



# HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES 2025

## COLOMBIA

# No excuses: The protection of civilians and compliance with international humanitarian law are not optional

At the beginning of my mission as head of the delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Colombia, I was told that armed conflicts in the country had intensified and, as a result, the humanitarian situation had deteriorated. During 2024, violations of international humanitarian law increased in the areas most affected by these conflicts, with humanitarian consequences. We saw a rise in the use of explosive hazards, the numbers of people displaced or confined, and the severity of attacks on health workers. All these reached levels not seen in Colombia for over eight years. While certain factors made 2024 a particularly complex year, the delegation in Colombia has been warning since 2018 that the humanitarian consequences have been worsening each year.

We see these changes reflected in the figures, but also in the accounts of communities, who tell us they feel increasingly exposed to risks, vulnerable and afraid. In the territories, people live in fear of the effects of armed conflicts and violence. The risks they face include homicide, forced disappearance, sexual violence, and the recruitment, use and participation of children and adolescents in hostilities. This increase in humanitarian consequences is compounded by the volatile situation in the country, caused by the fragmentation of armed groups, which exert control in certain areas, and the confrontation between state and non-state actors. Civilians are caught in the middle and increasingly unable to protect themselves, their families and their property.

For this reason, the ICRC delegation in Colombia sees an urgent need to insist on compliance with humanitarian law. It is not optional: respect for it should never be conditional on other factors, such as the existence of peace negotiations. In fact, when armed conflicts reach their height, unconditional compliance with humanitarian law becomes more important than ever. Parties to the conflict must do more than pay lip service to humanitarian law; it is their obligation to ensure that civilians are not drawn into the fighting and are protected from it. Humanitarian law must be a port in the storm.

When clashes between parties to the conflict increase and armed groups have more control, compliance with humanitarian law decreases. We saw this occur in Colombia in 2024. This situation has devastating effects for people who do not or have ceased to participate in the hostilities. For example, parties are failing to comply with the principle of distinction. Instead, they are increasingly putting communities in the middle of the conflict, exposing them to threats and stigmatization.

In 2024, we worked with communities in some of the most remote parts of the country, who face risks every day. We supported thousands of people through times of crisis, ensuring they received the help they needed. We helped communities to access water, we set up projects that gave them new opportunities and we held talks with armed groups and state entities to urge them to protect civilians.

These actions had a common goal: to give people greater peace of mind, tools with which to confront uncertainty, and hope for the future.

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The communities affected by armed conflicts in Colombia face great challenges. These are often invisible to those that are not affected by these circumstances, but our teams have seen them. This shows that the ICRC's work in Colombia is relevant and necessary, now more than ever. It is therefore urgent that all parties to the armed conflicts allow impartial humanitarian organizations the access they need and respect their work at all times and in all places.

Unfortunately, the outlook for 2025 is not good. We are concerned about the ongoing effects of the increased hostilities on civilians. If the parties to the armed conflicts do not explicitly commit to respecting humanitarian law, the outlook may get even worse.

So, we insist that parties must comply with humanitarian law, without delay, and that compliance must not be contingent on any interest beyond the protection of those people who do not or have ceased to participate in the hostilities. In Colombia and elsewhere in the world, we are seeing a trend of conflicts intensifying, exacerbated by various global and regional phenomena. In this landscape, there can no longer be any excuses: international humanitarian law must be respected. The lives and dignity of thousands of families are at stake.



**Patrick Hamilton**  
Head of the ICRC  
delegation in Colombia



# Colombia: Efforts to protect civilians are failing

In 2024, the humanitarian situation in Colombia got much worse. Armed groups split into factions and were reconfigured, territorial disputes between them intensified, armed actions increased and, in areas controlled by armed groups, mechanisms to control civilians were tightened. Moreover, as the ceasefires ended, hostilities between the national security forces and some of these groups resumed. All this significantly increased civilians' exposure to serious protection risks and violations of international humanitarian law.

The most concerning risks include the recruitment, use and participation of children and adolescents in hostilities; sexual violence; the presence, use and abandonment of explosive hazards; non-compliance with the principles governing the conduct of hostilities; and improper treatment of civilians. As these risks materialized, the humanitarian consequences deepened: the number of injured, dead and missing people rose; explosive hazards did more damage; more people were confined or displaced; and violent acts against health workers multiplied. This situation put extreme pressure on the communities affected and caused intense suffering among civilians.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, many of these consequences were not visible beyond the community affected. Moreover, the frequent changes in territorial control and the unpredictable behaviour of the armed groups limited victims' access to state and humanitarian assistance pathways, thus increasing their isolation and vulnerability. These conditions made it difficult for those outside the most affected areas to understand the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis.

## Vulnerable communities: Between a rock and a hard place

As armed actors clashed more frequently, the conduct of hostilities deteriorated, especially due to non-compliance with the principles of precaution and distinction.\* In 2024, civilians bore the brunt of the armed conflict, often being caught in the crossfire. Civilians also reported damage to their property as a result of the fighting. In some cases, civilian property was occupied by armed actors for military purposes or to care for the wounded.

This occupation by armed actors puts communities at serious risk, as the property may then be considered a legitimate target for attacks and destroyed. The civilian properties affected by the conflict included several schools, which were temporarily occupied by armed actors, suffered direct damage during the fighting or were left surrounded by explosive hazards. This limited access to education for many children and adolescents. Some were unable to attend classes for several days, others for months, putting them at greater risk of being drawn into

armed conflicts. The school is a protective environment. It is vital for keeping children safe and enabling them to develop fully as human beings.

The occupation of, and attacks on, schools also had a significant impact on the mental health of teachers, who reported constant fear, uncertainty and distress, and high levels of stress and anxiety. In 2024, we provided psychological and psychosocial support and care to 27 teachers working in some of the areas most affected by armed conflict, who were experiencing these kinds of effects. However, our intervention reached only a fraction of the teachers that need help. Most teachers do not seek help, either out of fear or because, in their desire to help their communities and continue to be caregivers, they put off seeking help until they reach breaking point.

Communities in the areas most affected by the armed conflicts and violence suffered from the pressure exerted by armed actors, as well as the direct consequences of hostilities. The fight for territorial control led to civilians being increasingly stigmatized. On multiple occasions, they were accused by armed actors of belonging to, aiding, favouring or being an accomplice of one or the other party to the conflict, simply for remaining in the territory and trying to survive in the midst of the confrontation.

This stigmatization had serious consequences for the communities, from the breakdown of their social mechanisms for dialogue, defence and resilience, to threats and

**\*The principles of distinction, precaution and proportionality establish rules for the conduct of hostilities, with the objective of protecting civilians from the effects of attacks.**

- ✓ **Distinction:** Requires that parties to a conflict at all times distinguish between persons directly participating in hostilities and those who are not or no longer directly participating. They must also distinguish between military objectives and civilian objects. Persons who do not participate directly or who have ceased to participate, and civilian objects, should not be attacked.
- ✓ **Proportionality:** Prohibits attacks which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians or damage to civilian objects which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.
- ✓ **Precaution:** Requires all feasible precautions to be taken when planning and executing military operations to avoid or minimize harm to civilians and damage to civilian objects.





displacement. It also affected humanitarian organizations' ability to carry out neutral and impartial work as, in some cases, armed actors restricted affected communities' access to aid on the grounds that it might benefit one of the parties to the conflicts. This made the situation even worse in areas where there was an urgent need of aid because of the violence.

It is important to note that the parties to the conflict must allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need, provided that it is impartial and provided without distinction.

In the areas controlled by armed groups, the treatment of civilians deteriorated even further. Violations of humanitarian law increased, such as homicides, threats and other kinds of abuse, the confinement of communities and the recruitment, use and participation of children and adolescents in the hostilities. In many cases, armed groups used these actions to exert social control.

The growing lack of respect for humanitarian law created a challenging reality for civilians. In 2024, we documented 382 alleged violations of humanitarian law, of which 44 per cent were acts committed outside the sphere of hostilities, targeting the physical and mental integrity of people protected by humanitarian law, such as civilians and those who are no longer involved in the fighting. Of those violations, 33 per cent were related to the conduct of hostilities, in particular the failure of the parties to the conflict to take precautions to protect civilians and civilian property from the effects of attacks. The remaining 23 per cent included acts that hindered the affected communities' ability to satisfy their basic needs and access health services, harmed their well-being and damaged civilian property. These figures reflect just the cases that we were able to document, not all the violations that occurred.

In Colombia, the level of risk to the lives and well-being of people affected by armed conflicts and violence has reached alarming levels. In the most vulnerable communities, the impact is profound. While we and other humanitarian

organizations are working hard to mitigate the risks, the primary responsibility lies with the parties to the armed conflicts. This is an essential point.

They have a duty to comply with humanitarian law, whose purpose is to safeguard civilians and limit the suffering caused by armed conflict. Failure to comply with the provisions of humanitarian law puts people's lives and dignity at risk. We must therefore insist that humanitarian law be respected, with no exceptions or concessions.

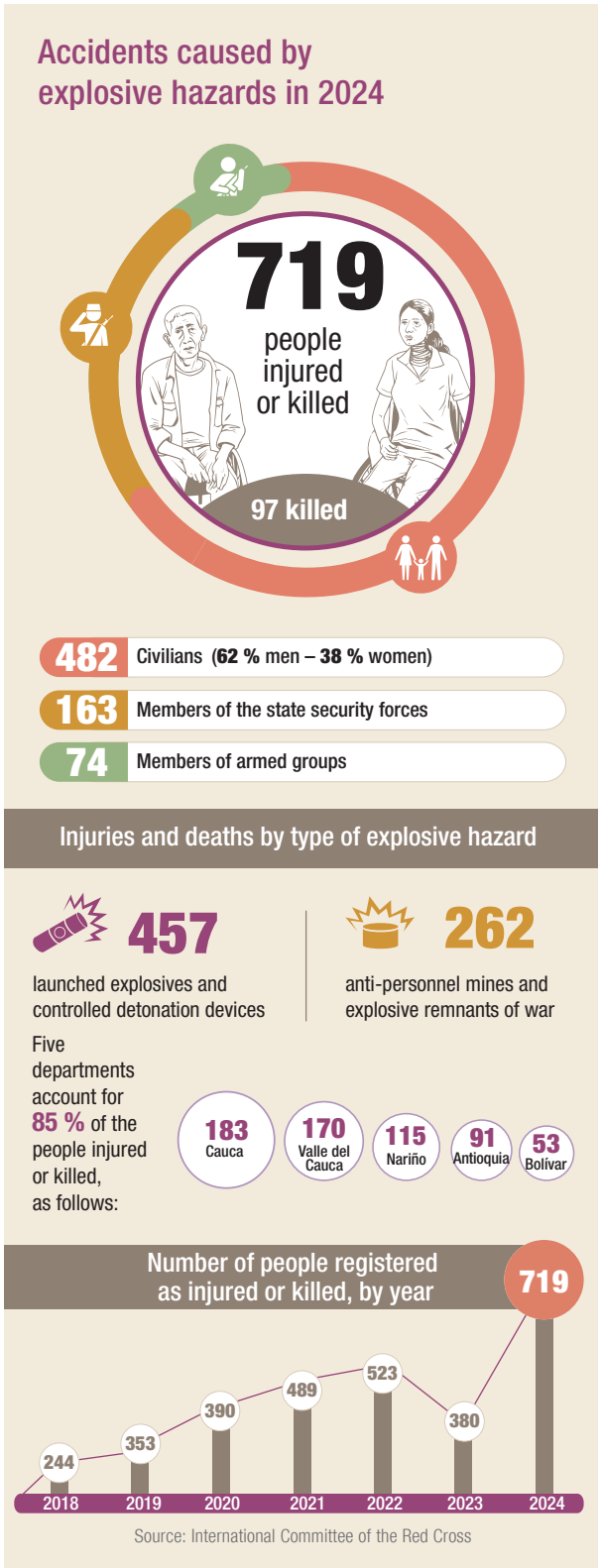
## The constant danger of explosive hazards

The presence, use and abandonment of explosive hazards have devastating effects on civilians. In 2024, entire communities were displaced or confined due to the constant threat posed by these explosive hazards. This transformed their ways of life, as they could no longer move freely through their territories. Many people lost their means of subsistence.

Essential activities such as hunting, fishing, planting, going to school or participating in community spaces became very dangerous. This situation compromised food security and access to essential goods and services. It also profoundly altered the communities' relationship with their environment, affecting their mental health and generating serious repercussions at the social and economic levels. People didn't know where existing explosive hazards were located or where new ones might have been installed, resulting in constant anxiety and fear of falling victim to them.

The number of people directly affected shows the seriousness of this problem. In 2024, we recorded 719 people injured or killed by anti-personnel mines, explosive remnants of war, launched explosives and controlled detonation devices. This figure represents an 89 per cent increase compared with 2023 and is the highest number reported in the last eight years.

The cases were spread across 14 departments of the country, with the Pacific region the most affected: the departments of Cauca, Valle del Cauca and Nariño accounted for 65 per cent of the injured and deceased. This rise has been driven by the increased use of explosive hazards as the hostilities have intensified. Civilians have been increasingly affected by these devices, especially launched explosives and controlled detonation devices. Of the total number of injuries and deaths recorded in 2024, 63 per cent were caused by these two types of devices and most of the victims were civilians.



In addition, the significant rise in the use of launched explosives, both in rural and urban areas, by means of improvised launching devices and unmanned aerial vehicles (drones), sharpened people's anxiety. This was especially the case for communities in departments where the impact of this type of device was greatest, such as Cauca, Arauca, Antioquia, Nariño and Norte de Santander.

Launched explosives can cause superfluous and unnecessary damage, and directly affect civilians and civilian property, especially when the attacks are not sufficiently precise or no distinction is made between military targets and civilians. It is worth restating that, under humanitarian law, parties to armed conflicts must respect the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution. Compliance with these principles is essential to protect civilians and minimize the effects of hostilities.

Not only did the impact of launched explosives and controlled detonation devices increase markedly last year, but anti-personnel mines and explosive remnants of war also did more damage. In fact, the number of people injured or killed by such devices rose by 42 per cent compared with 2023. The data show that all these types of device have serious consequences for civilians. Records show that in 2024, civilians accounted for 67 per cent of the deaths and injuries caused by these devices.

It is therefore clear that the situation is worsening and protecting communities is becoming very difficult. In 2024, we recorded accidents caused by explosive hazards in 78 municipalities of Colombia. In 39 of them, no accidents had been reported in the previous year. Moreover, for the first time in eight years, reports were received of people being hurt by these devices in the department of Amazonas. This shows that these devices are being used in new areas of the country.

\*An example of launched explosives are "táticos", improvised weapons that are fired from an explosive ramp. Examples of controlled detonation devices are cylinder bombs and car bombs, which require remote or timed activation. Explosive remnants of war include munitions that were fired but did not detonate during the fighting and munitions that combatants abandoned.



## Confinement, displacement and disruption of livelihoods

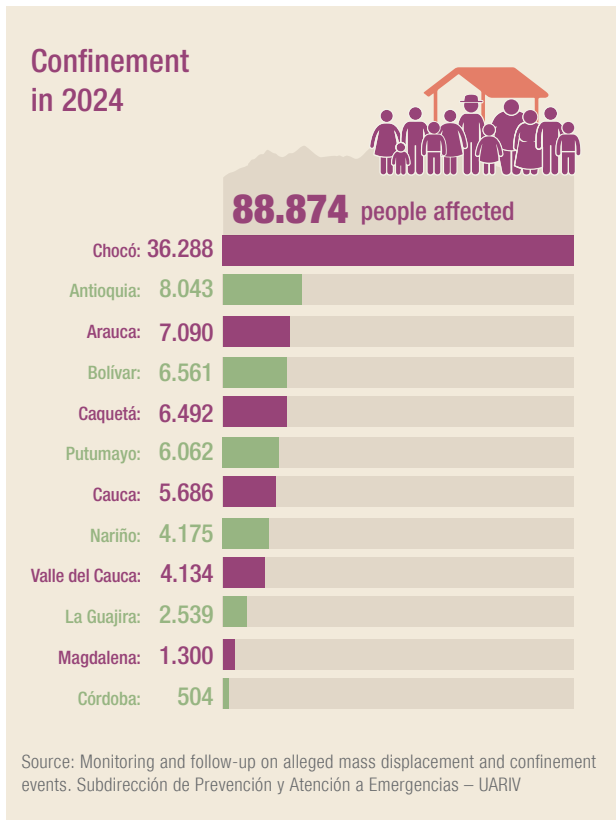
In 2024, community confinement in Colombia became more widespread than at any time in the last eight years. Confinement events increased by 102 per cent, and the affected population grew by 89 per cent compared with the previous year. According to figures from the Comprehensive Victim Support and Reparation Unit,<sup>\*</sup> 88,874 people were confined in 12 departments of the country over the course of the year. In some cases, communities were confined because of direct threats from armed groups; in others, they adopted protective measures, including limiting mobility, due to the risk of confrontations or the presence of explosive hazards in the area.

These confinements prevented civilians from accessing basic necessities, such as food and health services. This had several effects. In some cases, it harmed people's physical and mental health. It also drastically reduced safe access to water and basic sanitation, which increased levels of vulnerability. A territorial analysis shows that confinement was most common in the Colombian Pacific region, particularly in the department of Chocó, which accounted for 41 per cent of those confined. The number of confinement events in this department rose sharply, from eight in 2023 to 26 in 2024. Significant rises were also recorded in areas such as Antioquia, Arauca and Bolívar. In Antioquia, the population affected by confinement was more than six times larger than in 2023, making it the second most affected department in the country.

Confinement also increased in the southern departments, with the communities along the Caquetá and Caguán rivers particularly affected. The river is the main means of transport and communication and the main source of food for these communities, so being unable to travel along it profoundly affected their livelihoods and ways of life. The confinement figures for the southern areas of the country may seem low compared with other departments. But if we take into account the isolation of the communities and the low population density of these territories, the significance of these numbers becomes clearer. In Caquetá,

the population affected by confinement increased by 160 per cent from 2023 to 2024, while in Putumayo it increased by 300 per cent.

It is also important to consider the impact on ethnic communities, since 53 per cent of the people confined belonged to indigenous and Afrodescendent communities. Confinement affects these communities in several ways: it leads to a loss of autonomy, weakens their relationships with the territory, damages the social fabric and risks whole communities, and their cultures, disappearing.

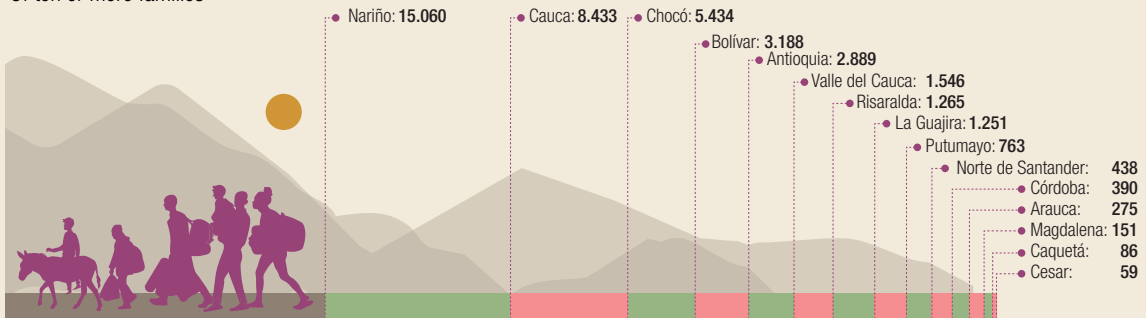


<sup>\*</sup>Monitoring and follow-up on alleged mass displacement and confinement events. Subdirección de Prevención y Atención a Emergencias – UARIV



## Mass displacement in 2024

Of ten or more families



**41,228** people affected

Source: Monitoring and follow-up on alleged mass displacement and confinement events.  
Subdirección de Prevención y Atención a Emergencias – UARIV

This complex scenario is made worse by mass and individual displacement. In 2024, mass displacement affected 41,228 people, across 15 departments. This is fewer people than in 2023, but the overall situation has not improved. In fact, the number of mass displacement events reported increased by 34 per cent, reflecting escalating hostilities and the higher rate of threats against, and intimidation of, civilians.

In 2024, mass displacement was so common that, every three days on average, the members of a community were forced to abandon their homes to save their lives. Each community left behind all their belongings. All they took with them was a persistent, unshakeable fear. Not only do displaced people lose material assets, but they also suffer a profound emotional and psychological impact. Families are separated, cultures are uprooted and the future becomes uncertain.

The Nariño department experienced particularly high levels of mass displacement in 2024. Although the number of events and the size of the affected population decreased compared with 2023, Nariño remains the most affected department in the country, accounting for 36 per cent of displaced people nationally. The situation in Cauca also stands out. In 2024, mass displacement events increased by 75 per cent compared with 2023, rising from 12 to 21. Large increases were also recorded in Antioquia and Bolívar. In Antioquia, there was an 89 per cent increase, while in Bolívar the number of events more than quadrupled, rising from three in 2023 to 16 in 2024.

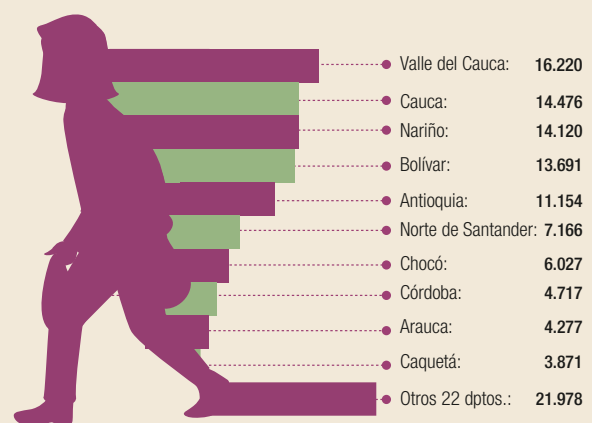
Ethnic communities have been particularly affected by mass displacement. Among those displaced, 66 per cent identified as indigenous peoples or Afrodescendants, showing that these communities are particularly vulnerable to the armed conflicts. When they lose their territories, this not only affects their livelihoods, but also erodes their cultural practices and collective identity.

The rates of individual displacement were also concerning. According to the Registro Único de Víctimas (Victims Registry), between January and December 2024, 117,697

people were individually displaced. Although this figure is high, it does not reflect the true number of people affected, as many victims do not report the event in the year it occurs, for fear of reprisals from the armed groups or because they are unaware of the state's assistance pathway.

Individual displacements occurred in all 32 departments of the country, but just six departments accounted for 65 per cent of the affected people. These were Valle del Cauca, Cauca, Nariño, Bolívar, Antioquia and Norte de Santander. Among these, Valle del Cauca was the most affected; in the department, the city of Buenaventura alone accounted for 11,532 displaced people. In many cases, this kind of displacement occurs because armed groups identify individuals as targets or threaten them, leading those people to abandon their homes and seek refuge as far away as they can. Fearing for their lives, most people never return home.

## Individual displacement in 2024



**117,697** people affected

Source: Subdirección de Valoración y Registro - UARIV

\*For example, as of December 2023, a total of 145,049 people had been included in the Registro Único de Víctimas due to individual displacement events that occurred during that same year. By December 2024, this figure had increased to 233,817 affected individuals. This is because nearly 40% of victims did not report the events in the same year they occurred, but rather the following year.

## Disappearance: The pain of not knowing

In Colombia, people continue to disappear. It is a never-ending tragedy. Thousands of families have searched tirelessly for their loved ones for years, even decades. They face countless obstacles, difficulties and, in many cases, stigmatization for demanding answers about what happened to their relatives and their whereabouts.

Meanwhile, more people are disappearing. In 2024, we documented 252 new disappearances related to armed conflicts and violence, an increase of 13 per cent compared with the previous year. These 252 cases were spread over 19 departments, but just seven departments accounted for 85 per cent: Arauca, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Bolívar and Chocó.

The people were reported missing for several reasons. Some were victims of disappearance, others were deprived of their liberty or recruited, and given no opportunity to communicate with their loved ones. In other cases, they died – victims of homicide or violent confrontations – and their relatives were not informed about what had happened or their whereabouts.

Armed groups continue to use disappearance as a strategy to terrorize civilians. However, in some cases of disappearance it is the weapon bearers who are responsible. For example, when a person is killed in an armed conflict, the weapon bearers, state or not state, may mismanage the body or information of the deceased. In 2024, with the increase in hostilities and territorial disputes, the number of dead and wounded rose, and with it the risk of people disappearing, in this context of mismanagement of bodies.

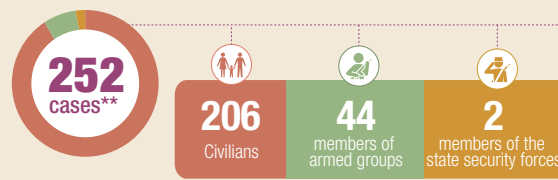
Under humanitarian law, parties to armed conflicts are obliged to prevent disappearance, both intentional and unintentional. If it does occur, they must make all possible efforts to clarify what has happened to, and the whereabouts of, missing people. Therefore, armed actors must take all necessary measures to ensure that the bodies of those who have died in the conflict are taken to state facilities, so they can be identified and returned to their families. No one should disappear, and no family should have to bear such uncertainty.

In 2024, 82 per cent of the people who disappeared were civilians. The remaining 18 per cent were members of the state security forces or armed groups. Most of the people who go missing are men. It tends to be their mothers, wives, partners, daughters and sisters who search for them. In the period between the entry into force of the 2016 Peace Agreement and December 2024, we documented 1,929 disappearances. Although high, this figure does not reflect the full extent of the problem; the true number of disappearances is certainly much higher.

Given that people continue to disappear, it is essential that the Colombian state establish an exclusively humanitarian, extra-judicial system to search for people who have gone missing since the 2016 Peace Agreement entered into force.

It is also crucial that the state allocate the resources needed to consolidate and implement the public policy governing the national search system, so that the families of missing people get concrete answers to their questions. In addition, it is important that the state strengthen the response capacity of the institutions that make up the medicolegal system, so it can provide the forensic services needed in relation to victims of armed conflicts. This includes searching for, recovering, analysing, identifying and returning to their families the bodies of the dead. The work of identifying the bodies is just as important as the work of recovering them. This is because, once a missing person is found, it is essential they can be identified and returned to their family with dignity. The search does not end when the body is found, but when the person's identity is restored.

### New cases of missing people in 2024\*



75 % men - 25 % woman



Seven departments Arauca, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Bolívar and Chocó accounted for **85 %** of the cases.

Number of people who have gone missing and been recorded as missing between the entry into force of the Peace Agreement in 2016 and December 2024:

..... **1.929**

\*These figures correspond to the cases documented by the ICRC in the course of its work. They are not, therefore, an exact reflection of the scale of the problem.

\*\*These figures may vary between ICRC publications as some disappearances are not reported in the year in which they occurred. For example, as at December 2023, we had documented 222 cases of disappearance that had occurred during that same year. However, during 2024, we documented another 88 cases that had occurred in 2023, resulting in a total of 310.

Source: International Committee of the Red Cross

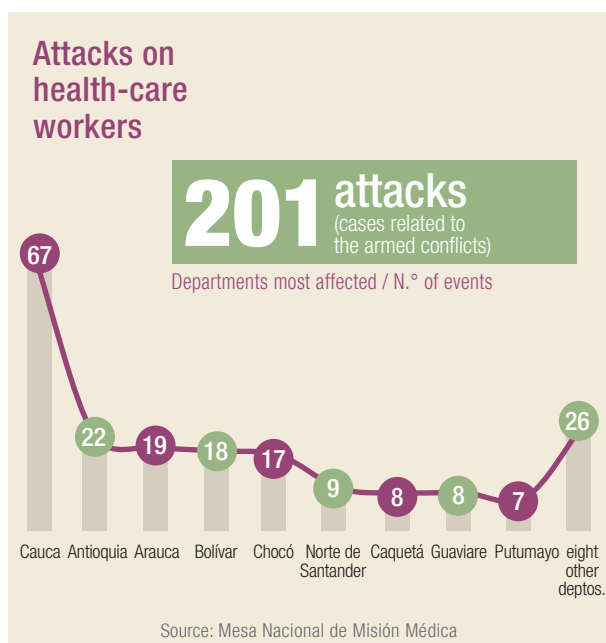


## Health care: Another casualty of the armed conflict

In 2024, another of the humanitarian consequences that intensified was violence against health-care workers. The National Medical Mission Board recorded 201 infractions (events related to the armed conflict). These included particularly serious events, such as the homicide of five people. They also included threats; communities having their access to health services restricted or cut off entirely; health workers being forced to provide care in inadequate conditions; the theft of medicines and equipment; and actions to hinder care for wounded and sick people. It's likely that more infractions occurred than were recorded. Victims of these events do not always report them, due, among other reasons, to fear of reprisals from those perpetrating the violence.

These events were spread over 19 departments of the country, with Cauca, Antioquia, Arauca, Bolívar and Chocó the most affected, accounting for 71 per cent of the cases. The violence not only impacted the lives and safety of health-care workers, including traditional healers, but also affected their mental health. In 2024, we provided psychological and psychosocial support to 451 health-care workers with a range of conditions, including high levels of anxiety, stress and suffering, and difficulties carrying out their work and caring for others.

Health-care workers in the territories most affected by the armed conflicts face a triple threat: they are direct victims of violence, they work in highly dangerous environments and they are continuously exposed to the suffering of their patients. They also report that they lack trust in the local and national support system, live in constant fear of being attacked, feel hopelessness about their work and experience low self-esteem due to stigmatization, all of which leads many of them to resign from their positions.



This situation has serious repercussions for communities, as it creates obstacles to accessing health services. At times, thousands of people have been unable to access health care, with fatal consequences in some cases.

## Victims/survivors of sexual violence: Invisibility and a lack of protection

We are also worried about the incidence of sexual violence in the areas most affected by armed conflicts and violence. This type of violence often goes unseen. Many victims/survivors choose not to report sexual violence, out of fear of retaliation, shame or guilt. As a result, the figures do not reflect the real magnitude of this phenomenon. In addition, a large number of cases go unreported because people distrust the institutions or face barriers to accessing the state assistance pathway.

Despite this underreporting, in 2024 our work in the territories showed that sexual violence related to the armed conflicts was on the rise. This violence has physical and psychological effects on not only the victims/survivors, but also on their families and communities. In numerous cases, armed groups used it to intimidate, punish, demonstrate their power and destroy the social fabric.

They use rape and other forms of sexual violence, such as sexual harassment, forced nudity, survival sex and sexual slavery, all of which profoundly affect the lives of victims/survivors and the environment in which they live. In some cases and communities, these acts are normalized and not recognized as sexual violence, making it easier for perpetrators to carry them out. This normalization occurs when communities draw some advantage from the situation, and so they do not take timely action to prevent or mitigate the sexual violence.

Because it is hard to collect accurate data and measure the magnitude of this tragedy, sexual violence receives less attention than other humanitarian consequences of armed conflict. The cultural and social characteristics of the communities in which it occurs may also prevent people from addressing the violence directly. Moreover, the workers responsible for responding to sexual violence do not always have sufficient training to provide clear guidance to the victims/survivors, and there may be barriers to accessing care, arising from prejudice, gender-based discrimination and other issues.

The impact of sexual violence is devastating and must be addressed as a priority. We must give the problem greater visibility, strengthen protection mechanisms and guarantee comprehensive care for victims/survivors. Above all, we must not only react to sexual violence, but also take preventive action to reduce its incidence.

## Classification of the armed conflicts in Colombia

The complex reality described in the previous sections is partly the result of the fragmentation and reconfiguration of armed groups. The unstable and constantly changing scenario in Colombia has intensified the humanitarian challenges. However, our current legal classification of the armed conflicts in Colombia does not reflect recent changes, since at the end of 2024, we did not have enough accurate information to establish a new classification.

We therefore continue to work with our existing classification of eight non-international armed conflicts in the country, which is based on the criteria established by humanitarian law. Nonetheless, we are closely monitoring the situation on the ground and analysing our findings. The classification of armed conflicts is a rigorous process and changes in classification can affect how humanitarian law is applied. This can have a profound impact on the parties and for the protection of communities living in the areas most affected by the conflicts. Considerable time is therefore needed to ensure the accuracy and legitimacy of the legal decision.



### Why does the ICRC classify armed conflicts?

The ICRC classifies armed conflicts solely to fulfil its humanitarian mission. This mission includes carrying out its functions under the Geneva Conventions, their Additional Protocols and the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, promoting respect for international humanitarian law and providing protection and assistance for the victims of conflicts.

### On what criteria does the ICRC base its classification of a non-international armed conflict?

The ICRC bases its classification exclusively on humanitarian law, which establishes two criteria that must be met for a situation of violence to be classified as a non-international armed conflict: that the armed groups have a minimum level of organization and that the violence between the parties reaches a minimum threshold of intensity. Both criteria must be met for that classification to apply. The ICRC carries out a technical and objective analysis of reliable information collected in the territories to check whether these two criteria are met.

### Under humanitarian law, are the motives of an armed group relevant for classifying it as a party to a non-international armed conflict?

Under humanitarian law, the motives of an armed group – whether political, economic, religious, ethnic or other – are not taken into account when determining whether it is a party to a non-international armed conflict or whether humanitarian law can be applied. Moreover, when a conflict is classified as a non-international armed conflict and humanitarian law is applied, this law does not grant armed groups or their members a special status. It neither permits nor prevents a state from negotiating with armed groups.

# The impact of armed conflicts on children

In 2024, state and non-state armed actors in Colombia continued to directly involve children in the conflicts. For example, information gathered by our teams in the field showed a large increase in the recruitment, use and participation of children in the hostilities.

Several factors made children more vulnerable to involvement in hostilities: a lack of life opportunities; limited access to education; weakened protective environments; and the presence of armed groups near their communities. These factors exposed them to the strategies used by armed groups to involve children: offers of financial incentives; seduction; recruitment through social networks with promises of money, prestige or power; threats to force them to join or emotional deception to persuade them, for example, making children "fall in love" with a recruiter. This last strategy became a recurrent practice in various areas of the country. Armed groups deceived children to persuade and manipulate them, to link them to the group and to make them consent to sexual demands.

Children who were recruited, used and participated in hostilities were affected in various ways. They were separated from their families, lost their hopes for the future, suffered psychological harm, sexual violence and mutilations, and were wounded or killed in combat. Families were also profoundly affected, especially parents whose children went missing. In 2024, we documented 77 new cases of children disappearing. Sixty-one of these disappearances were related to the hostilities. Of these 61 cases, five were closed after the children were found alive. In the remaining 56 cases, the search continues and their families are still waiting for answers.

The search requests we received reflect only a small part of the complex picture, but they show how involvement in armed conflict and humanitarian consequences such as disappearance are intertwined. Of the 77 children who we recorded as missing in 2024, 52 per cent are girls and 48 per cent are boys. Twenty-three of them are under 15 years of age and at least 22 belong to indigenous communities. The department of Cauca accounted for 53 per cent of the registered cases.

Establishing the exact number of children recruited or used by armed groups is extremely complex. The official figures do not reflect the magnitude of the problem as many cases go unreported. Many families do not report what has happened for fear of reprisals, because they live in remote areas where the state has little presence or because they hope that their children will return home.

However, we were able to get a clearer picture of the situation by talking to the affected communities. We regularly hold

meetings with civilians to address the problems affecting them and seek collective solutions to the risks and needs they face. As part of these conversations, we surveyed 348 people from 35 communities affected by the armed conflicts. Of those surveyed, 58 per cent said that the main protection risk in their communities was the recruitment, use and participation of children in hostilities, followed by weapon contamination, sexual violence and lack of respect for the principles governing the conduct of hostilities.

Although the survey sample is small and does not allow us to identify trends at the national level, it provides valuable information on community perceptions. For example, most of the respondents aged between 18 and 49 who identified the recruitment, use and participation of children in hostilities as the main risk said that humanitarian action by the ICRC in their communities has helped reduce children's exposure to this risk. These communities take a positive view of the confidential dialogues we hold with armed actors and our work to strengthen school infrastructure in some areas of the country. On this last point, several respondents noted that school environments are protective spaces and that children are safer inside their schools.

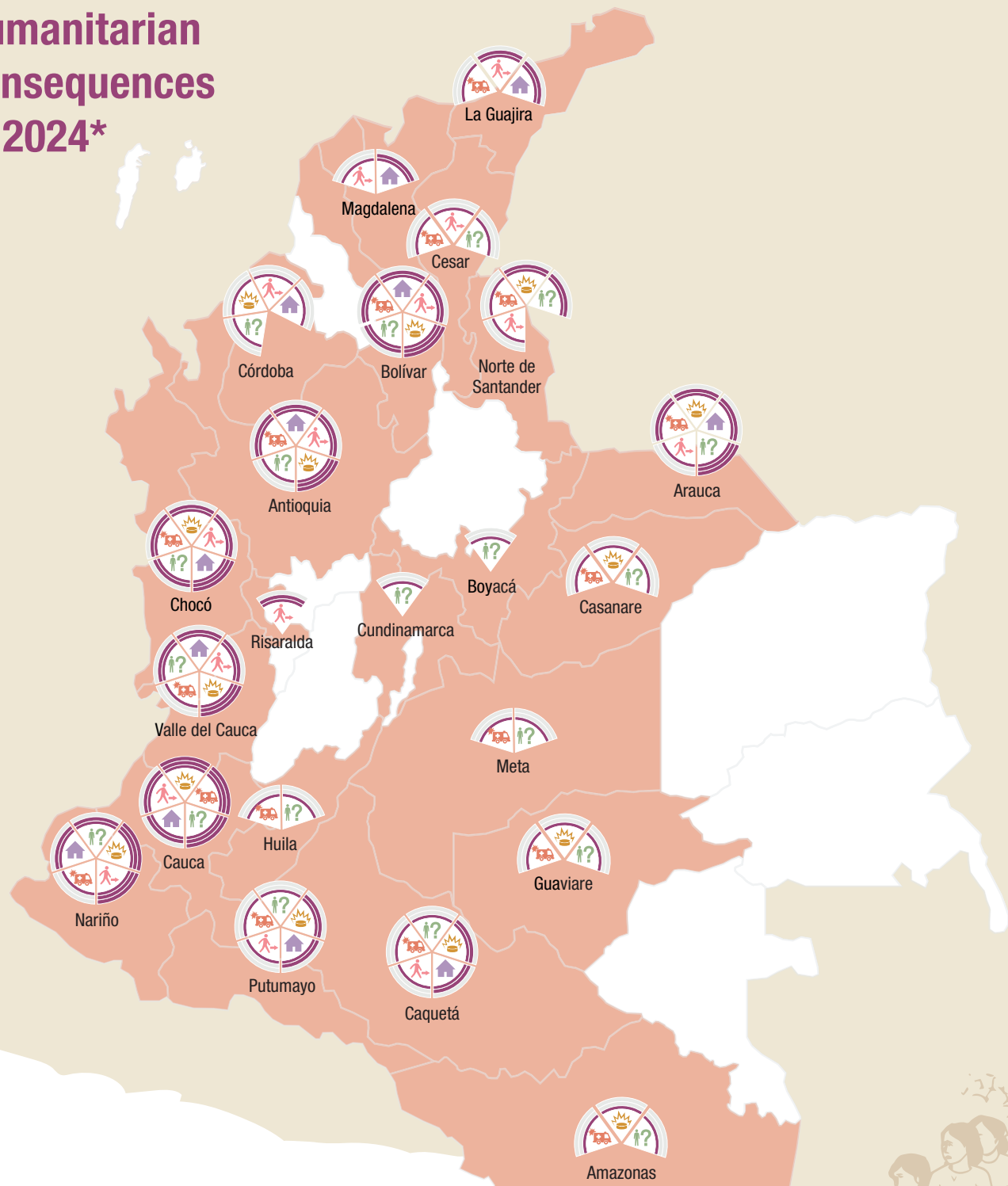
Children were also severely affected by explosive hazards. In 2024, we recorded 66 cases of children harmed by explosive hazards while going about their daily lives: playing, walking around their communities, attending school, carrying out agricultural work or travelling through public spaces in rural or urban areas. This is a big increase compared with 2023, when 24 children were direct victims of explosive hazards. Of the children harmed in 2024, 34 were victims of launched explosives and controlled detonation devices, and 32 of anti-personnel mines and explosive remnants of war. One child died. The others survived, but their lives will be forever changed by the terrible consequences.






In some cases, explosive hazards cause indiscriminate deaths. Even those who survive generally face amputations, multiple surgeries and long periods of physical rehabilitation. In addition to the physical harm, the events cause psychological harm that radically transforms survivors' lives. This situation is especially difficult for children, given their particular vulnerability. The profound and multidimensional impact of such events affects children's physical, emotional, social and educational development. Moreover, the negative consequences worsen over time, because children are vulnerable and face barriers to accessing the comprehensive care that would allow them to overcome the impact of the accident.





# Humanitarian consequences in 2024\*



	Scale 1	Scale 2	Scale 3
 <b>Accidents caused by explosive hazards</b> # of injured or deceased people	1 – 9	10 – 40	> 40
 <b>Confinements</b> # of people affected	1- 999 personas	1.000 – 9.999 personas	10.000 – 39.999 personas
 <b>Mass displacements</b> # of people affected	1- 999	1.000 – 9.999	10.000 – 29.999
 <b>New disappearances</b> (documented by the ICRC) # of cases	1 – 9	10 – 40	> 40
 <b>Attacks on health-care provision</b> (related to the armed conflicts) # of events	1 – 9	10 – 30	> 30

\*This map shows, by scale, the number of victims of the various humanitarian consequences recorded by department. However, these data do not take into account the population density of each department.





# Calls to action

## To state and non-state armed actors

- ✓ As the fighting intensifies, armed actors must protect civilians and those who no longer take part in the hostilities. International humanitarian law must be respected by the parties to the conflict, without exception.
- ✓ The principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution must be respected at all times and in all places. We call on armed actors to comply, in particular, with the principle of precaution, which requires parties to a conflict to take all feasible precautions to avoid or minimize harm to the civilian population and civilian property when planning and executing military operations.
- ✓ People who do not or no longer participate in the hostilities must be treated humanely. Homicide and threatening to commit homicide are absolutely prohibited. In addition, under no circumstances should civilians be stigmatized.
- ✓ Children must be kept out of the hostilities completely. The recruitment, use and participation of children in hostilities are violations of humanitarian law. Such acts irreparably harm not only the lives and dignity of the children, but also those of their families and communities.
- ✓ All forms of sexual violence are absolutely prohibited by humanitarian law and must be eradicated, both as a mechanism of intimidation and as a strategy for the recruitment, use and participation of children in armed conflict.
- ✓ Protection must be afforded to health-care workers at all times, and to wounded or sick people, even if they are armed actors. Ambulances and other forms of transport to evacuate wounded or sick people must be allowed to travel, regardless of which party they belong to. Likewise, the transfer and delivery of essential medical supplies must be allowed. As hostilities escalate, protecting those who provide care ensures that humanity prevails amid violence.
- ✓ In this situation, it is essential that the bodies of the people who are killed, including those of armed actors, are properly handled and identified, so they don't become missing people. All parties must ensure that families receive information about what has happened to their loved ones and where they are.
- ✓ We reiterate to armed actors, both state and non-state, that the presence, use and abandonment of explosive hazards have devastating consequences, from which they must protect civilians. We also urge them to consider the impact of these weapons on communities, especially in places that are essential for children, such as schools and playgrounds.
- ✓ It is important to remember that respect for humanitarian law is not dependent on the existence of peace negotiations. Nor should it be understood as being open to negotiation. Compliance with humanitarian law is mandatory, and when confrontation intensifies, it becomes more important than ever.

- ✓ We urge the parties to the conflict to adopt special agreements and/or unilateral declarations to extend and strengthen respect for and implementation of humanitarian law. These agreements should show a clear commitment to protect people who are not or are no longer taking part in the hostilities.

## To state entities:

- ✓ Due to the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation, we call on the state to respond promptly to the needs of the people affected by the consequences of the armed conflicts. This includes allocating adequate resources for this response. A timely response can ensure the survival of entire communities affected by armed conflict. In addition, we urge the state to activate and ensure the proper functioning of prevention pathways and to implement measures to mitigate the risks that civilians face.
- ✓ We urge the state to strengthen support mechanisms for people whose mental health is affected by the armed conflicts, such as teachers and health workers who do their jobs in the midst of hostilities.
- ✓ We call on the authorities to ensure that pathways are in place to prevent the recruitment, use and participation of children in hostilities, and to improve access to education as a way to mitigate the risk.
- ✓ We urge the state to guarantee that they will allocate the resources needed to implement public policy relating to the search for missing people and support for their families. This policy includes strengthening the national search system (including the medicolegal system) and giving victims/survivors a role in the design and implementation of the national public policy for missing people.
- ✓ We urge the state to establish an alternative mechanism, which is extrajudicial and humanitarian, for searching for people who have gone missing since 2 December 2016.
- ✓ The state must urgently adopt measures to prevent the bodies of people killed in the armed conflicts from disappearing. It is essential to ensure proper custody and traceability of both unidentified and unclaimed bodies that are buried by the state.
- ✓ We remind the state of the importance of making progress on its National Preventive Mechanism, established under the Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention against Torture. We also hope to see the state approve protocols for inter-institutional cooperation in crisis situations in penitentiary centres and in cases of people deprived of their liberty who have illnesses that make them unfit to serve a prison sentence.



## Results of our humanitarian work

We learn about violations of humanitarian law through dialogue with directly affected individuals and communities. We also work in certain communities to reduce the risk of the most common violations. To this end, we talk to the armed actors involved, carry out community interventions that reduce the vulnerability of the communities, and strengthen the capacities of the authorities to respond to the needs of the affected people. However, when risks materialize and generate humanitarian consequences, and the state is unable to respond in a timely manner, we provide direct assistance to victims through the provision of essential services such as medical care, food, emergency relief, access to safe water and basic sanitation, and community infrastructure.

In addition, we contribute to efforts to find out what has happened to missing people and their whereabouts by strengthening the capacity of civil society and the authorities and by supporting the families of missing people. To prevent people from going missing, we facilitate contact between family members. Likewise, we work to ensure that the bodies of people killed in the armed conflicts are taken to state facilities to be identified and returned to their relatives. We also work to provide protection and access to health care and, in certain circumstances, to improve detention conditions for people deprived of their liberty.

\*A person may have received more than one service.

### People affected by the armed conflicts

 **21.332 people**

enjoyed greater economic security after receiving food and support for productive and income-generating activities.

 **20.514 people**


benefited from better access to safe water, basic sanitation and vital infrastructure for the community, such as schools, community spaces and health posts.

 **11.416 medical**

dental, psychological and nursing consultations were carried out, and 1,303 vaccinations administered, thanks to the support of seven mobile health units in the areas most affected by the armed conflicts.

 **1.250 people**

who were wounded, sick, disabled or victims of sexual violence accessed physical and mental health services and physical rehabilitation.

 **31.900 people**

benefited from the medical supplies given to health centres and hospitals.

 **2.687 people**

received assistance and guidance on protection issues.

 **2.429 people**

from communities affected by armed conflicts received training in first aid and wound management.

### Dialogue with armed actors and strengthening of humanitarian law

 **399 confidential meetings**

with state and non-state armed actors in which we addressed issues such as the lack of respect for the principles governing the conduct of hostilities; the treatment of civilians; protection of and respect for health care; accidents caused by explosive hazards; the recruitment, use and participation of children in hostilities; and sexual violence.

We hold these confidential dialogues with armed actors to talk about the humanitarian consequences affecting civilians and alleged violations of humanitarian law in order to bring about a change in the behaviour of these actors towards the protected population.

 **3.233 members**

of the state security forces and government officials received training on international standards relating to the use of force and human rights, humanitarian law and other humanitarian norms.


 **256 members**

of armed groups took part in training on humanitarian law. In these sessions, they also talked about caring for wounded people, treating dead bodies with dignity, preventing disappearances, respecting health workers and preventing sexual violence.

 **706 cases**

were presented to armed actors to investigate what had happened to missing people and their whereabouts.

### Accidents caused by explosive hazards

 **19.315 people**


living in areas affected by the presence of explosive hazards received training on reducing the risk of accidents.


 **241 community**

contingency plans were developed to create response tools in communities affected by the presence of explosive hazards.

 **327 victims**  
benefited from economic assistance.

 **151 victims**  
received medical attention.

 **123 survivors**  
including 36 children, had access to wheelchairs, prostheses or other physical rehabilitation equipment.

 **120 officials**

and people working as intermediaries for victims received technical training on the state's assistance pathway for victims of explosive hazards.

### Searching for missing people and ensuring the dignity of the dead

 **707 relatives**

of missing people obtained information on the whereabouts of their loved ones thanks to our support. In addition, 157 missing people were found; 111 of them were alive.

 **The bodies**

of 13 people were recovered and handed over to the authorities to be identified. The bodies of two further people were received and transferred to the medicolegal system. Most of the bodies recovered were those of people who had gone missing after 1 December 2016, in areas that the state could not access.

 **With our support**

the bodies of 36 people who had died in combat zones were taken to state facilities. This meant that they did not become missing people and that their bodies were later returned to their families.

 **901 relatives**

of missing people received assistance in the form of guidance, psychological and psychosocial care, money or other help to buy food and basic household items, as needed.

### Children

 **864 teachers**

and administrative personnel from 19 schools received training in safe behaviour to mitigate the risk of accidents involving explosive hazards. They passed on this information to 3,659 students.

 **2.988 students**

received training on productive farming activities in eight educational institutions, to lower the risk of them being recruited or used by armed actors or participating in the hostilities.

 **2.800 students**

benefited from our improvements to the infrastructure of nine educational institutions and from a new multipurpose space where they can learn and play in appropriate conditions.

 **50 teachers**

and students took part in workshops held in schools to raise awareness of the risk of sexual violence.



### Victims/survivors of sexual violence

 **38 victims**

survivors benefited from physical- and mental-health care.

 **292 people**

received support, guidance and emergency assistance.

### Working with the Colombian Red Cross

 **8.811 civilians**

benefited from the humanitarian action of the Colombian Red Cross, which collaborated with the ICRC.

### The "CICR te escucha" (The ICRC listens to you) hotline


 **1.833 people**

received assistance through our "CICR te escucha" telephone hotline. We provided guidance and assistance relating to their humanitarian situation.

 **874 victims**

of armed conflicts also received guidance, support and care.

### Activities with communities and community organizations

 **1.098 people**

from communities and social organizations took part in our training programmes to strengthen their self-protection mechanisms against the effects of armed conflicts and violence.

 **1.613 community**

members received training on aspects of health care, such as first aid and wound management.

 **941 people**

took part in training and awareness-raising workshops on the different forms of sexual violence, risk identification and ways to inform people about state assistance pathways.

### More of our work

 **2.320 government**

officials took part in 249 meetings with us to strengthen the state's capacity to help victims of the armed conflicts and facilitate access to care pathways.

 **16.463 phone calls**

WiFi access and battery charging services were offered through our implementing partners and the Colombian Red Cross to vulnerable populations, mostly migrants in transit or wishing to settle permanently in the country, and Colombians needing to re-establish or maintain contact with their families.

 **552 people**

from the civil service, state institutions and the academic sector received training with a focus on humanitarian law.

 **34 people**

being held by armed groups were released in humanitarian operations that we facilitated.

### People deprived of their liberty in prisons

 **20.722 detainees**

were visited during the 35 visits we made to 19 places of detention.

 **42 people**

with disabilities accessed rehabilitation services and received 26 assistive devices such as prostheses, wheelchairs and other orthopaedic solutions.

 **62 people**

received guidance and support to access health care.

 **729 prison**

employees received training on prison management with a gender perspective and on the guidelines that establish the minimum conditions for the treatment of people deprived of their liberty.





# How communities perceive our humanitarian impact



**Acceptance  
Trust  
Protection**

**Acceptance  
Trust  
Protection**



**Acceptance  
Trust  
Protection**



In 2024, we surveyed 508 people from 61 communities in various areas of the country affected by armed conflicts and violence, in order to understand their perception of our programmes and operations and to what extent our work reduced prioritized protection risks in Colombia.

Most of the people surveyed belong to an ethnic group or identify as peasants: 79 per cent of respondents stated that they were indigenous people, Afrodescendants or peasants. The information obtained provides valuable insights into community perceptions.

Of the respondents, 63 per cent felt that the guidance, assistance and services we provided had resulted in many positive changes in their lives, their families and their communities. Another 30 per cent perceived some positive changes. Therefore, overall, 93 per cent of the respondents had a positive opinion of our humanitarian work.

In addition, 93 per cent of respondents said that their communities felt that, from the beginning, they were

listened to and the ICRC had taken their views into account when deciding how to guide them, help them and provide them with the services they have received. This response is key, as it reflects our efforts to maintain and strengthen our close relationships with the people we serve and to reduce the barriers they face in accessing humanitarian relief.

Likewise, 72 per cent of respondents stated that they trust our work and the initiatives we put in place. This finding highlights something that is fundamental for us: the importance of building relationships with communities based on trust and acceptance, which allows us to access their territories and provide responsible and inclusive humanitarian aid.

This survey is part of an ongoing process and, although the sample we used was small, it provides key information to further strengthen our work and commitment to support people affected by armed conflicts and violence.

# Decent detention conditions are still a long way off

In 2024, detention conditions for people deprived of their liberty continued to deteriorate, as did the welfare and safety of the staff of the National Penitentiary and Prison Institute (INPEC in Spanish). This was despite the Colombian government having declared a prison emergency in February 2024. It should be noted that the INPEC and the Penitentiary and Prison Services Unit (USPEC in Spanish) are civilian bodies. They are not part of the Military Forces of Colombia, nor do they directly participate in the hostilities.

The state has begun applying positive measures such as Act 2292 of 2023, which benefited 90 women its first year of implementation. Nonetheless, overcrowding remains a concern. In prisons run by the INPEC, it reached an average of 25.6 per cent. In addition, the prison service is massively understaffed by at least 16,000. The current workforce is too small to ensure proper prison management, dignified treatment of detainees or effective re-socialization.



Various factors have led to detention conditions that do not meet international standards. For example, many of Colombia's national prison establishments (known as ERON) are no longer fit for purpose and deteriorating further due to a lack of preventive and corrective maintenance. This makes it difficult to supply them with essential services such as water, and impossible to provide people deprived of their liberty with proper health care.

The current health service model is increasingly focused on curative care. It faces high costs and problems with management and implementation, and lacks a systematic approach to caring for people with disabilities. Moreover, the absence of a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach to mental health hinders rehabilitation, for example, for those who use psychoactive substances. The high turnover of health personnel, who are sometimes threatened by detainees, also hinders service provision.

Another concern is that the information system for prison deaths is weak, which hinders authorities' efforts to adopt preventive measures addressing the causes of these deaths.

Transfers took place to move convicted people from temporary detention centres to national prison establishments. This alleviated, albeit to a limited extent and only temporarily, concerns about people being detained for too long in these centres, which are designed to hold people for no more than 36 hours.

## Releases: How we have brought thousands of people back home

Over 55 years, the ICRC in Colombia has helped nearly 2,000 people who had been held by armed actors to return to their families. In 2024, our efforts as a neutral intermediary led to 34 people regaining their freedom.

We have been able to continue this work thanks to our experience in handling these operations and the trust that parties to the conflict place in us. Unfortunately, there is still a need for us to play this role.

The people released may be civilians, members of armed groups or of the state security forces. Our humanitarian work continues irrespective of the reasons for which they are being held. The principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality guide our work. We are entirely focused on doing everything possible to free people so they can return home.



We help people around the world affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence, doing everything we can to protect their dignity and relieve their suffering, often with our Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. We also seek to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles.

People know they can count on us to carry out a range of life-saving activities in conflict zones and to work closely with the communities there to understand and meet their needs. Our experience and expertise enable us to respond quickly, effectively and without taking sides.

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