



HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES 2021

COLOMBIA



ICRC

Do we want to return to normality?

In 2020, we witnessed the humanitarian situation in Colombia deteriorate as the pandemic led to an escalation of the armed conflict and violence.

This is now my third time working in Colombia for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and, as I take up my new role as head of delegation, it strikes me that Colombians are still incredibly resilient—something I first observed back in the 2000s. It is a quality that has helped them overcome a host of difficulties, but this time, I can see that new challenges have emerged, alongside existing ones.

I would like to start by saying that I have every confidence in the ability of our humanitarian teams to respond to the needs of people affected by armed conflict and violence. I would also like to express my support for all Colombians, especially those who have been affected by COVID-19, and the country's health-care workers.

We often hear that 2020 was not a normal year, but what kind of normality does Colombia hope to return to? We must all play our part to ensure that the new normal goes far beyond the collective effort to overcome COVID-19. Returning to a normality where civilians fear for their lives and thousands of people across the country are unable to live in dignity is unthinkable.

The ICRC reports that the pandemic has exacerbated the consequences of at least five non-international armed conflicts in Colombia. Communities from across the country

have been particularly affected by armed groups breaking humanitarian law, including in the departments of Antioquia, Cauca, Chocó, Nariño, Norte de Santander and in some parts of south-eastern Colombia.

We must never accept that the word “normal” means hundreds of people falling victim to an explosive device, being forced to leave their homes or having to search for missing loved ones. Our hope is that with the support of society as a whole and the commitment of all armed actors, these serious violations of humanitarian law will no longer be a part of daily life and this suffering will finally come to an end.

Last year, we faced our greatest ever challenge as an organization: remaining in close proximity to communities in conflict zones without risking their health or that of our staff. In 2021, our efforts will continue to focus on maintaining our proximity to people who need our help.

Like most countries, Colombia is facing its most complex public health challenge in recent history: the roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccine. Globally, access to basic health care is particularly difficult for those who are marginalized, and this is also true for people living in conflict zones, internally displaced people, migrants, asylum seekers and detainees, all of whom are vulnerable to COVID-19 and have a right to be protected against it.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement stands ready to help Colombia's health-care workers vaccinate those most at risk across the country.



“Last year, we faced our greatest ever challenge as an organization: remaining in close proximity to communities in conflict zones without risking their health or that of our staff.”

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Caraffi'.

Lorenzo Caraffi
Head of the ICRC Delegation in Colombia

Plunged into isolation by pandemic and conflict

A reduction in the humanitarian consequences of armed conflict and violence would have been a positive start to 2021. Sadly, the opposite was true.

There are at least five ongoing non-international armed conflicts that continue to affect the daily lives of Colombia's civilians and their ability to live in dignity.

The ICRC considers the parties to these conflicts to be the Republic of Colombia, the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), the Gaitanistas Self-Defence Forces (AGC) and the structures of the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP) that did not join the 2016 Final Agreement and operate under a centralized command (Frentes 1, 7 and 40 – Coordinating Command of the West).

The pandemic has heightened fear among communities affected by violence, not only because they fear the virus itself and have witnessed its impact on thousands of families but, with the passing months, they have found themselves without protection amid worsening armed violence.

Last year, we recorded an increase in the number of victims of explosive devices—and the number was alarming. In most cases, the incidents occurred far from municipal capitals where there was limited access to emergency health care. The communities themselves became first responders.

For almost 50,000 Colombians, armed violence has made mass displacement* and confinement a tragic part of their life. Many have been affected financially by the pandemic and have been forced to choose between taking cover at home or fleeing to safety and leaving everything behind. In Nariño department, for example, there was a mass population displacement on average every 11 days.

Some of the other violations of humanitarian law allegedly committed by all armed actors include threats, murder, cruel and inhuman treatment, sexual violence, attacks on health services, the destruction or damage of civilian property, the recruitment and use of children, disappearances and a failure to protect civilians from the consequences of the hostilities.

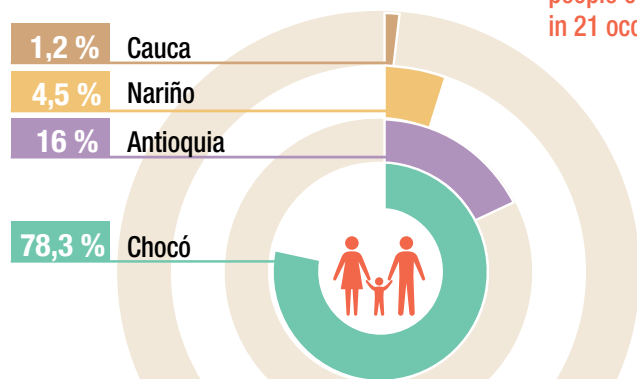
In addition, it was also difficult for people to obtain protection or judicial guarantees from the state, either because of the restrictive measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 or because of the movement restrictions some armed groups imposed on civilians.

Living amid these dire circumstances are people, the victims, who have shown remarkable resilience in adapting to new forms of violence in order to survive.

We have faced difficulties too when carrying out our humanitarian work, but we persevered even during the most challenging moments of the pandemic. In 2021, we will continue our efforts to relieve the suffering caused by armed conflict. However, our efforts will never be enough if those responsible for inflicting this suffering are not truly committed to limiting the humanitarian impact of warfare. We will continue to reiterate the point that there really are limits.

Confinement in 2020

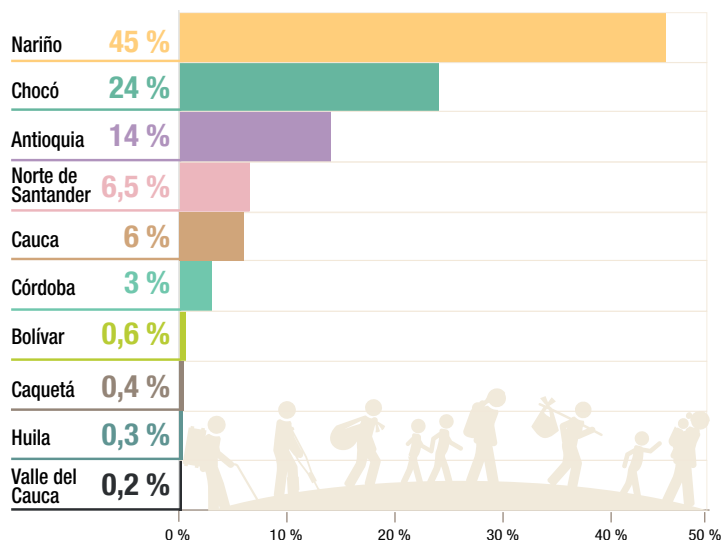
28.123
people confined
in 21 occurrences



Mass displacement*

*10 or more people

21.307
people displaced



Source: Monitoring of alleged mass displacement and confinement incidents, subdirectorate for emergency prevention and response – UARIV.

Overview of the humanitarian situation

Against the backdrop of the pandemic, the humanitarian consequences of armed conflict worsened, as did violence against civilians in some parts of Colombia. Many communities experienced greater levels of fear as their exposure to risk increased.

We are particularly concerned about the increase in the number of murder victims – people who are protected by international humanitarian law (IHL) and other humanitarian rules – as well as the increase in violence used by weapon bearers to maintain social control over territories.

In some areas, armed groups imposed severe restrictive measures under the guise of preventing the spread of the virus. Communities saw their freedom of movement restricted, their ability to make a living destroyed and their access to essential health services limited. They faced fear and intimidation, knowing they risked threats and murder if they failed to comply with these social control measures.

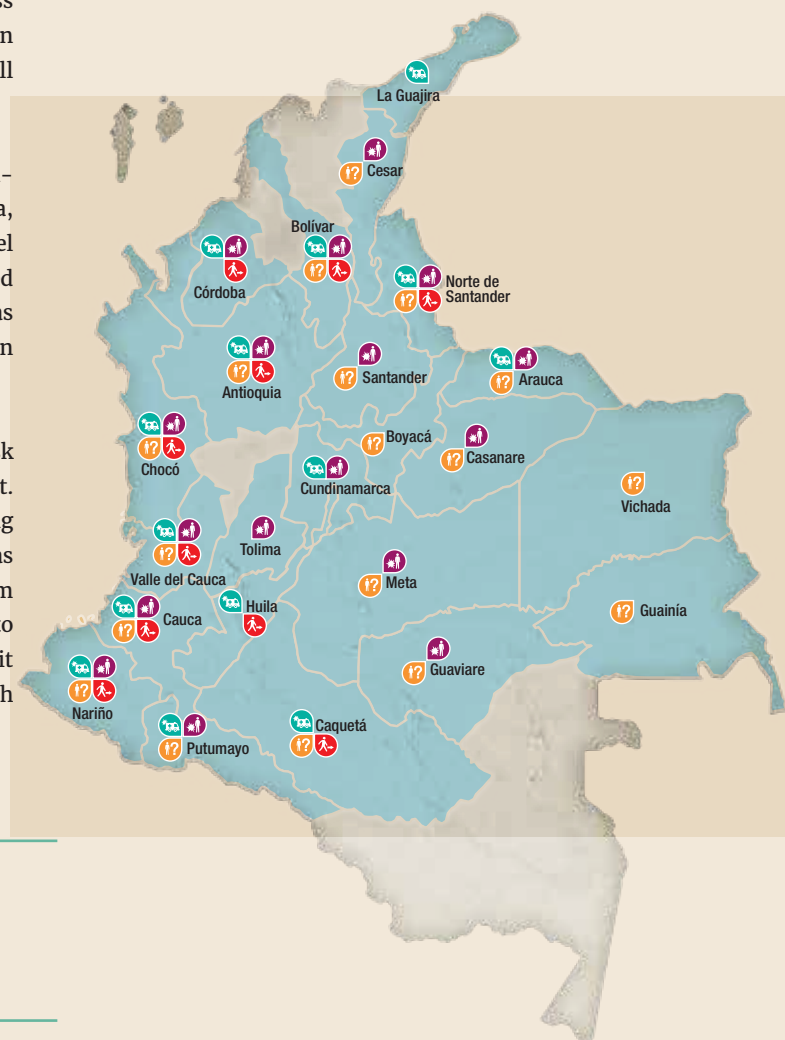
This dire situation worsened as disappearances, mass displacements, severe confinement and attacks on health-care services continued, and as more people fell victim to explosive hazards.

Over half of Colombia's departments suffered these humanitarian consequences all at the same time, with Antioquia, Cauca, Chocó, Nariño, Norte de Santander and Valle del Cauca accounting for the highest percentage of affected people. However, even less densely populated areas, such as Caquetá, Guaviare and Putumayo, saw an upsurge in violence.

In the worst-affected regions, civilians were at greater risk of harm and under huge pressure, but this was not evident. The pandemic presented new challenges in terms of assisting people affected by armed conflict and violence because as they became more isolated, their plight was hidden from view. Furthermore, it became more difficult for victims to access state assistance or humanitarian help. Likewise, it was more difficult for those same organizations to reach those in need.

The fact that there are few state organizations in the areas most affected by conflict, combined with the effects of the pandemic and the worsening humanitarian situation, made it difficult for civilians to maintain decent living conditions and to stay safe.

The map of Colombia shows a worrying scenario, but the reality is even more complex.



Over half of Colombia's departments simultaneously suffered humanitarian consequences.

Health services deal with a pandemic and violence

The year 2020 was particularly difficult for health-care workers. Not only did they have to deal with a public health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also with the escalation of violence against them.

In Colombia, for example, 325 attacks were reported against health-care workers, facilities and vehicles – the highest number on record in 24 years. Patients, their families and members of the community were responsible for half of these acts of aggression.

These attacks were sparked by discrimination against health-care workers, fear of catching COVID-19 and particularly by fake news. Health-care workers experienced physical attacks and death threats from civilians, and misguided accusations that staff were spreading the virus in the community or even benefiting financially from the crisis.

Violence and armed conflict only served to make this situation worse. Attacks by armed groups against health services across the country constituted a breach of IHL and had serious consequences, such as the mass resignation of health-care workers.

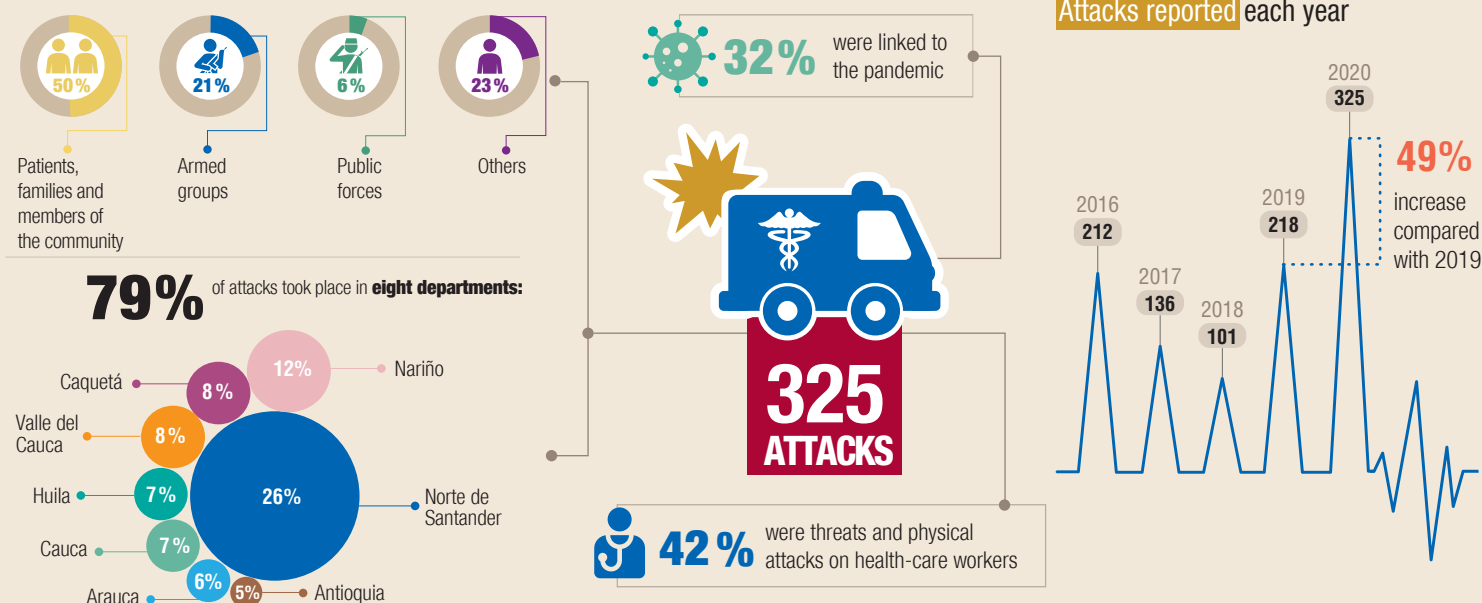
Statistics show that armed groups were responsible for at least 88 incidents targeting health-care staff and facilities. We know from our work on the ground, however, that this number is higher due to under-reporting and fear of reprisals for reporting the facts.

The attacks not only affected health-care workers themselves, but also patients and whole communities, who were often left with no access to health care. This had the greatest impact in those areas most affected by hostilities, where the health system was already weak or non-existent. It is hard to estimate the scale of the issue and to put a figure on the total number of people affected.

Health-care workers became extremely vulnerable to attack at a time when their work was most needed. For the time being, the outlook for 2021 does not show any sign of improvement. The public health emergency persists and it continues to be exacerbated by violence and social upheaval.

*Figures from the National Health-Care Committee

Attacks on health-care services in 2020



Source: National Health-Care Committee

Explosive hazards: a silent threat

Armed conflict and violence have reverberated throughout this pandemic and there is hard evidence to prove it. In 2020, we reported 389 victims of explosive hazards, the highest number in the last four years.

Most victims are civilians living in rural areas who happen upon these hazards as they go about their daily business in search of water or walking along roads. The accidents took place in 69 municipalities across 17 departments. Some municipalities* had not reported any victims in recent years, which suggests the problem has resurfaced in areas where it had become a thing of the past.

It is hard to estimate the level of contamination caused by explosive hazards in Colombia. Huge progress has been made by humanitarian demining since the peace agreement was signed between FARC-EP and the Colombian government, but it is still hugely challenging to decontaminate certain areas and to provide guarantees of non-repetition for victims, particularly where armed conflict and violence ravages the country.

The challenge in these areas is magnified because it goes beyond the long-standing presence of these explosive

hazards and includes new weapon contamination resulting from current armed conflict and territorial disputes between armed groups.

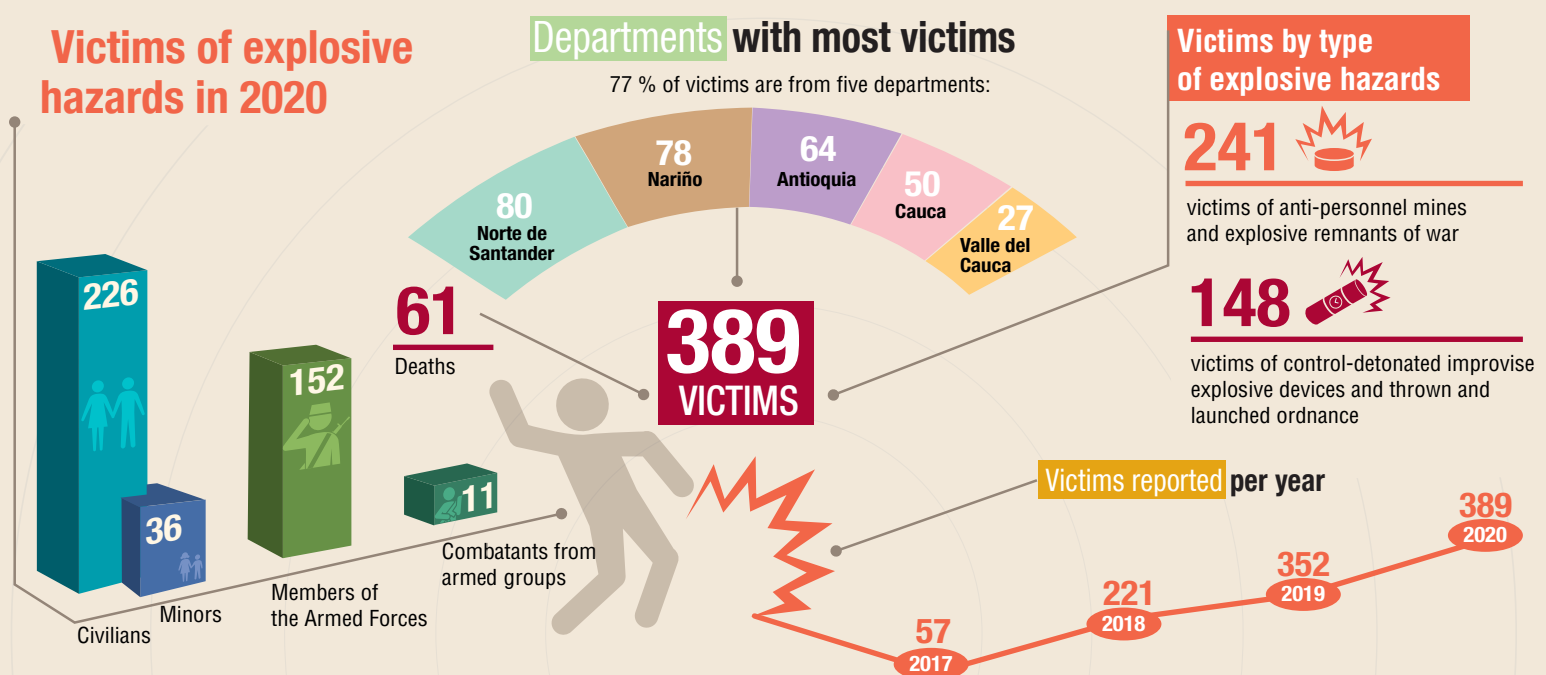
In Colombia, the presence of explosive hazards has a direct impact on civilians, who suffer the worst consequences from armed conflict and violence. These explosive hazards include anti-personnel mines, the best-known type, as well as explosive remnants of war, thrown and launched ordnance and control-detonated improvise explosive devices** which are all causing increasing numbers of casualties.

The number of victims gives us an idea of how serious the problem is, but it is not the only metric. In 19 municipalities where accidents were reported, there were also issues of confinement or displacement, showing just how many humanitarian consequences stem from this one issue.

Explosive hazards pose a silent and latent threat to rural communities. Since the location of each hazard is unknown, people live in permanent fear and are unable to move around freely, which in turn affects their ability to earn a living.

*41 of the 69 municipalities affected in 2020 did not report any accidents in 2019.

**Explosive devices activated remotely or manually, using a timer, remote control or other mechanism.



Source: International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

120,000 reasons to keep searching

In 2020, we registered one missing person every three days in Colombia. From the time that the peace agreement was signed until 31 December 2020, we recorded 571 new cases of people who went missing because of armed conflict and violence. Although this is an alarming statistic, it does not accurately reflect the scope of the tragedy; the true picture is in all likelihood much worse.

The departments of Arauca, Norte de Santander, Nariño, Cauca, Antioquia and Chocó reported the highest number of missing people in 2020. Our reports confirm that all armed groups continue to use disappearances to cultivate a climate of fear among civilians in order to maintain territorial control and to avoid the requirement to treat dead bodies in accordance with the law.

If searching for missing people in Colombia was already difficult, the pandemic made it an even greater challenge. With conflict escalating in some parts of the country and the pandemic stopping people from moving about freely, families struggled to search for their loved ones or receive updates from government organizations about their search.

Two factors exacerbated the situation. First, many families of the 120,000 missing work in the informal economy and were forced to choose between continuing their search or earning money to survive. Secondly, the restrictive pandemic measures made it more complicated to access government assistance.

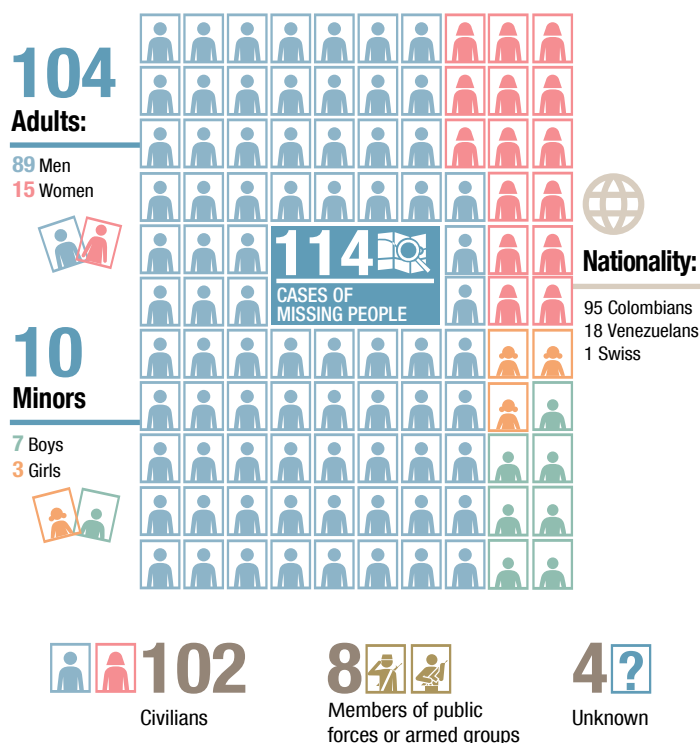
This problem of missing people has shattered the lives of thousands of Colombian families. Relatives of the missing already faced a long and uncertain journey; the pandemic has added an extra layer of complexity, making it even more tortuous for them to exercise their rights.

Even before the pandemic, ensuring unidentified bodies were handled appropriately was a challenge. With the increase in deaths from COVID-19, it was clear that dead bodies needed to be stored somewhere suitable if they were to be subsequently identified and returned with dignity to their relatives.



Jesús and Ismael Rodríguez are searching for their brother Arnulfo, who went missing in 1996 in Norte de Santander. They do not have any photos of him.

Cases of missing people in 2020



These figures reflect the ICRC's work in Colombia. However, under-reporting means the scale of the problem is much greater.
Source: International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

In some cases, the bodies of unidentified people in cemeteries were moved to make space for those who had died from COVID-19. This jeopardizes any future attempts to identify these remains, a process that relies on forensic analysis to link the bodies of the dead with their families.



In 2020, we provided computers, headsets and televisions to over 40 prisons so detainees could keep in touch with their loved ones.

Instituto Nacional Penitenciario y Carcelario (INPEC)

The challenge of prison reform

For several years now, we have highlighted the need to improve conditions in prisons and to institute changes to criminal policy.

If nothing else, 2020 proved that delays to prison reform could have devastating consequences in certain situations – like the COVID-19 pandemic. Overcrowding, poor access to health care and insanitary conditions increased the risk of the virus spreading in places of detention, and people deprived of their liberty were at greater risk of contracting it.

The government implemented measures to tackle the pandemic and while these measures were necessary and appropriate, they have not tackled the root of the problem.

Structural reform is needed to deal with the prison crisis; a reactive and ad hoc response will not suffice. We cannot stress enough the urgent need for a criminal and prison policy that guarantees the rights and dignity of people deprived of their liberty.

Migrating to a conflict zone during a pandemic

In 2020, migrants faced the harsh reality of diminishing job opportunities and increased discrimination. Those who arrived in the country without documents and became ill with COVID-19 had trouble accessing health care, unless they needed urgent medical attention.

Others, who had left their homes in search of a better life, arrived in places where armed conflict dominates the lives of its residents. Their vulnerable status put them at greater risk of sexual exploitation or child recruitment, and many lost contact with their relatives.

A positive development is the Colombian government's decision to implement the Temporary Protection Statute for Venezuelan Migrants. If implemented correctly, it will provide better assistance and rights for migrants living in areas affected by armed conflict and violence.



In cooperation with the Colombian Red Cross, we supported 355,900 migrants and members of their host communities.

L. Benavides/Colombian Red Cross

The proper use of force

Colombia's public forces faced multiple challenges during 2020. Although most police officers abided by international standards on the proper use of force, there were allegations of disproportionate force being used by the public forces in both urban and rural areas. This presented a challenge in terms of how to teach, integrate, monitor and oversee the implementation of these standards within law enforcement agencies.

We continue to carry out online training on the standards that govern the use of force when maintaining law and order. We also provide recommendations to different organizations on how to apply humanitarian principles effectively.

However, this will not be enough if the values and standards that protect people during armed conflict and other violence have not been fully adopted.

Thank you for placing your trust in us



E. Fuentes/ICRC

Many communities living in conflict zones are exposed to the danger of explosive devices. We teach them how to mitigate the risk of accidents.



E. Fuentes /ICRC

We helped to secure the release of 22 people through the confidential, bilateral dialogue we maintain with all armed actors in Colombia.



V. Miranda/ICRC

We worked to meet the needs of people living in areas affected by armed conflict and helped to alleviate the impact of the pandemic.

We recognize and admire the resilience of people living in places affected by armed conflict and violence. They refuse to give up and they work towards a brighter future despite their circumstances.

We continue to support those who are most in need of our help and we reiterate that wars have limits. No civilian should ever suffer because of war.

In 2020, 22 people who were being held by armed groups were reunited with their loved ones, thanks to our neutral, impartial and intermediary role. We are delighted they were reunited with their families.

This is not new for us: the ICRC has been working in Colombia for more than 50 years. By the end of 2020, we had helped to secure the release of 1,805 people.

We too were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we made a huge effort to maintain our proximity to communities most affected by armed conflict and violence in both remote and urban areas.

This allowed us to meet people's needs. We doubled the number of people we helped in 2020 compared with 2019.

All over the world, the red cross is a symbol of humanity. We continue to strive to bring hope and save lives.

Calls to action

Tackling COVID-19

- We urge the Colombian government to include marginalized and vulnerable people in the national vaccination programme, including people affected by armed conflict and violence, detainees, migrants and people with disabilities. These people should have the same right and access to the vaccine as others do.
- It is critical that armed actors give people living in areas under their control access to the vaccine. All parties should also facilitate the work of health personnel and humanitarian organizations who are responsible for the vaccine.
- We urge the prison authorities and the Ministry of Justice to continue to evaluate and implement measures that reduce the negative effects of COVID-19 restrictions on people deprived of their liberty. It is important to ensure that detainees have contact with their relatives.
- The pandemic requires the authorities to comply with Colombia's existing recommendations and guidelines related to the dignified handling of the dead. Dead bodies should be appropriately registered, identified and buried without adversely affecting or altering the burial sites of unidentified bodies who may be missing persons.
- We remind the national and local authorities that they should respect the decision of families regarding burial or cremation in accordance with their cultural or religious beliefs.

Health services

- We call upon the people of Colombia to respect and protect the crucial role played by health-care workers, particularly during this pandemic.
- We reiterate this call to all armed actors and urge them to stop attacking health-care workers, facilities and vehicles. We remind you that acts of violence towards health-care workers constitute a violation of IHL.

Armed conflict

- We call upon the public forces and all armed groups to respect civilians and protect them from the consequences of hostilities. We remind you of the strict obligation to comply with IHL and other humanitarian rules.
- We urge the state to ensure that all victims of armed conflict and violence have access to state assistance, including psychosocial and economic support.
- We urge all parties not to discriminate against victims, who should be treated with empathy and support, and this should include migrants.

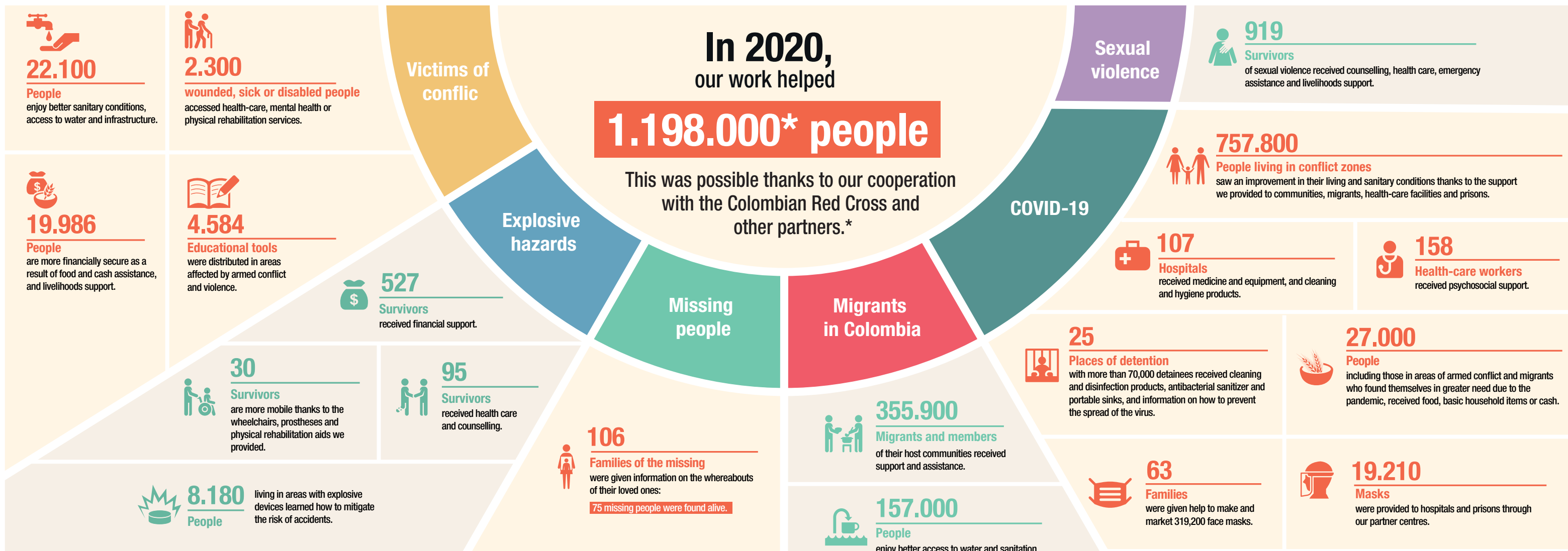


L. Aguilera Jiménez / ICRC

In 2020, we successfully recovered the remains of 16 missing people in conflict zones. Unfortunately, we have also suffered failed attempts, such as this one in Norte de Santander.

Missing people

- We remind all parties to the conflict that they should help determine the fate and whereabouts of missing people in order to provide answers to their families. Knowing that a missing person has died allows the family to organize a dignified funeral for their loved one and to grieve.
- We urge the state and Colombian civil society to continue to support the Missing Persons Search Unit (UBPD) in carrying out its important work.
- We remind the authorities that the urgent search mechanism is an important tool that should be activated immediately and appropriately when a person goes missing, based on the principle of good faith when someone makes a tracing request.



Despite the challenges of the pandemic, we have continued to reach even the remotest communities in areas affected by armed conflict and violence.



In addition to food and money, we provided livestock like chickens and pigs.

Our neutral, impartial and independent role means we have been able to help people in need for more than half a century.

6.050
Members of the public forces and authorities
took part in training on international standards on the use of force, IHL and other humanitarian rules.

261.490
Phone calls
Wi-Fi hotspots and mobile phone battery charging services helped migrants and victims of conflict to contact their loved ones.


22
People
held by armed groups were released through our humanitarian dialogue.

713
Cases
of missing people were raised with armed groups in an effort to clarify their fate and whereabouts.

*A person may have received more than one service.



15 % 
of our staff
comming from
26 different countries

85 % 
The others are
Colombians

Our team is
made up of
456
humanitarian
workers

 **52 %**
are women

 **48 %**
are men



\$ Our budget is:
135.736 million Colombian pesos



We have been carrying
out humanitarian work
around the world for

157 years



We have been working
in Colombia for

52 years

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.



 CICRColombia
 @CICR_co
 cizr_americas
 www.cicr.org/co
 bogota@icrc.org

International Committee of the Red Cross

Calle 96 N.º 11 b - 37
Tel.: (571) 313 86 30