



ICRC

HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES 2020

ANNUAL COLOMBIA OVERVIEW



Protecting dignity amid conflict

The tales of people who have suffered from the conflict and armed violence reflect the difficult reality for many in Colombia today.

In 2019, explosive devices and mines killed or maimed a new victim nearly every day; people had to flee their homes or were confined to their communities; they were murdered, threatened, went missing or suffered sexual violence; medical workers and facilities were attacked in areas already stricken with low health coverage; natural resources were destroyed; minors were recruited and used by armed groups. These were the most serious breaches of international humanitarian law (IHL) documented by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on the ground.

National authorities and social organizations, among them the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, will continue to face challenges if they do not command sufficient resources to meet the needs of the population, and if their humanitarian action does not place at its very heart the voices of those who know the conflict and violence first-hand: the victims. We all have a responsibility to listen to them.

With 50 years of experience on the front line of the armed conflict in Colombia, we remain committed to finding pragmatic solutions to complex humanitarian dilemmas, while continuing to stress that wars without limits are wars without end.

Thanks to our teams working in different parts of the country to promote respect for IHL, we can affirm that at least five armed conflicts are still under way in Colombia today. To ensure the protection of people's physical integrity and their human dignity, it is vital that all armed players assume unequivocal responsibility for their actions and omissions. The fear underlying the victims' tales, however, reveals an ever more complex panorama of abuses. We therefore call urgently on government bodies and civil society to take more forceful action to respond to people's needs, after all the suffering they have endured.

Against this backdrop of violations of IHL, the country is hosting a large number of migrants who are living in a state of extreme vulnerability, albeit with a capacity to overcome the difficulties facing them. Many Colombians and their government have opened their doors to those in need, but the international community's response has been insufficient.

“All armed players must assume unequivocal responsibility for their actions.”

Christoph Harnisch

Head of the ICRC Delegation in Colombia



Members of an indigenous community in Chocó learning about ways to improve their health and hygiene conditions.

452.000
Migrants and residents of receiving communities benefited from improved living conditions.

1.500
Family members improved their livelihoods after receiving guidance, money, training and support in order to find employment or bolster their businesses.

60
Bodies of missing people were transferred for handover to the authorities or the families. In addition, 170 family members received mental health care.



“It's as if your heart had been torn out. You never feel at peace. I just want to open the door and see my sons standing there.”
—Omaira, mother of two missing in Arauca.

+
We donated medicines and medical supplies to 14 hospitals, which treated over 30,000 Colombians and migrants.

139.000
People received livelihood inputs and other support to boost their income.

34.000
People benefited from medical and psychosocial care.

260.000
People gained improved access to water and infrastructure.

“Whenever my daughter hears a loud noise she bursts into tears. She's terrified of the clashes, but where can we run to?”
—Hermes, resident of Hacari, North Santander.

49.200
People affected by the conflict and armed violence gained access to better sanitary conditions and infrastructure, including water supply.

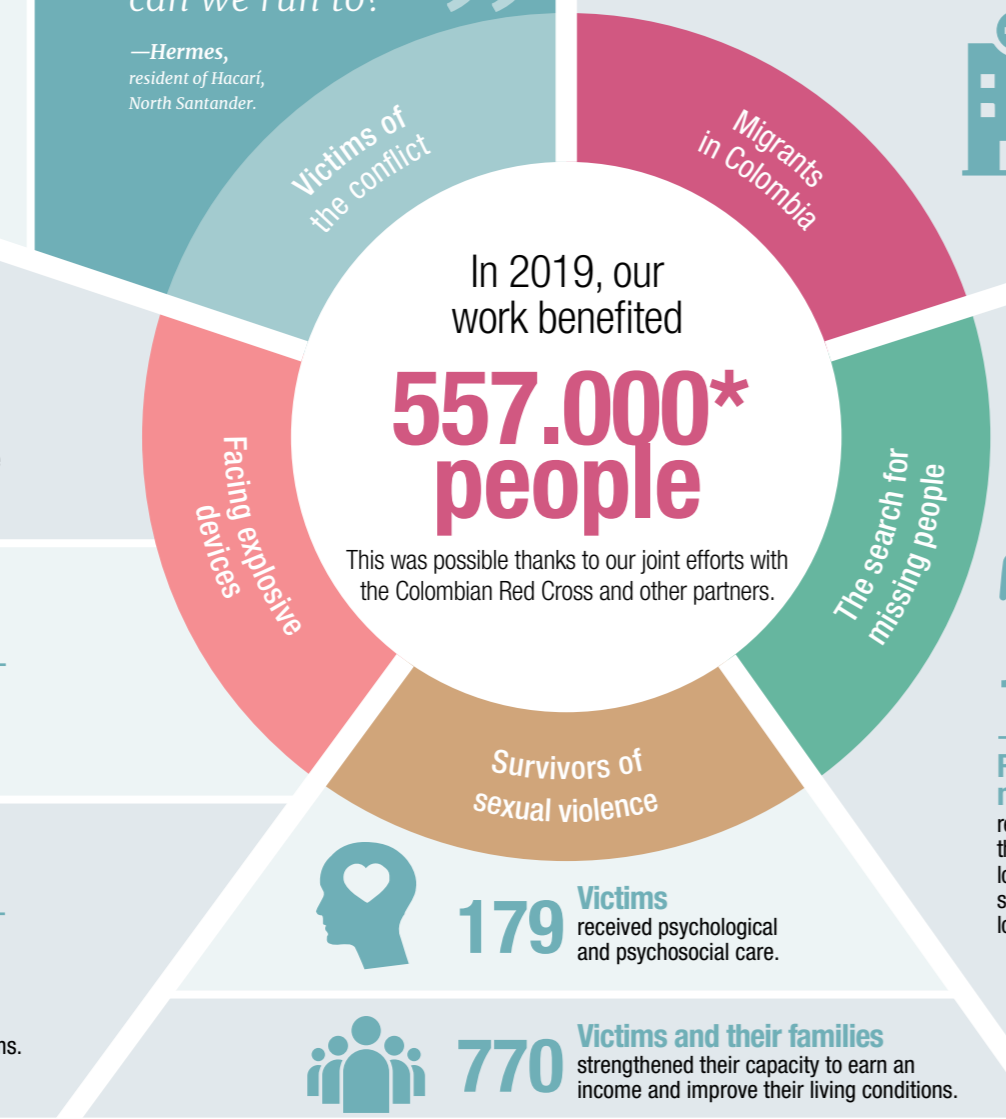
29.400
People living in areas affected by explosive devices learned how to reduce the risk of accidents.

100
Victims received health care and guidance.

100
Survivors improved their mobility thanks to wheelchairs, artificial limbs and other physical rehabilitation items.

230
Disabled people in prisons overcame mobility barriers thanks to wheelchairs, artificial limbs and other physical rehabilitation items.

2.500
Members of the Armed Forces and prison authorities attended training on international standards on the use of force, IHL and other humanitarian rules.



In 2019, our work benefited **557.000*** people

This was possible thanks to our joint efforts with the Colombian Red Cross and other partners.

11.900
People bolstered their economic security after receiving food and support for productive and income-generating activities. Around 4,400 of them were in rural areas.

1.270
Injured, sick and disabled people benefited from health and physical rehabilitation services.

“We think there is peace, but what is happening is more worrisome for us, as we have to go out into the fields to earn a living.”
—Luber, victim in Caquetá.



261.000
Services, including phone calls, Wi-Fi and battery-charging, were provided to help migrants contact their loved ones.

*The same person may have received more than one service.



We are the International Committee of the Red Cross

We help people around the world affected by armed conflicts and other situations of 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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Living without fear, still just a dream for many Colombians

The resurgence of armed activities shows that peace has not yet borne the promised fruit in the most vulnerable regions of the country, where the State has not fully consolidated its presence and the arrival of migrants is spawning new challenges.



987

VIOLATIONS OF IHL and other humanitarian standards were documented by our teams in 2019.

Peace is still elusive in many parts of Colombia. In 2019, there were 352 victims of explosive devices and anti-personnel mines, over 25,300 people were displaced and there were 218 acts of aggression against health workers and facilities. These were, however, just some of the sad indicators of the deteriorating humanitarian situation in several areas of the country.

Over 27,600 inhabitants were confined to their neighbourhoods because of the actions of armed groups and the presence of explosives. 83% of these people live in Chocó, a department long afflicted by desperate poverty and unmet basic needs. Entire communities were thus left struggling in the face of armed clashes, shortages and limited access to their fields and to health care.

Other departments where our teams observed urgent problems were Nariño, Antioquia (especially Bajo Cauca), Arauca, North Santander, Cauca, Caquetá, Meta and Córdoba. While the situation has clearly improved significantly in many parts of the country, in oth-

ers a weak institutional response has exacerbated the suffering caused by an escalation in the conflict and armed violence.

As evidence of this difficult situation, in 2019 our field teams documented 987 violations of IHL and other humanitarian standards. 77% of these cases involved threats, homicide, sexual violence and the recruitment of minors, among other very serious acts. However, this gives us only a partial view of the situation, based on the cases recorded first-hand in the 13 offices we have in the country. It is a disheartening panorama, which shows that all armed players in Colombia are still failing to respect the minimum rules of war and make the civilian population bear the brunt of their actions.

The figures contained in this document help us to grasp the scale of the effects of the conflict and violence, but we have no numbers encapsulating those consequences that remain to be gauged, for instance on people's state of mental health, including feelings of fear, despair and uncertainty, as well as school dropout rates and stigmatization.



Ernesto Guzmán / FPA

A complex panorama of abuses

New dynamics in the violence, coupled with old types of behaviour by armed actors, draw a complex map of increasingly destructured armed groups, hindering our ability both to analyse the situation and to respond appropriately to people's needs.

There has been no decrease in abuses linked to the violence, which take on a different form in each region of the country. The main challenges facing us as humanitarian workers, as well as other organizations and State bodies, are thus still the following: identifying the structures of the armed factions, and establishing a dialogue with them to remind them of their obligation to comply with humanitarian rules and explain the importance of allowing us to reach the victims.

In 2019, we noted continuing trends in the violations perpetrated. Thus, many of the victims used by members of armed groups for their activities were then abused sexually. Other groups sometimes made them disappear or killed them in retaliation. The victims' families were usually also threatened, and had to flee their homes and keep silent. The atmosphere of fear, coupled with the sad normalization of many of these practices, hinders efforts to find out about more cases and take any preventive measures to protect potential victims.

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Fernando Romero / CICR

Migrating to conflict zones

Against this already difficult backdrop, over 1.6 million migrants**, including refugees, who are passing through or have settled in areas of Colombia affected by conflict and armed violence, are particularly vulnerable. They are exposed to different kinds of abuses and risks, and many of them are afraid to seek help, face xenophobic reactions and have scant knowledge of their rights.

Wide-ranging action is urgently needed to support communities that have suffered the ravages of over half a century of conflict and today are taking in migrants, as well as some 500,000 Colombians*** who have returned to their country.

The phenomenon of under-reporting also complicates steps to resolve the issue of missing persons, which currently total over 83,000*, with no sign of the problem waning. In 2019, we recorded 93 new disappearances in Colombia.

Although we obtained information about 913 of the 2,158 people we are searching for, only 116 cases were resolved (5% of the total). This shows that finding those who have gone missing is a gargantuan task that will take many years, and which the Missing Persons Search Unit is working hard to solve, together with other institutions.

Security conditions must first improve so that the families can come forward and report their cases. All armed players must also fully recognize their obligation to provide any information they have to help locate people who have disappeared in their areas of influence. If there is no will to end the spiral of pain that too many Colombians are enduring, the answers, so necessary in these moments of uncertainty, will remain on paper alone.

* Data from the National Centre for Historical Memory
** Figures from Colombia Migration
*** According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Daniel Valencia / CICR

A wounded person being evacuated by the ICRC and local health officials in rural Chocó.

Health care under threat

In 2020, the peace agreement signed between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army) will be four years old. This historic event represented a huge step forward for the country, but also poses additional challenges for the parties and civil society as a whole.

The institutional response to victims has indisputably been strengthened, and communities have bolstered their capacity to protect themselves and defend their rights. However, any progress made is jeopardized each time the capacity to do something as essential as saving lives comes under attack. In 2019, our teams recorded 218 cases of aggression against health workers and facilities, some of them entailing grave breaches of IHL.

Many areas of the country that require greater support have not yet reaped the benefits of the signed agreement. The State's presence there is still too fragile to guarantee the health, education and other basic services necessary to ensure decent living conditions. We also note with concern that the precarious humanitarian situation in these

Alarming deterioration of conditions in prisons

Living conditions for the inmates of Colombian prisons continue to worsen each year. Unstable public penitentiary policies, coupled with the desire to solve immediate problems over structural issues, inhibit any long-term solutions.

While we recognize the ongoing efforts of State bodies, the problems afflicting prisons in Colombia go far beyond overcrowding and the difficult situation this creates for those detained there

regions only foment the violence and strengthens the illicit economies that sustain it, such as drug-trafficking and illegal mining.

Seeking or providing medical care has become an act of courage in departments such as North Santander and Valle del Cauca. Firstly, health facilities are few and far between and in poor condition, in the very areas most affected by the conflict and armed violence. Secondly, threats and dangerous security conditions often prevent staff from carrying out their work. We cannot even start to calculate the number of preventable diseases, medical complications and deaths that could have been avoided if a health worker had not been forced to flee or a health care centre not had to close its doors for lack of resources.

Our calls to action

To armed actors

- We urge the Armed Forces and armed groups to comply with their obligation to know, respect and apply IHL and other humanitarian standards. Under no circumstances should civilians continue to suffer the consequences of armed actions. The complex situation in different regions of the country impels us again to remind all armed players that respecting limits in war is not optional.
- We call on all armed actors to provide any information they might have concerning the fate of missing persons. Fulfilling this duty will help provide answers to tens of thousands of families who still do not know what happened to their loved ones.

To the authorities

- It is vital that the new local and regional authorities focus their efforts on providing dignified, timely and comprehensive assistance to communities affected by conflict and armed violence in urban and rural areas.
- We call on the State to strengthen its capacity to provide wide-ranging care, including psychosocial and economic support, to all victims. Survivors of sexual violence, recruitment, explosive devices, threats and disappearances, among others, must receive dignified and efficient assistance that is tailored to their needs and does not revictimize them.
- We acknowledge the State's efforts to respond to the needs of migrants. However, implementation of the regulatory framework must be strengthened at regional and local levels.
- We urge the authorities to continue providing support to the Missing Persons Search Unit, which relies on having the necessary resources and the cooperation of all State agencies in order to fulfill its mission.
- The proper management of morgues, cemeteries and other burial sites is key in the search for missing persons and in preventing the loss of bodies. We urge the relevant institutions to recognize their responsibility in this task.
- We remind the penitentiary authorities of the importance of unifying responsibility for detainees' health under a single lead entity with sufficient autonomy to make decisions regarding the physical and mental condition of inmates.

To Colombian society

- Since most of the acts of aggression against medical staff and facilities in 2019 were carried out by members of the civilian population, we extend a call to everyone to protect and respect the activities of health workers. This is equally relevant for armed players.
- It is vital that the private sector facilitate fair and dignified employment for the victims of the armed conflict and migrants.

To the international community

- Urgent measures are needed to respond to the challenges of migration. The international community must step up its funding for humanitarian programmes aimed at meeting the needs of migrants (including refugees), as well as returning Colombians and receiving communities.



John Williams / CICR



Kevin Quiróz / CICR

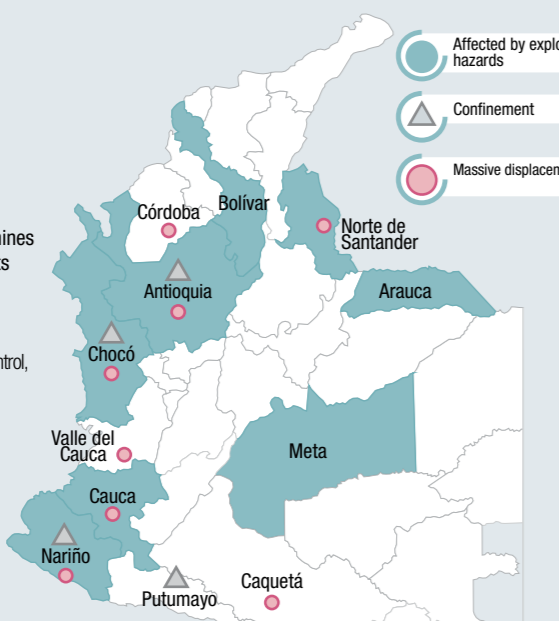
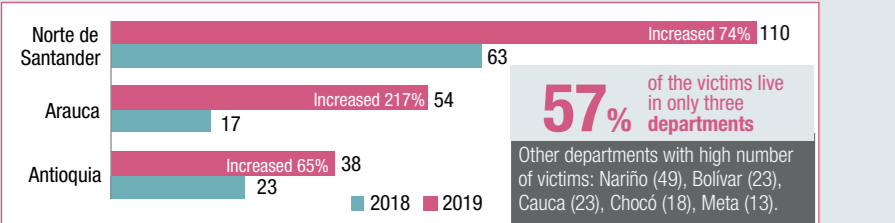
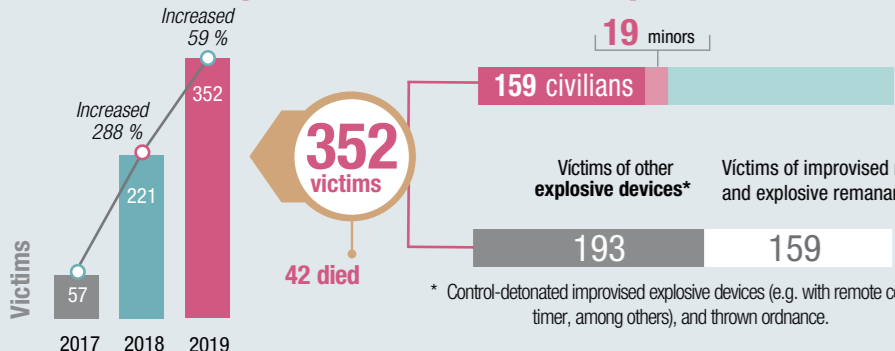


Rebeca Urea Gaitano / CICR



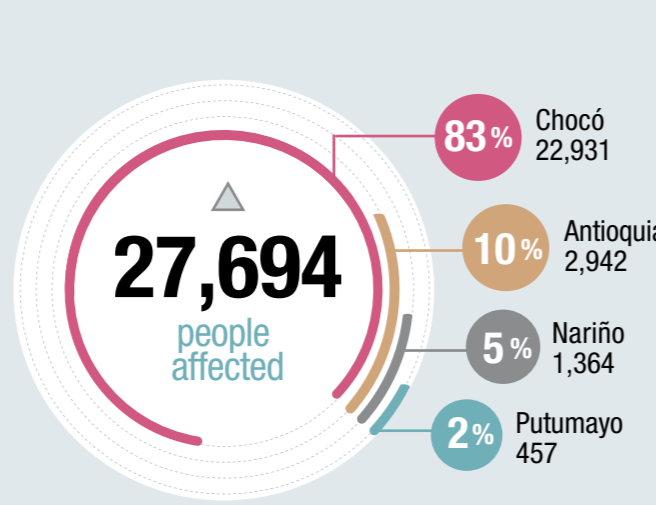
Laura Palomares / CICR

Victims of explosive hazards and improvised mines



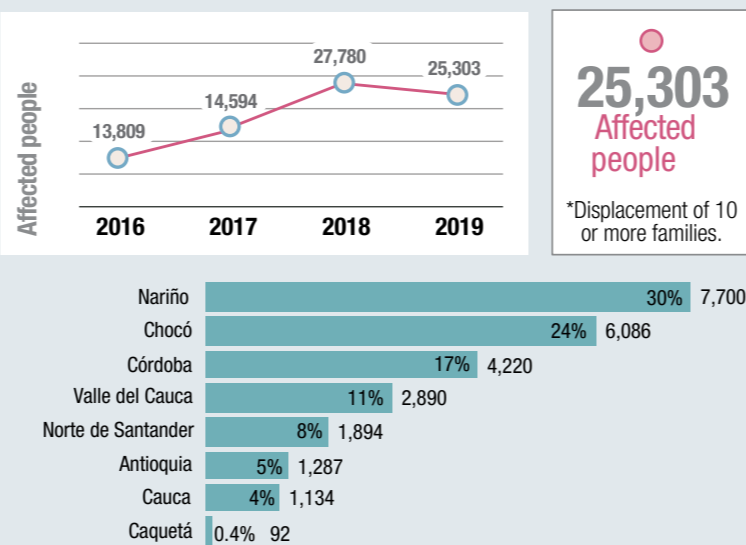
Source: International Committee of the Red Cross

Confinement in 2019

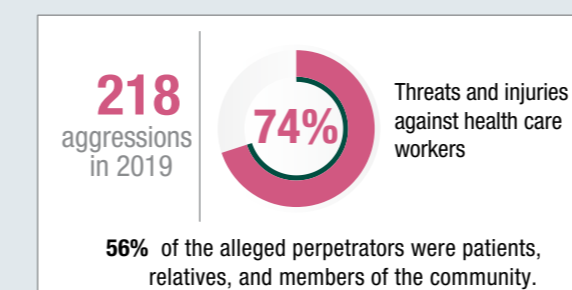
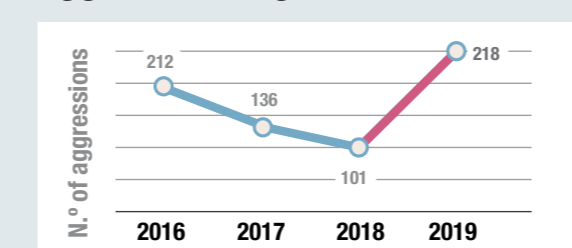


Source: tracing of alleged mass displacement events, Prevention and Emergency Assistance Branch – UARIV.

Massive displacements*



Aggressions against health care workers



Source: Ministry of Health and Social Protection

Departments where 80% of the aggressions were registered in 2019

