances, death threats, targeted killings, sexual violence, large and small-scale displacement, extortion, confinement, accidents caused by anti-personnel mines and other explosive devices, social control, and the recruitment of children by armed groups and gangs.

We cannot reiterate enough that **compliance with humanitarian law is not optional**. Both security forces and armed groups in the country must comply with these rules and keep the civil population out of hostilities. Gangs must also ensure they keep civilians out of harm's way.

The Unit for the Victims Assistance and Reparation reported that last year there were nearly 77,000 victims of the armed conflict and other violence. While the figure itself is alarming, we must not forget that behind each number is a family's story of grief and sorrow – one that no family should ever have to experience.

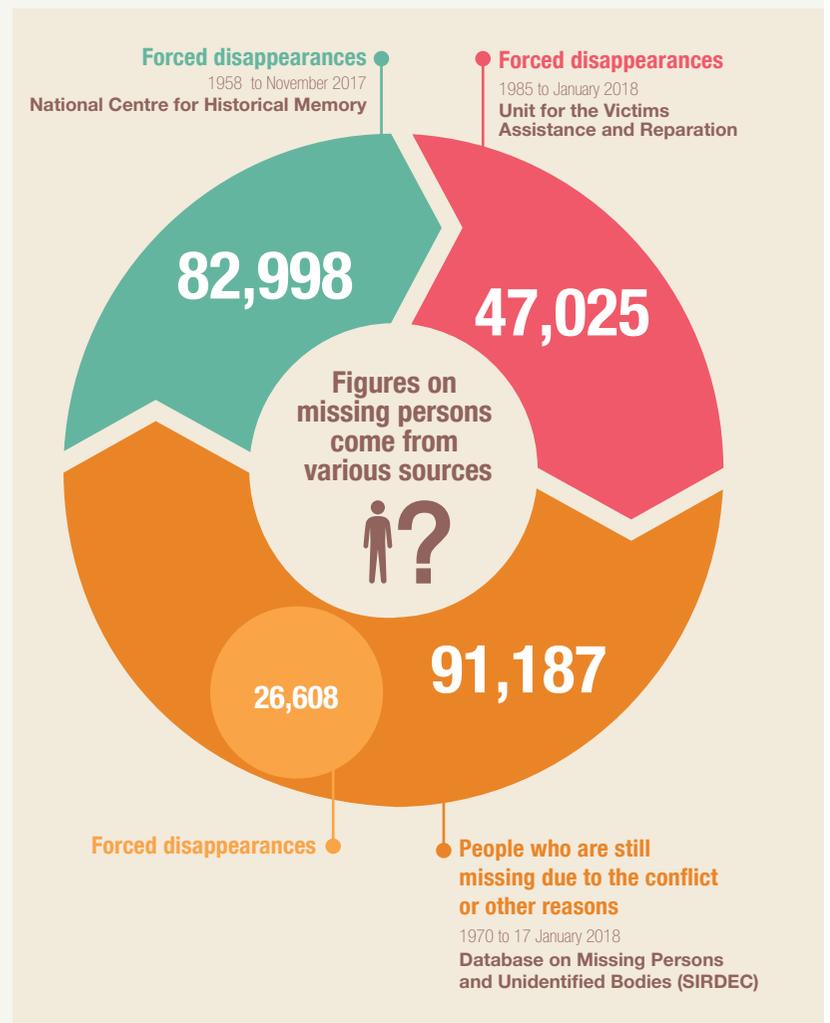
As a result of this worrying trend and the weak response from the authorities, **our teams carried out 14 emergency humanitarian operations** in 2017 alone. Most of these operations took place along the Pacific coast and provided support to those who had been displaced or confined due to armed clashes.

Missing people and their families

Beyond any doubt, the most critical humanitarian challenge currently facing the country is finding the people who have disappeared as a result of the armed conflict and violence. It has been more than two years since the Government and FARC-EP committed to searching for missing people as part of the Peace Agreement. However, their efforts have not been enough; thousands of families are still waiting for answers as to what happened to their loved ones.

Between 2015 and 2017, the number of missing persons cases opened by the ICRC to support families in their search increased by 133%. This figure does not necessarily mean that there has been an increase in disappearances, but rather that more people have come forward to report recent or past cases.

Missing persons cases opened by the ICRC to guide and support relatives in their search



The violence continues

Peace is still a fragile possibility. Although the conflict between the Government and FARC-EP has ended, there has been no respite in clashes between armed groups, and between armed groups and security forces in primarily rural, Afro-Colombian and indigenous areas.

While the Colombian State has made efforts to reach the most isolated communities, **the land-control interests of new and old armed groups have left their mark on civilians.** There is still a lot of work to be done to alleviate suffering in these regions, which should have benefited more from the Peace Agreement.

Although the 101-day bilateral ceasefire between the Government and the ELN offered some relief in certain areas of the country, the most affected populations now more than ever need strong humanitarian agreements that will have a real impact on their daily lives. As a neutral and independent intermediary, we are willing to support initiatives that aim to relieve the suffering of victims.

The social control exerted by gangs, together with the resulting invisible borders, death threats, sexual violence and the use of children in crime, have sparked a humanitarian catastrophe in several cities. Yet these issues are often overlooked or, worse still, **deemed to be natural consequences of poverty and inequality.** It is unacceptable that such abuse has become the status quo in certain urban areas of the country.

Prison crisis

The Colombian authorities agree that **the country's criminal policy is incoherent and ineffective.** The Constitutional Court has stressed the policy's excessively punitive approach and stated that the current conditions in prisons violate the human dignity and rights of detainees.

Although we recognize the efforts being made by the authorities to resolve the enormous challenges facing the prison system, we still think that substantial changes need to be made to address the harsh conditions in which prisoners live.

Overcrowding is merely the tip of the iceberg. According to the National Prison Institute's (INPEC) January 2018 figures, overcrowding stood at 46%, meaning **there are 36,400 too many people in the country's prisons.** Yet the serious humanitarian consequences of such an ineffective criminal policy run deep and can lead to **poor medical care and a lack of sanitary facilities,** which accelerates the spread of diseases.

In an effort to try and reduce crime, detention rates have quadrupled in Colombia since 1993. However, there is no evidence to suggest that harsher punishments improve the safety of citizens.

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Lena Mucha



Rebeca Lucía Galindo/ICRC



“I hope I’ll be able to bury my son’s remains before I die”



Eva's son disappeared nine years ago in Chocó. The ICRC recovered his body in June 2017. At the time of writing, Eva was still waiting for the authorities to complete the necessary procedures in order to deliver his body.



Laura Aguilera / ICRC

From the field

“We keep having to leave everything behind because of this war”, stated William, just one of the many people who have been displaced by various clashes between armed groups, as well as by the presence of anti-personnel mines and other explosive devices in Chocó. In 2017, we provided emergency humanitarian assistance to more than 2,380 people from the region.



Cecilia Mejía / ICRC

We built a small clinic in the Puesto Indio rural settlement in the Chocó jungle using bricks made from recycled plastic.



Donaldo Zuluaga / El Colombiano

During the #AquíFaltaAlguien (Someone is missing here) campaign, **relatives of missing people** in regions of Colombia affected by the armed conflict organized various activities to remember those who have disappeared and call for the search for missing persons to be accelerated.

In 2017, we asked Colombians from different areas to share messages of support for those who have **survived sexual violence**; the responses included this message from the Women’s Peace-Weaving Association in Cúcuta.



Clara Araújo / ICRC

Our call to action

The armed conflict

- ◉ We urge the newly elected administration and members of parliament in 2018 to **make the humanitarian response to victims of the conflict and armed violence a priority** in their political agenda.
- ◉ In the years to come, the country's leaders must undertake to comply with the humanitarian aspects of the **Peace Agreement** and ensure that the resources needed for their implementation are available.
- ◉ Humanitarian agreements must be adopted as part of the **talks between the Government and ELN**; such agreements must have a real impact on the lives of people who have suffered because of the conflict.
- ◉ We reiterate our call to the security forces and all armed groups – including the ELN, AGC, EPL and structures from the former FARC-EP Eastern Bloc that did not join the peace process – **to observe international humanitarian law** and other humanitarian rules and keep the civil population out of hostilities.
- ◉ We remind the State of its obligation to **limit the use of force** under an IHL framework to groups involved in situations of armed conflict, as defined under international law.

Missing persons

- ◉ Priority must be given to getting the **Missing Persons Search Unit** (UBPD) up and running. The unit must maintain its extrajudicial and humanitarian roles and have sufficient human and financial resources allocated to it.
- ◉ Victims' organizations need support to strengthen their position and participate in the search process: **Family members must always be included**, receive information and be treated with dignity. State authorities must respond effectively to their needs.
- ◉ We remind all parties that are or have been involved in the armed conflict of their **obligation to provide any useful information** they might have concerning the fate of people reported missing during the conflict.

Vulnerable regions

- ◉ It is urgent for the Colombian State to ensure that it has a constant presence in the country's **most isolated areas**, with a focus on social reconstruction (e.g. guaranteeing basic services, ensuring public participation, taking advantage of sustainable opportunities). Any such State presence should not be limited to land or police control.
- ◉ We call on the State to respond quickly and effectively to the needs of communities affected by **new types of armed violence**, including the most vulnerable urban areas.

The worsening prison crisis

- ◉ We urge the new government to strongly commit to making concrete progress towards solving the **crisis in the prison system**.
- ◉ We stress that **alternatives to detention** should be used systematically and set forth in Colombian legislation in specific cases.



More reasons to continue working in Colombia

Below is a summary of what we achieved through the humanitarian work we carried out in 2017, often alongside the **Colombian Red Cross**.

Our humanitarian work impacted the lives of **65,700** people

690 relatives

of missing people received support and guidance on their rights.



271 people

were able to find out what had happened to their missing relatives. Of those, 133 re-established contact, while the remaining 138 were notified that their loved ones had died.



19 bodies

were recovered in conflict areas and delivered to the authorities for identification.



12,000 people

have improved sanitary facilities, access to water and community infrastructure.



3,300 displaced

people received food, other supplies or cash to help them through the emergency.



1,700 prison officials

and law enforcement authorities were trained in international use-of-force and humanitarian standards.



11,980 people

living in areas affected by explosive devices learned how to prevent accidents.



490 victims

received psychological and psychosocial support.



11,320 disabled people

improved their living conditions at rehabilitation centres that are partnered with the ICRC.



107 minors

who formerly belonged to armed groups began their journey to a new life.



570 people

mostly victims of threats, were assisted in finding a safe place.



13 people

being held by armed groups returned to their loved ones. We have helped more than 1,630 people recover their freedom since 1994.



1,280 detainees

benefited from the ICRC's work, which consists of prison visits, and improvements to water and sanitary facilities and health care.



1,500 families

affected by the conflict were able to increase their income through work-related training, job-seeking support and resources to strengthen their business.



In Colombia

- We are team of **352 humanitarian workers**
- We have been working here for **49 years**
- Our 2017 budget was **28 million US dollars**

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About the ICRC

We help people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything we can to protect their dignity and relieve their suffering, often together with our Red Cross and Red Crescent partners.

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