



Disorder on the Border: Keeping the Peace between Colombia and Venezuela

Latin America Report N°84 | 14 December 2020

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Principal Findings

What's new? Crime and violence have simmered along the lengthy Colombian-Venezuelan frontier for decades. But the regional spillover of Venezuela's political conflict and economic collapse has caused ties between the two states to fray as well, amid border closures, a migrant exodus and rival military exercises.

Why does it matter? Numerous armed groups clash with one another and harm citizens along a border marked by abundant coca crops and informal crossings. High bilateral tensions could spur escalating border hostilities while perpetuating the mistreatment of migrants and refugees whose movements have been restricted by COVID-19.

What should be done? Colombian and Venezuelan authorities should urgently establish communication channels to resolve violent incidents along the border, possibly with international backing. They should reopen formal border crossings as planned, but also increase humanitarian aid to help ensure that migrants and refugees are healthy and can move safely.

Executive Summary

The border between Colombia and Venezuela is the site of Latin America's most prominent inter-state standoff and its worst humanitarian emergency. More than 2,000km long, the line dividing these countries is a magnet for guerrilla groups and organised crime, particularly on the Colombian side. Poverty, corruption and booming black markets – including trade in the world's largest concentration of coca crops – drive the creation of new armed factions and instil ferocious competition among them. But the frontier is now caught up in turbulent regional politics as well. Venezuela's political conflict has led to a feud between the governments in Caracas and Bogotá, putting both militaries on high alert; its economic woes have forced millions of Venezuelans to flee across a Colombian border now closed due to COVID-19. Rebuilding trust between the neighbours, restoring cooperation on health and security, restarting talks between the Colombian state and the country's last guerrillas, and ensuring that migrants receive humanitarian aid will be vital to preserving peace on the frontier.

Low-intensity conflict has tormented the borderlands for decades, reflecting their neglect by the state as well as the illicit riches there for the taking. Since the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) demobilised after the 2016 peace accord, a panoply of armed actors has vied for a share of the border spoils, whether production and trafficking of coca and cocaine, contraband, extortion rackets or illegal mines. The largest remaining Colombian guerrilla force, the National Liberation Army (ELN), has seized the opportunity to expand on both sides of the frontier. Colombian paramilitary remnants and upstart gangs prowling indigenous territories, FARC rebel dissidents, Venezuelan para-police and Mexican drug cartels complete the shifting patchwork of armed outfits. Clashes among these groups and killings of civilians in contested zones have continued throughout the pandemic.

This tide of violence is now inseparable from international tensions, above all the breakdown of relations between the two neighbours. Venezuela's internal political conflict has diffused across the region, bringing President Nicolás Maduro's increasingly authoritarian government into heated dispute with centre-right Colombian President Iván Duque, who insists that Maduro be removed ahead of a fresh presidential election in Venezuela. Severed diplomatic ties, mutual accusations of support for "terrorists" and military exercises along the frontier mark a dangerous nadir in bilateral relations. In the absence of communication channels and trust between the sides, the risk persists that a violent incident on the border could escalate into a full-blown inter-state crisis.

For most people along the border, this bilateral estrangement has meant a painful rupture in cross-border family, kin and business ties. But for some, it has brought profit. Repeated closures of official border points since 2015 enriched larger armed groups and local entrepreneurs smuggling fuel, goods and people over illegal crossings. Coca crops have continued to grow in Norte de Santander state, which according to the UN boasted in 2019 the largest area under cultivation in the whole of Colombia – itself the largest coca supplier in the world. Some Venezuelans living on the frontier even express gratitude that the ELN, now backed or at least tolerated by the

Venezuelan state and security forces, has become the new dominant armed group in their area and helped stamp out petty crime.

But there is no doubt as to who has suffered the most from this border debacle. Over five million migrants and refugees have fled Venezuela, the majority in search of economic opportunity; close to two million, including some of the poorest migrants, have settled in Colombia. Corrupt officials, predatory armed groups and calculating locals have fleeced many of their savings. Others face the menace of sexual exploitation. Now the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed them to further hardships. Those returning to Venezuela face a dismal quarantine in state facilities, with authorities labelling them “biological weapons”. Those leaving for Colombia have no option for the time being but to brook the extortion of armed groups manning the illegal crossings.

Poverty and ailing state institutions along the border will require sustained attention over years, ideally through fulfilment of rural development provisions in the Colombian peace accord and broad economic reconstruction in Venezuela. In the meantime, the two neighbours should take urgent steps to curb the risk of worsening violence and instability. The pandemic fleetingly promised a thaw in relations as both governments set up a channel to exchange health information. They must now do far more to prevent misunderstandings along the border and their potentially lethal consequences. Colombia and Venezuela should agree on a joint method for monitoring the border, perhaps through the creation of a mechanism for resolving incidents under international auspices. Both countries should support efforts to return to negotiations between Bogotá and the ELN, shelved early in 2019 after a deadly bomb attack. Meanwhile, increased humanitarian aid will be crucial to preventing the border’s formal reopening from generating huge movements of poor and unprotected people in both directions.

Despite their determination to resist aggression from the other side, authorities in Colombia and Venezuela know that armed hostilities along the border would prove catastrophic for both nations. Reestablishing channels of communication while attending to the victims of crime and violence at the frontier will be vital to preventing a disaster neither side wants.

Bogotá/Caracas/Brussels, 14 December 2020

Disorder on the Border: Keeping the Peace between Colombia and Venezuela

I. Introduction

Tensions between Colombia and Venezuela are most keenly felt in the long-suffering region that joins the two. Snaking over 2,219km from arid La Guajira on the Atlantic coastline through mountain ranges and then down to savannahs and the Amazon rainforest, these borderlands are as diverse as they are expansive. A few thriving cities sit in stretches of countryside beset with crushing poverty. Armed groups including guerrillas, ex-paramilitaries and criminal gangs battle over booming illicit businesses and trafficking routes that pass close to army bases. Meanwhile, the deepening political and economic crisis in Venezuela has led the two countries to sever ties while pushing millions of migrants and refugees across the border. Mutual mistrust, criminal opportunity and sheer human misery, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, are profoundly reshaping the violence that has traditionally afflicted the borderlands.

People in these areas have lived for decades in a limbo of state neglect and encroaching criminal and guerrilla power.¹ Colombia's capital Bogotá lies around 500km from the main crossing into Venezuela, close to Cúcuta, which in turn stands 675km from Venezuela's capital Caracas near the Caribbean Sea. The borderlands' physical distance from the metropolises partly explains the scant influence of state authorities along the frontier, particularly on the Colombian side during the country's internal conflict from the mid-1960s onward.² Clustering in these areas, armed groups seized de facto power in several spots. Residents often find they have more in common with family and neighbours on the other side of the frontier than with the national authorities far away.³

Recent events on both sides of the frontier have wrought fundamental changes in the region's landscape of insurgency and crime. Colombia's 2016 peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) marked an end to conflict between Bogotá and the country's largest guerrilla group. While opening up the prospect of formal economic development and improved public services in conflict-affected border regions, the accord could not stop smaller armed outfits from jostling to grab

¹ Crisis Group Latin America Report N°65, *Containing the Shock Waves from Venezuela*, 21 March 2018. Outstanding analyses of crime and violence in the borderlands include: Ariel Ávila (ed.), *La frontera caliente entre Colombia y Venezuela* (Bogotá, 2012); Socorro Ramírez, "Desfases venezolano-colombianos e impactos en la frontera compartida", *Nueva Sociedad*, May 2016; "Venezuela, crimen sin frontera", *El País* (Colombia), September 2017; and Annette Idler, *Borderland Battles* (New York, 2019).

² "Informe defensorial sobre las zonas de frontera", Colombian state Ombudsman, January 2017. See also Crisis Group Latin America Report N°40, *Moving Beyond Easy Wins: Colombia's Borders*, 31 October 2011.

³ "State presence is often non-existent or temporary, and is considered a nuisance or intervening factor that alters, yet is not decisive for security". Idler, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

the illegal business ventures left behind.⁴ Meanwhile, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro responded to the rising political threat from opposition parties as well as a sharp economic contraction by shifting to increasingly authoritarian rule. His government turned to mineral exploitation in the country's south as a lifeline while Venezuelan security forces deepened their ties with former and current Colombian guerrillas.⁵

For their part, crime syndicates and other armed groups have sought to profit from the official border closures, including the shutdown following the COVID-19 outbreak, while waging local turf wars to control illicit economies. In Norte de Santander, a north-eastern Colombian border department, armed groups carried out six massacres, taking a total of 25 lives, in the first nine months of 2020.⁶

Research for this report included over 110 interviews with experts, state officials, community leaders, border residents, police and military officers, criminals and smugglers. Field visits were undertaken on both sides of the Colombian-Venezuelan border before the pandemic, in the departments of La Guajira, Norte de Santander, Vichada and Guainía on the Colombian side, and Táchira and Zulia states on the Venezuelan side. Telephone interviews have also been conducted in both countries since March.

⁴ Crisis Group Latin America Report N°63, *Colombia's Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace*, 19 October 2017.

⁵ See Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°36, *Power without the People: Averting Venezuela's Breakdown*, 19 June 2017; as well as Crisis Group Latin America Reports N°65, *Containing the Shock Waves from Venezuela*, 21 March 2018; and N°73, *Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South*, 28 February 2019.

⁶ In Colombia, states are known as departments. Crisis Group telephone interviews, human rights observatory in Norte de Santander, 26 August and 21 September 2020.

II. State, Crime and Poverty along the Border

Conflict and crime are deeply entrenched in the borderlands. While occasional interventions by faraway national governments and outbreaks of bilateral tension have stolen the limelight, the underlying conditions giving rise to insecurity are the real story. Weak and ineffective state institutions, a stunted formal economy and myriad opportunities for illicit money-making remain unaltered. Far from solving these dilemmas, border closures have multiplied incentives for criminal activity.

A. *Bilateral Solidarity and Hostility*

Venezuela and Colombia once belonged to the same nation, Gran Colombia, or Greater Colombia, founded by South American independence leader Simón Bolívar. After a short existence, from 1819 to 1830, Greater Colombia, which also included present-day Ecuador and Panama, fell apart following ferocious struggles among emerging national elites. Despite the demarcation of frontiers, people living in the borderlands continued to share kinship ties and commercial relations, as well as a common culture.⁷

Politically, however, the neighbours became more estranged in recent decades. Bilateral relations came under strain during the 1980s and 1990s, when Colombia's internal conflict occasionally spilled over the border. But it was the election of Hugo Chávez as Venezuelan president in 1998 that marked the start of a widening diplomatic and ideological breach between the two countries. Chávez reoriented his country away from the U.S. and toward left-wing governments in Latin America, both democratic and authoritarian. He also cozied up to autocratic states elsewhere, like China and Belarus. Meanwhile, Colombian President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) and his successor Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) sought U.S. help in combating both rebels and drug producers with the multi-billion-dollar Plan Colombia aid package.⁸

At first, Uribe and Chávez, ideological adversaries who both traded on charisma, boosted trade and infrastructure cooperation despite misgivings.⁹ But relations between the two took a turn for the worse after Uribe dismissed Chávez as a potential facilitator of peace talks with the FARC guerrillas. The two governments then exchanged vitriolic statements in 2008 when Uribe ordered an airstrike on a FARC

⁷ The Colombian-Venezuelan border was demarcated by the Spanish Arbitration Award of Queen María Cristina and the 1891 Treaty on Demarcation of Borders and Navigation of Common Rivers between Colombia and Venezuela. Robert D. Klock, *Gulf of Venezuela: A Proposed Delimitation* (Miami, 1980). For more on the shared history of Colombian and Venezuelan border communities, see "Informe defensorial sobre las zonas de frontera", Colombian state Ombudsman, January 2017.

⁸ Plan Colombia was a joint initiative of the Colombian and U.S. governments, beginning in 1999 and aimed at tackling drug trafficking as well as the country's insurgencies. For contrasting views of the plan's achievements, see Thomas C. Bruneau and Richard B. Goetze, "From Tragedy to Success in Colombia: The Centrality of Effectiveness in Civil-Military Relations", William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, 2019; and Winifred Tate, *Drugs, Thugs and Diplomats: U.S. Policymaking in Colombia* (Stanford, 2015).

⁹ Uribe and Chávez met frequently to discuss bilateral projects. Colombia and Venezuela were each other's second biggest trading partners, after the U.S. in both cases, with commerce worth \$7.2 billion in 2008. See "Politics versus trade", *The Economist*, 10 September 2009.

camp in northern Ecuador.¹⁰ Colombia later claimed to have found evidence of Venezuelan government support for the rebels saved in a computer in the bombed-out camp.¹¹

Diplomatic ties improved under President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018), who invited Venezuela to become one of four guarantor countries for peace talks with the FARC in 2012.¹² But the thaw proved no more than a hiatus. Not long after Maduro's election in 2013, following Chávez's death from cancer, relations between the two countries chilled even as the FARC talks proceeded. The onset of a dire economic crisis in Venezuela as well as the heightening of political tensions and street protests there in 2014, which Maduro partly blamed on Colombian provocation, strained ties between the neighbours.¹³ Spats over armed groups' operations along the border made matters worse, leading Venezuela to close frontier crossings and expel more than one thousand Colombian citizens in 2015.¹⁴

Relations deteriorated still further with the election of conservative Iván Duque as Colombian president in June 2018, with the new government proclaiming its support for a "a diplomatic siege" of Venezuela to speed a restoration of democracy.¹⁵ Then, in early 2019, National Assembly chair Juan Guaidó staked his claim to the interim presidency of Venezuela, to full-throated U.S. and Colombian cheers. On 23 February 2019, Maduro broke off ties with Bogotá in retaliation for Guaidó's plan to bring humanitarian aid across the border from Colombia.¹⁶ Bilateral diplomacy remained in a deep freeze, and on 14 March 2020, Duque announced the closure of all seven official border crossings as a measure to curb the COVID-19 outbreak.

Throughout these troubles, the borderlands have provided a venue for the feuding governments to pursue their strategic goals. Colombia has accused Venezuela of harbouring FARC and other rebels, while Maduro has said the Duque government is giving safe haven to anti-*chavista* armed proxies. Both governments have said the

¹⁰ The Colombian military killed FARC leader Raúl Reyes and at least sixteen other rebels in an airstrike on 1 March 2008. The Ecuadorian government did not authorise the attack, and Chávez warned Bogotá that a similar action in Venezuelan territory would be "cause for war". "Chavez warns of 'war' if Colombia strikes Venezuela", Reuters, 2 March 2008.

¹¹ The information retrieved reportedly indicated a relationship between Chávez and the Colombian guerrillas, although Chávez dismissed these accusations. "The FARC Files: Venezuela, Ecuador and the Secret Archive of 'Raúl Reyes'", International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2011.

¹² Juan Forero, "Once a partner of Colombian guerrillas, Venezuela now helps in peace talks", *The Washington Post*, 14 October 2012.

¹³ "Maduro acusa al expresidente colombiano Uribe de la violencia reciente en Venezuela", RTVE, 15 February 2014.

¹⁴ Maduro closed the border in September 2015 following a diplomatic row sparked by a 19 August attack on three Venezuelan soldiers in Táchira state. "El cierre que generó una crisis humanitaria", *El Tiempo*, 17 December 2015. Presidents Maduro and Santos met in September 2015 for five hours in Ecuador in a bid to restore healthy relations. "Maduro y Santos acuerdan el retorno de embajadores e investigar la situación fronteriza", *El Mundo*, 22 September 2015. Santos later described the migrant exodus as his "worst nightmare", adding that he feared the impact of Venezuela's troubles on Colombia and the peace process. "Juan Manuel Santos: 'Mi peor pesadilla es Venezuela'", *EFE*, 10 November 2017.

¹⁵ "Colombia's Duque says Venezuelan Maduro's hours are numbered", Reuters, 1 February 2019.

¹⁶ "Venezuela breaks diplomatic relations with Colombia over aid, Maduro says", Reuters, 23 February 2019.

other is sponsoring terrorist activities.¹⁷ Military build-ups and other forms of sabre-rattling have been recurrent.¹⁸

Colombia has set various dates for formally reopening the border, the latest target being 16 January, but it has repeatedly pushed back plans to do so.¹⁹ Authorities in Bogotá said they expect that up to 500,000 Venezuelans could cross back into Colombia in the six months after reopening out of economic desperation.²⁰

B. *Economic Ties, Informal Trade and Crime*

The decline and eventual disintegration of bilateral ties has slashed trade between the neighbours. Both governments have aimed to diversify their commercial partnerships, albeit in different directions: whereas Caracas looked to China, Russia and Turkey before and after the imposition of U.S. sanctions from 2017 onward, Bogotá has sought to expand trade with a larger set of countries as well as with its main trading partners, the U.S. and China. It formally joined the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2020.²¹

Aggrieved by the threat to their livelihoods, businesspeople along the border complain that political differences between Bogotá and Caracas should not hinder trade.²² Major commercial infrastructure, including the Tienditas bridge, finished in 2016, offers a means of connecting the two countries seamlessly. But the bridge has been closed ever since its construction. It gained global notoriety when the Venezuelan government blocked it with containers in a bid to stop opposition-coordinated humanitarian aid from arriving in 2019.²³ Official Colombian plans to boost bilateral commerce have been shelved as relations have soured.²⁴

Even so, bonds between residents and businesses across the border have withstood political hostilities. A total of 5.5 million people live in Venezuela's four border

¹⁷ Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°40, *Containing the Border Fallout of Colombia's New Guerrilla Schism*, 20 September 2019.

¹⁸ Venezuela carried out exercises allegedly involving 150,000 troops in September 2019. In March 2020, the U.S. and Colombia organised military exercises close to the border. "Colombia y EE. UU. inician entrenamiento en frontera con Venezuela", *Deutsche Welle*, 10 March 2020.

¹⁹ "Cierre de fronteras terrestres y fluviales se extenderá hasta el próximo 16 de enero de 2021", *Migración Colombia*, 30 November 2020.

²⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Colombian government official, 25 November 2020. Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°24, *Broken Ties, Frozen Borders: Colombia and Venezuela Face COVID-19*, 15 April 2020.

²¹ Colombia had free trade agreements with 26 countries in 2010, a number that rose to over 60 by 2020. It became a full OECD member in April 2020. See "Colombia entra oficialmente a la OCDE", *El Espectador*, 29 April 2020. For more on relations among Venezuela, Turkey, China and Russia, see "Turkey and Venezuela: An Alliance of Convenience", *Wilson Center*, March 2020; and Stephen B. Kaplan and Michael Penfold, "China and Russia have deep financial ties to Venezuela. Here's what's at stake", *The Washington Post*, 22 February 2019.

²² Crisis Group interview, representative of the Colombo-Venezuelan chamber, Bogotá, 23 January 2020.

²³ Phil Gunson, "High Noon Over Humanitarian Aid at Venezuela's Border", *Crisis Group Commentary*, 22 February 2019.

²⁴ Findeter, Colombia's state developmental planning bureau, designed a strategy called "Diamante Caribe-Santanderes" that included infrastructural works to make transport between Colombia and Venezuela more efficient. Crisis Group interview, Findeter representative, Bogotá, 6 February 2020.

states, while Colombia's six border departments are home to over 3.6 million.²⁵ Colombian locals and their businesses used to depend on Venezuela for primary products such as fuel, flour, milk and rice until shortages in the latter country worsened and prices rose, while consumer sales in Cúcuta, the most important city on the Colombian side of the border, soared in 2019 before crashing down during the two countries' lockdowns.²⁶ This boom reflected increased contraband and remittance flows via the city, as well as purchases of basic goods by Venezuelan visitors after price controls were lifted in their country, making Colombian goods relatively cheaper.²⁷

Informal and illicit cross-border trade has long flourished across a porous and sparsely patrolled border, particularly as formal trade has withered. Even before Venezuela's economy began to contract in 2013, its subsidised fuel and food products were smuggled to Colombia for sale at close to market prices, while cocaine moved the other way.²⁸ Since then, criminals and ordinary residents alike have captured more and more of the profits from trade between these two asymmetric economies by using informal crossings, known as *trochas*. Drugs (particularly coca paste and cocaine), minerals, fuel and food easily find a way across so long as the right payments are made, above all to armed groups and state security personnel.²⁹

With the growth of cross-border trade has come a spike in violence. It is common to encounter several armed groups when passing through a single crossing. Smugglers, migrants and refugees are disappeared or murdered, either for not paying extortion fees or because they are suspected of collaborating with other bands; bodies, including dismembered corpses, continue to appear at informal crossings.³⁰ "There is no day on which nobody is killed or disappeared", a resident from the Venezuelan

²⁵ "XIV Censo Nacional de Población y Vivienda 2011", Venezuelan National Statistical Institute, August 2012; "Censo Nacional de Población y Vivienda 2018", National Administrative Statistical Department (Colombia), October 2018.

²⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, rural resident of Vichada, 13 October 2020. Judith Valderrama, "Comerciantes grandes y pequeños de Cúcuta dependen del venezolano para su dinámica económica", *Crónica Uno*, 17 May 2020. "Comerciantes de Atalaya, en la quiebra por la COVID-19", *La Opinión*, 29 August 2020.

²⁷ Venezuelan banks and individuals have been allowed to trade in foreign currency since May 2019. See Fabiola Zerpa and Alex Vasquez, "Venezuela lifts controls on banks trading foreign currency", Bloomberg, 7 May 2019; and "Maduro says 'thank God' for dollarization in Venezuela", Reuters, 17 November 2019.

²⁸ Black markets in Venezuela generated \$14.4 billion in 2018, much of it made up of drug, fuel and gold trafficking across the Colombian border. Crisis Group email correspondence, Colombian customs representative, 12 May 2020. Presentation by Ecoanalítica at the Wilson Center, Washington, 14 January 2020.

²⁹ To move contraband over the *trocha* from Puerto Santander to Venezuela, smugglers reportedly pay bribes to security officers on both sides as well as to armed outfits. In September 2020, it cost up to \$20 for a person to use an informal border crossing. Crisis Group interviews, local businesspeople, Táchira state, January 2020; telephone interview, Venezuelan migrant, 22 September 2020.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, government representative, Cúcuta, 18 November 2019.

border town of Boca de Grita said.³¹ Human rights groups have also gathered numerous testimonies of sexual violence and extortion at the *trochas*.³²

The fuel smuggling boom itself received a shock as the campaign to remove Maduro from power gathered pace and U.S. sanctions hit the oil industry. Sanctions on Venezuelan crude oil exports have made it far harder for Caracas to import light fuel for transport, making it increasingly scarce in Venezuela and slashing petrol contraband to Colombia.³³ As a result, the number of petrol stations in Cúcuta has risen almost tenfold compared to a few years ago, meeting soaring demand for an alternative to contraband fuel from Venezuela.³⁴

C. *Natural Resources, Poverty and Public Services*

Border regions offer fertile land for large-scale agriculture (for example, African palm, soybeans and rubber), as well as sites for coal extraction, oil exploitation and mining. Large-scale agricultural and mining projects attract investors, many of them foreign, to these regions, but antagonise locals, who regularly express alarm over the effects on fragile ecosystems and access to water.³⁵ The search for profit in the Venezuelan borderlands has also opened rifts between entrepreneurs and residents. In Zulia state, the violent expansion of the African palm industry has forced indigenous farmers off their lands, while guerrilla and paramilitary groups have found lucrative employment in providing protection to entrepreneurs and intimidating locals.³⁶

These large-scale business activities have not helped bring broad-based economic development. Border regions in Colombia and Venezuela continue to suffer endemic high poverty and limited access to basic services. In the three Colombian border departments of Guainía, Vichada and La Guajira, under 50 per cent of the population has access to running water and sanitation.³⁷ Over 70 per cent of workers of the

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, Boca de Grita resident, Puerto Santander, 17 December 2019; Boca de Grita community leader, Táchira, January 2020. Armed groups also make threats of violence by voice message and on paper, posting flyers bearing the names of individuals and companies suspected of working with enemy groups.

³² Crisis Group interview, women's rights activist, Bogotá, 13 November 2019. See also Julia Zulver and Annette Idler, "Gendering the Border Effect: The Double Impact of Colombian Insecurity and the Venezuelan Refugee Crisis", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 7 (March 2020).

³³ Black-market petrol prices within Venezuela have risen to as much as \$5 a litre, eroding the possibility of making a profit by selling it in Colombia. Venezuela is an oil-producing country, but its refineries are processing less fuel as a result of underinvestment and a lack of maintenance. U.S. sanctions, for their part, have undermined Caracas' access to foreign currency as well as deterred business transactions with foreign firms. Occasional arrivals of Iranian light fuel have temporarily plugged the gaps in supply. See Anatoly Kurmanaev, "From nearly free to out-of-reach: gasoline's crazy price swing in Venezuela", *The New York Times*, 15 May 2020.

³⁴ John Otis, "Venezuela's fuel shortage upends long-time Colombian border gas smuggling trade", NPR, 10 September 2020.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, university professor, Cúcuta, 18 November 2019; environmental official from Norte de Santander, Cúcuta, 16 December 2019.

³⁶ African palms are the primary source of palm oil. Crisis Group interviews, farmers and residents, Zulia, February 2020.

³⁷ "Censo Nacional de Población y Vivienda 2018", op. cit.; and Ever Mejía, "La Guajira enfrenta la pandemia con hambre y sin agua potable", *La Silla Vacía*, 27 April 2020.

labour force in Cúcuta are informally employed, and 24.6 per cent are jobless, the second highest figure for a Colombian city.³⁸

Venezuela's economic collapse has heaped additional difficulties upon those its border residents were already experiencing. According to the World Food Programme, 9.3 million people in Venezuela, roughly one third of the country's population, suffer food insecurity and need urgent assistance.³⁹ Venezuelan border states, including Zulia, Táchira and Amazonas, rank among the states with the highest percentage of people in need, according to a UN humanitarian assessment.⁴⁰ Public services in these areas have dwindled as a result of the financial squeeze on Caracas. Until the border closures triggered by the COVID-19 outbreak, over 2,500 Venezuelan school-children were attending schools in Norte de Santander, in Colombia, after their teachers abandoned their jobs in protest over low wages.⁴¹ Schools in Colombia, however, do not always have the capacity to absorb all these children.⁴²

Regions on both sides of the border are also disproportionately affected by poor health-care provision. Venezuela's crisis has devastated the country's hospitals, which frequently lack access to water and suffer power shortages. Pregnant women in hospitals in Maracaibo, for example, have been obliged to pay for basic medication and medical supplies in dollars, leading a number of them to cross *trochas* into Colombia shortly before giving birth.⁴³ COVID-19 has laid bare the collapse of the Venezuelan health system, particularly in Maracaibo, where cremation ovens at one stage broke down from overuse.⁴⁴ But on both sides of the border, depleted health-care systems have come under extreme strain. Medics from a public hospital in Colombia's La Guajira, for example, threatened mass resignation amid the coronavirus outbreak as they had not received their full wages in 25 months.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, low wages and a high degree of discretionary power drive complicity between security force officers and criminal groups on both sides of the border. Venezuelan officers have been accused of involvement in extortion, kidnapping, smuggling and trafficking, while generally proving indifferent to the political affinities of

³⁸ "Cúcuta nuevamente segunda ciudad con mayor desempleo en Colombia", Caracol Radio, 1 November 2019; and "Tasa de desempleo en Cúcuta es de 24,6 %", *La Opinión*, 30 October 2020.

³⁹ "2020 Global Report on Food Crises", Food Security Information Network, 2020.

⁴⁰ "Humanitarian Response Plan", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, July 2020.

⁴¹ Astrid Suárez, "El drama de los niños que viven en Venezuela y estudian en Colombia", Proyecto Migración Venezuela, 14 May 2020.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, municipal council member in Juan Frío, Villa de Rosario, 28 January 2020; government representative, Puerto Carreño, 8 May 2020.

⁴³ Bram Ebus, "Under a Merciless Sun: Venezuelans Stranded Across the Colombian Border", Crisis Group Commentary, 25 February 2020. According to *The New York Times*, doctors in the San José Hospital in Maicao delivered 2,700 babies in 2019, compared to 70 in 2015. See Julie Turkewitz and Isayen Herrera, "Childbirth in Venezuela, where women's deaths are a state secret", *The New York Times*, 10 April 2020.

⁴⁴ Anatoly Kurmanaev, Isayen Herrera and Sheyla Urdaneta, "Venezuela deploys security forces in coronavirus crackdown", *The New York Times*, 19 August 2020.

⁴⁵ "Médicos de un hospital en La Guajira advierten que se irán a paro si no les pagan su sueldo", *El Espectador*, 6 April 2020.

the armed groups with which they collude.⁴⁶ These practices are not uncommon among Colombian police, army and migration officers either. “The gangs do the dirty work, they charge [extortion fees], and then they make arrangements with them [law enforcement]. That is the dynamic of how things work along the border,” explained a social leader in the Catatumbo frontier region.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, local official, Boca de Grita, January 2020. Freddy Bernal, the Venezuelan government’s designated “protector” of Táchira state, has denounced the presence of paramilitary groups tolerated by officials there. “Activan plan para desmantelar grupos irregulares en la frontera del Táchira”, *El Universal*, 29 April 2019. In January 2020, a Colombian police officer was arrested in Cúcuta for working for the Rastrojos group in Puerto Santander and collecting extortion and kidnapping fees. “Policía capturado sería cabecilla financiero de ‘los Rastrojos’ en Cúcuta”, *El Colombiano*, 31 January 2020. The departmental Ombudsman has urged police in Cúcuta to rotate personnel and reduce corruption, warning of police violence toward sex workers and permissiveness toward fuel trafficking. “Alerta Temprana N° 035-2020”, Colombia state Ombudsman, 5 August 2020.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, civil society member from Catatumbo, 29 April 2020.

III. Armed Groups along the Border

Poverty, weak state institutions, flourishing illicit trade between two dissimilar economies and the complicity of state and security officials have entrenched crime across both sides of the border. Colombia's borderlands are sparsely populated, but they are among the country's most violent areas: close to 5,000 people were killed there between 2012 and 2019.⁴⁸ Venezuelan border regions also contend with a coterie of non-state armed groups and flare-ups of fighting.

A. *Evolving Armed Groups: Competition and Control*

The array of armed groups on the border has transformed since the FARC demobilised in 2017. New or expanding groups filled the power vacuum that the guerrillas left behind, seeding fresh turf wars. Six massacres in 2020 testify to fierce disputes for territorial control, leaving a death toll of 25 across Norte de Santander.⁴⁹

Regardless of their size or origin, all armed groups close to the border look to make intensive use of informal crossings. They coerce or collude with law enforcement so that they can ply the *trochas* unmolested. Should the authorities pursue them, the armed groups exploit the borderlands' natural features to evade capture – hopping over the frontier or hiding along jungle rivers and in mountain ranges. At the same time, the rising use and profitability of *trochas* caused by shutdowns of the formal border since 2015 have meant that larger and better armed groups, in particular the guerrilla National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Rastrojos, have displaced smaller and more disorganised criminal outfits. By generating economies of scale and coordinating with a broader set of state and security officials, these larger groups seized control of fuel smuggling from Venezuela.⁵⁰

In spite of this concentration of power as well as the complicity between certain officials and armed groups, clashes along the border are frequent and violent enough to represent a low-intensity conflict. Colombian security forces sporadically battle armed outfits. Tacit alliances between Venezuelan state security forces and armed outfits, above all Colombian guerrilla groups, are also no protection against outbreaks of hostilities. The ELN clashed with the Venezuelan National Guard in November 2018 near Puerto Ayacucho, in Amazonas state, killing three National Guardsmen.⁵¹ Venezuelan soldiers also traded fire in September 2020 with a Colombian guerrilla faction, allegedly part of the FARC dissident Frente 10, in southern Apure state. Four soldiers and fifteen fighters were reportedly killed.⁵²

⁴⁸ Over 70,000 were forcibly displaced in the same period. "Sin Dios Ni Ley", Fundación Paz y Reconciliación, February 2020.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, local human rights investigator, 27 August 2020; human rights observers in Norte de Santander, 21 September 2020. A massacre in Colombia is usually defined as an intentional collective homicide of three or more people. "Colombia ¿Qué es una masacre?", Deutsche Welle, 24 August 2020.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, residents and community leaders, Táchira, January 2020.

⁵¹ Bram Ebus, "A Rising Tide of Murder in Venezuela's Mineral-rich South", Crisis Group Commentary, 12 November 2018.

⁵² "Fuertes enfrentamientos entre militares venezolanos y disidencias", *El Tiempo*, 19 September 2020. In both incidents, the Venezuelan government refused to admit Colombian guerrillas were involved and blamed either paramilitary organisations, terrorists or criminals from Colombia.

Ordinary residents, for their part, tend to tolerate the presence of armed outfits despite the violence they suffer. People in conflict-affected regions, such as Catatumbo, generally trust or at least put up with these outfits, as they respect the justice that the armed groups apply in the absence of official law enforcement.⁵³ The armed groups mete out violent punishments, including torture and summary executions, to those who break their rules, and with particular zeal to outsiders. Venezuelan migrants who cross a line are at high risk.⁵⁴ One form of punishment used by guerrilla groups in Catatumbo is to put people to work on coca plantations, either picking leaves or cooking for the other labourers.⁵⁵

During the COVID-19 pandemic, various villages decided to impose restrictions on movement and throw up barricades at the entrances from main roads, while armed groups have relayed their own quarantine rules over social media and by distributing pamphlets.⁵⁶ Armed groups in Colombia were reportedly allowing locals to return to normal life in September in parallel to the central government's decision to lift many nationwide restrictions.⁵⁷

B. *The ELN: Advances on Both Sides of the Border*

The ELN's expansion across both sides of the border is the outstanding feature of armed activity in the region.⁵⁸ According to one of its top commanders and negotiators, Pablo Beltrán, the rebel group has "a very broad historical presence along those 2,200km of border. There have always been ELN forces and they will always be there".⁵⁹

Colombia's last remaining guerrilla force is present in every border department and assigns most of its foot soldiers to the region: a former commander estimated in 2018 that about 70 per cent of its troops were operating in the borderlands.⁶⁰ Its presence in Venezuela goes back decades, although its activities used to be quite limited, with the guerrillas mainly using the other side of the border as a strategic rear guard.⁶¹ Since 2017, however, the ELN has advanced deep into Venezuela's interior, acquiring larger stakes in illegal gold mining as well as recruiting more fighters.⁶²

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, senior international agency representative, Cúcuta, 18 November 2019.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, social leader from El Tarra, Cúcuta, 20 December 2019.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, youth representatives from the Catatumbo region, December 2019.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, civil society member, Catatumbo, 29 April 2020.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, health and security expert, Norte de Santander, 5 September 2020.

⁵⁸ ELN fighters in Colombia number between 2,500 and 4,000, according to estimates, but the guerrillas also have an extensive network of civilian and militia members. "¿Qué hacer con el ELN?", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, January 2020.

⁵⁹ See the transcript of the Reuters interview with Pablo Beltrán: "Un violador de acuerdos respalda a otro violador de acuerdos", Reuters, 28 May 2020.

⁶⁰ "Eln participaría en guerra en Venezuela, incluso combatiría a Colombia", *La Opinión*, 1 October 2018.

⁶¹ For more information on the ELN's activities in Venezuela, see Crisis Group Latin America Report N°78, *A Glut of Arms: Curbing the Threat to Venezuela from Violent Groups*, 20 February 2020; and Crisis Group Report, *Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South*, op. cit.

⁶² On Bolívar and Amazonas, see Crisis Group Report, *Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South*, op. cit.

ELN fighters are training local *colectivos*, violent para-police groups loyal to *chavista* politicians, often with the approval of Venezuelan security forces.⁶³

As part of its expansion, the ELN has seized areas previously controlled by the FARC, including swathes of Catatumbo and towns in the Venezuelan state of Táchira.⁶⁴ One senior ELN representative claimed that the guerrillas have been constructing a broad social base, in the knowledge that citizens feel more secure under their sway now that the FARC has withdrawn.⁶⁵ Locals interviewed in Venezuela said crime and extortion have fallen since the guerrillas' arrival, while the summary justice meted out tends not to be violent.⁶⁶ Even so, the ELN's presence is not free of risk for locals, who can find themselves caught in crossfire or facing sudden changes in command that lead to more brutal treatment. In addition, one of the ELN's main economic activities on both sides of the border is kidnapping.⁶⁷ In February, a powerful ELN sub-group, the North-eastern Front, announced a four-day "armed strike" in which it blocked roads, burned vehicles and imposed curfews; 40 per cent of its actions took place in Catatumbo.⁶⁸

Often, the ELN summons community meetings to give a seal of legitimacy to its expansion, telling residents that it fights crime and instils order. In Venezuela's Zulia state, the ELN informed locals that it would combat a feared criminal group called La Zona (for more, see Section III.E below). In league with Venezuelan security forces, the ELN proceeded to assume control over Wayuu indigenous villages on the Venezuelan side of the border; locals said they are content since violence has dropped, although the guerrillas now manage cross-border contraband.⁶⁹ Nearby, in the Perijá mountains, the ELN's influence over the Yukpa indigenous community has sparked resentment, with Yukpa leaders vexed by the recruitment of youngsters, many tormented by hunger, into the guerrillas' ranks.⁷⁰

Expansion has nevertheless put the ELN at loggerheads with other armed outfits. These include the Popular Liberation Army (EPL, also known as the Pelusos), another Colombian criminal group with which the ELN clashed in Catatumbo in 2018, and the Rastrojos, a criminal band that emerged after Colombia's paramilitary forces

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, senior ELN member, Norte de Santander, November 2019.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior ELN member, November 2019. See also Joe Parkin Daniels, "Peace is war as armed groups roil Colombia's lawless border region", *The Guardian*, 20 July 2019.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior ELN member, Norte de Santander, November 2019.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Ureña, San Antonio, Rubio and García de Hevia municipalities, Táchira, January 2020.

⁶⁷ Rosalinda Hernández, "AN debate en Táchira con familiares de secuestrados por las FARC y el ELN", *El Estímulo*, 1 March 2018; and Eilyn Cardozo, "Denuncian que en Ureña el Eln tiene campamento de secuestrados", *La Opinión*, 4 March 2020.

⁶⁸ "Inseguridad en el Catatumbo", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, February 2020. During what it calls an "armed strike", the ELN halts all economic activity in a given area and restricts mobility there as a means of displaying its local power.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, human rights activists in La Guajira, May 2020; northern border resident, 31 May 2020. Similarly, the guerrillas' presence in the southern Venezuelan border town of Puerto Ayacucho heralded a campaign of "social cleansing" directed at perceived criminals and other undesirables, only to be followed by a spike in petty crime after the group temporarily departed. Crisis Group telephone interviews, observer in Amazonas state, May 2020; local security expert, 31 August 2020.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, local indigenous leaders, Zulia, February 2020.

demobilised between 2003 and 2006.⁷¹ About 150 ELN combatants were dispatched to fight the Rastrojos and other bands in both Norte de Santander in Colombia and the neighbouring Venezuelan state of Táchira in late 2019.⁷² States where the guerrillas exert largely uncontested control, such as Arauca in Colombia and Apure directly across the border in Venezuela, supposedly suffer less violence.⁷³ Nonetheless, Human Rights Watch has documented extensive abuses of civilians under the ELN's thumb.⁷⁴

C. *Post-paramilitary Forces*

Colombian crime groups that sprouted from paramilitary forces following their demobilisation include the Rastrojos and Gaitanistas (more formally known as the Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces of Colombia). All of these operate on the border separating Norte de Santander from the Venezuelan Táchira state, which the paramilitaries dominated from 1998 to 2005.⁷⁵ Despite their lineage, these groups now have little to do with their predecessors' counter-insurgency mission.⁷⁶ Instead, they exercise control over illicit businesses while running trafficking corridors for drugs and fuel in alliance with officials on both sides of the border.

Conflict between these groups and other armed contenders, including the ELN, escalated from 2017 and onward, affecting in particular Puerto Santander, a hub for the trafficking and sale of contraband Venezuelan fuel that had been dominated by the Rastrojos.⁷⁷ Though weakened, the Rastrojos continued their rackets on the Venezuelan side of the border, above all in the towns of La Fría and Boca de Grita, where they colluded with the military and local authorities in extortion, fuel smuggling and narco-trafficking.⁷⁸

Rising political tensions on the border have since imperilled these marriages of convenience between post-paramilitary groups and Venezuelan officials (see also Section V). In the eyes of Caracas, the profit-making ventures in these border towns contradicted the official government stance, which has repeatedly denounced the intrusion into national territory of Colombian "paramilitary organisations".⁷⁹ At the same time, deepening ties between Venezuelan state forces and the ELN – a sworn

⁷¹ The EPL started as a rebel group linked to the Communist Party of Colombia (Marxist-Leninist), which split off from the Colombian Communist Party in the 1960s, but it is now considered a crime group. "Crimen organizado y saboteadores armados en tiempos de transición", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, July 2017.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, senior ELN member, Norte de Santander, November 2019. See also "The War in Catatumbo", Human Rights Watch, August 2019.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, senior ELN member, Norte de Santander, November 2019.

⁷⁴ "The Guerrillas are the Police", Human Rights Watch, January 2020. Dissident factions and a Venezuelan guerrilla force, the Bolivarian Forces of Liberation, are present in the same area.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, environmental official, Cúcuta, 16 December 2019.

⁷⁶ For more on post-paramilitary activities in Colombia, see Crisis Group Report, *Colombia's Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace*, op. cit.

⁷⁷ Puerto Santander is also close to Catatumbo's coca-producing areas, and unknown quantities of fuel are trafficked to the cocaine laboratories for use in processing the drug.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, local state body, Cúcuta, 16 December 2019.

⁷⁹ Daniel Pardo, "Crisis fronteriza entre Colombia y Venezuela: ¿quiénes son los paramilitares de los que habla Nicolás Maduro?", BBC Mundo, 8 September 2015.

enemy of the Rastrojos along stretches of the border – highlighted the incongruous loyalties of Venezuela’s security apparatus.⁸⁰

The Rastrojos’ influence in the area rose to unavoidable prominence in February 2019, when opposition leader Guaidó crossed the border into Colombia with the criminal group’s assistance.⁸¹ As control over the borderlands became a matter of high political concern and national security for the Maduro government, Venezuelan forces embarked on efforts to sever ties with the Rastrojos and curb the group’s sway.⁸² In February 2020, a Venezuelan army incursion ended in a shootout with the Rastrojos in Boca de Grita, a Venezuelan border town, forcing many inhabitants to flee to Colombia. The ELN moved into the area, while remnants of the Rastrojos remain nearby in Venezuela and have retrenched in towns on the Colombian side, employing extreme violence, including dismemberment of their victims, to defend their positions and intimidate rivals.⁸³ In a bid to survive in Venezuela, the group reportedly changed its name in 2019 and now self-identifies as a pro-government *colectivo*.⁸⁴

D. FARC Dissidents

Before and after the signing of the 2016 peace deal, various FARC factions reneged on the peace process and resolved to continue the armed struggle. Many new recruits joined them, giving rise to a disparate collection of outfits with different ambitions and tactics, of which the most significant is led by Gentil Duarte. The Colombian military estimates that 2,600 fighters are part of the dissident factions, with an additional 2,000 people belonging to their support networks.⁸⁵

FARC dissidents under the name of Frente 33 operate in Catatumbo, where they control a major share of cocaine production and trafficking routes.⁸⁶ Various sources indicate that this front has split into two, one group under the command of Jhon Cuarenta, also known as “Jhon Catatumbo”, and another led by Jorge Villa.⁸⁷ These factions claim not to represent any sort of dissidence, but to remain authentic FARC rebels. In a video published on 28 May, they said they are part of a structure led by

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, residents and community leaders, Táchira, January 2020.

⁸¹ Photos of Guaidó posing with known Rastrojos members surfaced on social media in September 2019, leading the Maduro government to accuse Colombia and the opposition of colluding with criminal organisations. See Tom Phillips and Joe Daniels, “Venezuela’s Guaidó pictured with members of Colombian gang”, *The Guardian*, 13 September 2019.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan organised crime member, 28 January 2020. See “¡Duro contra el crimen transfronterizo! Fanb neutralizó a 6 integrantes de la banda paramilitar Los Rastrojos”, *Con El Mazo Dando*, 9 February 2020.

⁸³ In July, six civilians were killed near Puerto Santander. “Zona rural de Cúcuta, en máxima alerta por masacres y desplazamiento”, *La Opinión*, 20 July 2020. Earlier that month, four victims of a massacre, reportedly perpetrated by the Rastrojos, were thrown in the Zulia river. “Tragedia familiar: investigan masacre en zona rural de Cúcuta”, *El Tiempo*, 7 July 2020.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, local leaders, Boca de Grita, January 2020.

⁸⁵ “Disidencias de las Farc duplican su número de hombres en solo 12 meses”, *El Tiempo*, 31 May 2020.

⁸⁶ “Disidencias controlan el 20% del narcotráfico en el Catatumbo”, *La Opinión*, 21 June 2020.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interviews, senior international agency representative, Cúcuta, 18 November 2019; Rubén Zamora, former Frente 33 commander, Cúcuta, November 2019; and telephone interview, Colombian conflict expert, 17 May 2020.

former FARC commanders Gentil Duarte, Iván Mordisco and Leonardo Posada.⁸⁸ Most of their rank and file are nevertheless new recruits, including many Venezuelans, rather than ex-FARC fighters.⁸⁹

Elsewhere, FARC dissidents are less well rooted and regularly find themselves collaborating or competing with other armed groups. Dissidents grouped in the Aca-cio Medina Front exert control over communities and maintain relations with security forces in parts of the Venezuelan state of Amazonas, even reportedly sharing their food with members of the Venezuelan National Guard. The dissidents also appear to have taken advantage of the ELN's decision to wind down its activities in mineral-rich Amazonas state following clashes with the National Guard in late 2018, although the ELN maintains a robust presence in the proximity of Puerto Ayacucho, the Atabapo municipality and its Yapacana gold mines.⁹⁰

FARC dissidents have often met with a hostile public reception, above all in the southern borderlands. Indigenous representatives reportedly voiced discontent with the fighters in meetings with the FARC dissidents in the interior of the Atabapo municipality.⁹¹ The indigenous spokesperson claimed that forces foreign to the region were working in their ancestral lands and warned the guerrilla groups and the military that they could expect a violent reaction were these offences to continue.⁹² FARC dissidents had allegedly told indigenous community leaders that the *chavista* government had allowed them to work in Amazonas state.⁹³ In September, indigenous groups requested that the Venezuelan navy block the Orinoco river to stop miners and armed groups from entering the Yapacana park.⁹⁴

E. *Smaller Criminal Outfits*

Numerous smaller crime rings operate across northern stretches of the border, but each one faces grave challenges. Tempted by booming illicit rackets surrounding the area's border crossings, larger groups have sought to capture the bulk of the profits, sparking a series of brutal internecine clashes. Indigenous clans, for instance, are deeply involved in informal cross-border smuggling between La Guajira and Zulia, with around 50 community-run barricades on some of the main routes connecting the two countries, often employing a simple rope to stop people, who would then pay

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, state government representative, Cúcuta, 18 November 2019. Crisis Group Briefing, *Containing the Border Fallout of Colombia's New Guerrilla Schism*, op. cit. See also YouTube video by Andrey Abendaño, 28 May 2020, FARC-EP Catatumbo.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Rubén Zamora, former Frente 33 commander, Cúcuta, November 2019; social leader from El Tarra, Cúcuta, 20 December 2019.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group telephone interviews, local security experts and human rights activists, 2020.

⁹¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, local investigator, 5 October 2020.

⁹² Crisis Group telephone interviews, security expert in Amazonas state, 22 January 2020; environmental researcher in Amazonas state, 20 November 2020.

⁹³ Crisis Group telephone interview, civil society representative from Amazonas, 18 May 2020.

⁹⁴ "Indígenas piden el cierre total del paso a las minas ilegales del Parque Nacional Yapacana", Kapé Kapé, 24 September 2020. In September, community leaders gave the FARC dissidents an ultimatum to leave the area and seized mining equipment in Yapacana, though their relations with the ELN appear to be better. Crisis Group telephone interview, human rights defender in Amazonas, 26 September 2020. María Ramírez Cabello, "Indígenas de Amazonas rechazan actividades mineras de disidencias de las FARC en sus territorios", *Correo del Caroní*, 26 September 2020.

a “toll”.⁹⁵ But the border closure of 2015 and the increase in trafficking from 2017 onward made control of the crossings far more profitable, leading to conflicts among rival armed groups for control.⁹⁶ This area, especially the border municipality of La Guajira, in Zulia state, became a hotspot for violence.

One of the most violent factions was La Zona, members of which included indigenous Wayuu, outsiders to the region and released convicts. Local politicians established relationships with La Zona, and the group worked alongside parts of the Venezuelan security forces.⁹⁷ But these ties frayed once the band began a savage campaign of expansion early in 2018, killing more than 100 people as it tried to rid itself of competing gangs to become the supreme authority between Maicao and Maracaibo. Entire communities on the Venezuelan side were displaced and fled across the border to Colombia. In the village of Guarero, close to the border, La Zona carried out public executions in broad daylight.⁹⁸ The gang’s reign ended in 2019, when first state security forces and then the ELN decided to combat it. La Zona was almost eliminated as a result.⁹⁹

Another upstart is el Tren de Aragua. This Venezuelan criminal gang, also known as a *megabanda*, has forged supply chain relations with the Colombian drug trafficking group the Gaitanistas, and devotes itself to extortion, assassinations and drug trafficking.¹⁰⁰ According to a Venezuelan drug trafficker, el Tren de Aragua has ties with the ELN and FARC dissidents, but also allegedly collaborates with the Rastrojos in human trafficking.¹⁰¹ The group now forms part of a complex and fast-changing criminal landscape on the Colombian side of the border, in the Cúcuta area.¹⁰²

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, residents of La Raya border settlement, Zulia, February 2020. The justification for this practice is that outsiders crossing the border should pay a modest “right of passage” fee to traverse the indigenous people’s ancestral lands.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, residents, journalists and activists, Guajira municipality, Zulia, February 2020.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, investigators in La Guajira and Zulia, 2019 and 2020.

⁹⁸ Ebus, “Under a Merciless Sun”, op. cit.

⁹⁹ Some La Zona members continue to extort truckers near the border town of Paraguachón, but their territorial control is greatly diminished. Crisis Group telephone interview, border resident in La Guajira, 6 September 2020.

¹⁰⁰ “El Tren de Aragua y sus homicidios en la frontera”, *La Opinión*, 17 July 2019; and “Cae grupo armado venezolano responsable de crímenes en la frontera”, *El Tiempo*, 17 July 2019. Venezuelans use the term *megabanda* for gangs with more than 60 members.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan organised crime member, Norte de Santander, January 2020; and “Alerta Temprana N° 035-2020”, op. cit.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interviews, senior ELN member, Norte de Santander, November 2019; local civil society representative, Cúcuta, 15 January 2020.

IV. Coca and Other Criminal Economies

The fertile but rugged terrain in the Colombian border state of Norte de Santander has become the epicentre of global coca production. Producers and traffickers are exploiting the influx of Venezuelan migrants and refugees to assure themselves a steady supply of cheap labour, while Mexican cartels are gaining a firmer foothold in the region. Counter-narcotic crackdowns, meanwhile, continue to fuel hostilities among communities, armed groups and the state.

A. *The Lure of Coca and Failing Substitution*

Illicit crops are cultivated in most Colombian border departments, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).¹⁰³ The latest UN estimates of coca cultivation in Colombia indicate that more than 41,711 hectares are planted in Norte de Santander, a 24 per cent rise over 2019, most of it in the Catatumbo region, where the crop greases the wheels of the local economy and all armed groups have stakes in the business.¹⁰⁴ “It is coca that sends our children to school”, explained a border inhabitant in the Amazon.¹⁰⁵ Once processed, coca paste and cocaine are transported to Venezuela or to Colombian ports on the Caribbean. Drug trafficking from Colombia to Venezuela has diminished since 2017, but routes remain operative; most of Colombia’s cocaine leaves from the Pacific coastline.¹⁰⁶

Although coca plantations are based in Colombia, the drug business along the border has transformed into a binational affair, drawing intensively on Venezuelan manual labour. Colombian coca farms are not necessarily a bad option for undocumented migrants. Venezuelans in rural Norte de Santander explain that they receive free meals on the plantations, sleep in hammocks and earn 40,000 to 50,000 Colombian pesos per day (\$11 to \$14): it is a far better deal than day labour on nearby African palm plantations, which pay 15,000 to 20,000 pesos (\$4 to \$5.50) and do not provide food or lodging. The lure of the coca fields is so strong that it has drawn many Venezuelan youngsters across the border.¹⁰⁷

Numerous coca-growing communities in Colombia have signed up to a program for voluntary crop substitution, called the National Comprehensive Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops (PNIS), devised as part of the 2016 peace agreement with the FARC.¹⁰⁸ More than 4,000 families in the border states, of whom 3,000 are in

¹⁰³ The quantities in Arauca and La Guajira are not significant, however. See “Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos”, UNODC, July 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. Tibú is Colombia’s number one coca-producing municipality. Three other municipalities in Catatumbo, according to the UNODC, belong in the top ten coca-producing areas.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group focus group, indigenous representatives, Cumaribo, 24 November 2019.

¹⁰⁶ “El Tráfico de Cocaína de Colombia Hacia el Mundo”, Fundación Paz y Reconciliación, April 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Anatoly Kurmanav, “Do-gooder or ‘devil’? A friar’s work divides a Venezuelan village”, *The New York Times*, 3 January 2020. Very few drug crops have traditionally been located in Venezuela, although some are popping up. Small coca plots and cocaine laboratories have been reported in Zulia state, while 33 cocaine laboratories were dismantled in Venezuela, close to the Colombian border, in 2018. “Venezuela Crimen Sin Frontera”, *El País* (Colombia), September 2017; “Report 2019”, International Narcotics Control Board, February 2020.

¹⁰⁸ Article 4 of the 2016 peace deal offers coca-growing families the opportunity to swap illicit crops for legal alternatives, with a temporary financial incentive.

Norte de Santander, enlisted.¹⁰⁹ But the program has failed to distribute subsidies and support alternative, legal production, disappointing participants and pushing some back to illicit crops, albeit often following pressure from armed groups. “We feel betrayed”, said a social leader from El Tarra, a town in rural Catatumbo. “We gave the word of good faith to the government”.¹¹⁰

Tensions between locals and the Colombian government have flared because the latter is determined to rid the countryside of coca crops, including with continuous manual eradication during the COVID-19 pandemic and vows to resume aerial fumigation of fields.¹¹¹ Armed groups involved in the cocaine business responded to such threats by reportedly killing four local activists advocating crop substitution in Norte de Santander between January and August, while the army has killed four rural leaders in the same region since March.¹¹² On 31 August, members of the dissident Frente 33 murdered four soldiers deployed on a mission to eradicate coca.¹¹³ At the same time, coca farmers and other parts of the drug supply chain have felt the pinch during the coronavirus lockdown due to the difficulty of getting supplies, such as fuel, to cocaine processing regions.¹¹⁴

B. *Mexican Cartels*

It is no novelty that Mexican cartels operate in Colombia. Colombian drug cartels forged relations with their Mexican counterparts to transport cocaine to North America back in the 1980s.¹¹⁵ In the wake of the FARC demobilisation, other Mexican cartels have grasped the opportunity to consolidate their position in cocaine-producing areas. The Attorney General’s office in Colombia warned in 2018 that Mexican cartels are active in ten of the country’s 32 departments, with most of the cocaine that leaves Colombia passing through Central America and Mexico.¹¹⁶

Drug traffickers in Catatumbo used to sell their narcotics to the FARC guerrillas, but in the wake of their demobilisation, the Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation cartels from Mexico have stepped into the supply chain, negotiating directly with crop growers and managing relations with armed groups such as the EPL, ELN and FARC

¹⁰⁹ “Report No. 19 – PNIS”, Colombian Presidency, November 2019.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, social leader from El Tarra, Cúcuta, 20 December 2019.

¹¹¹ In 2015, former President Santos ended aerial spraying after the World Health Organization’s International Agency for Research on Cancer suggested that the herbicide used is carcinogenic. See “Colombia to ban coca spraying herbicide glyphosate”, BBC, 9 May 2015.

¹¹² Crisis Group telephone interviews, Rubén Zamora, ex-Frente 33 commander, 31 August 2020; community leader in Norte de Santander, 8 December 2020. Elibardo León Estévez, “Comunidad dice que el Ejército asesinó a joven campesino en el Catatumbo”, RCN Radio, 28 June 2020; “Asesinan a líder indígena en Norte de Santander”, Noticias Canal 1, 1 June 2020; “Dos muertos en intentos de erradicación de coca”, *La Opinión*, 19 May 2020.

¹¹³ “Disidencias son responsables de ataque a militares en Catatumbo: Ejército”, Caracol Radio, 31 August 2020.

¹¹⁴ “Alerta Temprana N° 035-2020”, op. cit.

¹¹⁵ Colombian cartels started their first supply chain relations with Mexican organised crime in the 1980s. See Boris Miranda, “Cuál es el poder de los narcos mexicanos en Colombia: ‘Actúan como empresarios que invierten en una franquicia’”, BBC Mundo, 18 July 2019.

¹¹⁶ “En estos diez departamentos hacen presencia los carteles mexicanos”, *El Tiempo*, 29 January 2018.

dissidents. Although these groups jostle for control of various areas, each of them seemingly has a working relationship with the Mexican cartels. Moving upstream in the supply chain enables the Mexican groups to pay less for the product, but more than what Colombian farmers are used to receiving. “They [the cartels] want the best quality and as much as possible”, explained a former cartel member.¹¹⁷ An army colonel told a local media outlet that Mexican organised crime now controls 80 per cent of the cocaine and coca paste leaving Catatumbo.¹¹⁸

Drugs produced in Tibú and nearby El Tarra are taken to Venezuela on the first leg of the journey to the international market. Farmers are paid in advance for their harvest, repaying their debts later with coca or cocaine paste.¹¹⁹ From Venezuela the product is shipped abroad by boat or plane, sometimes using airstrips close to the border. Venezuelan authorities say they destroyed more than 50 clandestine airstrips in 2019, but they admit that it takes more time to destroy an airstrip than to build one.¹²⁰ One small village close to Lake Maracaibo, called San Felipe, used to depend on agriculture and fishing, but now reportedly functions as a take-off point for small planes ferrying cocaine to the Caribbean. It has been nicknamed “Sinaloa”.¹²¹

As well as allegedly bribing complicit state officials on both sides of the border, the cartel also pays local armed groups a quota based on the quantities of drugs that they buy and move.¹²² The same local armed groups provide security for cartel members, which is particularly important given their cash-based transactions.¹²³ Mexicans bring cash to Cúcuta, then to Catatumbo, where dollars are taken to the farming areas to pay producers. Some money haulers who are under investigation are said to have travelled from Mexico City to Bogotá, and thence to Catatumbo.¹²⁴

Community leaders fear that the Mexican cartels might start to threaten local activists, above all those who oppose coca cultivation and campaign on behalf of the crop substitution program. Supporters of substitution have indeed suffered lethal attacks, but as yet there are no reported cases in which the killers were Mexican cartel members. In practice, the Mexican cartels depend on Colombian armed groups for security, and these have been at the forefront of attacks upon social leaders. According to the former cartel member, the Mexican outfits respect the territorial control of Colombian armed groups, preferring to maintain a low profile and conduct business with as little agitation as possible.¹²⁵

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, ex-cartel member, Colombia, December 2019.

¹¹⁸ Pedro Luis Sánchez, “Mexicanos controlan el 80% de la coca del Catatumbo”, *La Opinión*, 18 November 2019.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, social leader from El Tarra, Cúcuta, 20 December 2019.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview, regional government official, Zulia, February 2020.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interviews, residents and local leaders, Machiques, Zulia, February 2020. Hawkers at a nearby transport hub reportedly shout “Sinaloa! Sinaloa!” for trips to San Felipe.

¹²² Crisis Group interview, local state body, Cúcuta, 16 December 2019.

¹²³ Crisis Group interview, social leader from El Tarra, Cúcuta, 20 December 2019.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, law enforcement and customs authorities in Norte de Santander, Cúcuta, 29 January 2020.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, ex-cartel member, Colombia, December 2019.

C. Other Criminal Economies

Two other commodities, contraband Venezuelan fuel and illegally mined gold, are major sources of revenue for armed groups, crime syndicates and corrupt security officers in the borderlands.

1. Fuel

Fuel smuggling (or *pimpineo*) is another illegal pursuit driven by poverty. Before the pandemic, an estimated 3,000 families depended on it in Norte de Santander, but *pimpineo* occurs along the entire Colombian-Venezuelan border.¹²⁶ In 2019, a *pimpinero* made at least 20,000 Colombian pesos (now \$5.50) per day transporting and selling Venezuelan contraband fuel, but the lowly operatives of the business face high risks.¹²⁷ A representative of fuel smugglers claimed that *pimpineros* have been killed in shootouts at the *trochas*.¹²⁸ Armed groups also extort a fee from them for every trip across the border.

Even before the collapse of the contraband fuel market in Venezuela, the influx of migrants involved in the activity had driven earnings down. But since early 2020, the trade in fuel carried by individuals over the border has nearly ceased to exist. About 80 per cent of *pimpineros* are out of work, or have started selling Colombian fuel, which they are even transporting to Venezuela.¹²⁹ Larger armed groups have continued the contraband, but to maintain profits they have to ship bigger volumes using more capital-intensive operations.¹³⁰

Fuel is also used in the process of producing coca paste. “The big mafias of narco-trafficking use it”, said one fuel smuggler.¹³¹ Contraband fuel for cocaine production has traditionally been sourced from Venezuela, but crude oil, or *pata 'e grillo*, is also stolen from wells and refined in makeshift laboratories in Colombia for these purposes.¹³² Crude oil is also tapped from pipelines to secure fuel supplies, while threatening to blow up pipelines is also a way for armed groups to extort oil companies.¹³³

2. Gold

The crisis in Venezuela has driven many impoverished people to mines in the country's south, where a gold rush abetted by the resource-starved government in Caracas and overseen by the armed forces is under way. Since the gold market in Venezuela is

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, *pimpinero* representative, Cúcuta, 29 January 2020; email correspondence, Colombian customs representative, 12 May 2020.

¹²⁷ Each jerrycan of about twenty gallons earns less than a dollar for the *pimpinero*.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, *pimpinero* representative, Cúcuta, 29 January 2020. In the first seven months of 2020, twenty bodies were found in informal crossings along the Colombian side. See “Alerta Temprana N° 035-2020”, op. cit., p. 24.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, *pimpinero* representative, 21 May 2020; and *pimpinero* representative, 3 September 2020.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, fuel smugglers and border residents, Táchira, January 2020.

¹³¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, fuel smuggler, August 2020.

¹³² “El ‘oro negro’ del Catatumbo, atractivo de los grupos ilegales”, *Verdad Abierta*, 12 October 2016. Crisis Group interview, community representative, Petrólea, 18 December 2019.

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, environmental official, Cúcuta, 16 December 2019. The Caño Limón pipeline, owned by EcoPetrol and Zenit, only operated for two months in 2019 because of 120 illicit valves and twenty attacks on the pipeline by guerrilla groups.

under U.S. sanctions and increasing scrutiny from other governments, the European Parliament, the UN and international media, most of the gold is trafficked across borders in the expectation that it will be quietly sold abroad. Once transported to Colombia, gold as well as other minerals such as coltan are often legalised through the use of false Colombian mining titles and presented as above-board national production before being sold on the international market.¹³⁴

Hundreds of people carry this gold by foot across formal and informal border crossings, including migrants and refugees forced to do so under threat of violence. On the Colombian side of the Simón Bolívar bridge, the main formal crossing between the two countries, a local leader warned that para-police *colectivos* on the Venezuelan side attempt to steal gold from smugglers. “If they catch you, they will kill you”, he stated.¹³⁵

That said, gold trafficking has decreased significantly as a result of COVID-19 travel restrictions. Traffickers have found it increasingly hard to reach international markets, leading to a sharp decline in black-market gold prices in Venezuela even though production has remained stable and international gold prices have reached record highs. Those with access to cash dollars in Venezuela can thus buy up the precious metal in bulk at discount prices and move it along remaining trafficking routes or stockpile it.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ “Venezuela, the smugglers’ paradise”, InfoAmazonia, 23 July 2019. Crisis Group interviews, Colombian intelligence officials and mineral traders, 2018 and 2019. Colombian Defence Minister Carlos Holmes Trujillo claimed that the ELN and FARC dissidents traffic illegally mined gold from Venezuela to Colombia with the Maduro government’s approval. “Eln y Bacrim están en Venezuela fortaleciendo sus negocios: mindefensa”, *El Tiempo*, 26 June 2020.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interview, social leader, Norte de Santander, January 2020.

¹³⁶ Marco David Valverde and Bram Ebus, “La gran barata del oro en el Sur de Venezuela”, Armando Info, 10 May 2020.

V. High Political Tension along the Borders

Border communities have often been tolerant or supportive of illicit business and armed groups in the expectation these will provide jobs, rudimentary justice and public order to substitute for a negligent state. Local allies, complicit officials in the state and security forces and escape routes along the border offer protection and impunity to lawbreakers. But rising political tensions between Colombia and Venezuela have appeared to mark an end to this criminal idyll: Caracas and Bogotá have been compelled to treat their shared border as a potential inter-state threat, adding high-level national security concerns to general state neglect.

A. Venezuela's New Security Approach

Weeks after Juan Guaidó staked his claim to the interim presidency of Venezuela, the opposition hatched a plan to send a humanitarian aid convoy into the country on 23 February 2019. The Maduro government claimed that the convoy was a smoke-screen for foreign military intervention.¹³⁷ It closed the border, blocked one of the bridges between the countries and organised a rival concert to the “Venezuela Live Aid” event staged by the opposition together with British magnate Richard Branson.¹³⁸

Caracas also reinforced its border defence, in the process initiating deep and lasting changes to the region's security landscape. The government dispatched soldiers, but also deployed irregular armed groups, seemingly out of fear that large numbers of troops might desert.¹³⁹ Venezuelan authorities allegedly approved the release of inmates to boost their numbers ahead of the aid operation.¹⁴⁰

Resurgent interest from Caracas has bestowed exceptional powers on certain armed groups. Soon after the failed aid operation, Venezuelan security forces began combating some of the criminal outfits running *trochas*, among other reasons because of their supposed complicity with Guaidó. Meanwhile, the ELN boosted its public outreach in the neighbouring border provinces of Norte de Santander and Táchira, allegedly with *chavista* consent.¹⁴¹ The guerrillas reportedly have access to off-road vehicles, high-end transmission equipment and state-subsidised food packages, which they hand out to locals to gain support. Their growing presence, especially in Táchira, appears to have the blessing of authorities in Caracas, who view the ELN as a sup-

¹³⁷ Crisis Group Statement, “Negotiating an Exit from Venezuela's Bruising Deadlock”, 4 March 2019.

¹³⁸ The concert in question raised only \$2.4 million of the \$100 million it aimed to collect. “370.000 personas asistieron al Venezuela Aid Live; se han recaudado más de 2 millones de dólares”, CNN Español, 28 February 2019.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior international agency representative, Cúcuta, 18 November 2019. More than 300 Venezuelan soldiers deserted in the first three days after the event. A Venezuelan opposition attaché received them in Cúcuta. See “Colombia says 326 Venezuelan army deserters since Saturday”, France 24, 26 February 2019.

¹⁴⁰ An unspecified number of corpses, including dismembered bodies, were found along the border after the concert. Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement and customs authorities, Cúcuta, 29 January 2020.

¹⁴¹ According to Colombian army estimates, the ELN has 1,400 fighters in Táchira, Barinas and Apure states. This number does not take into account several other Venezuelan states with a reported ELN presence, including the border states Amazonas and Zulia. “El 44% de las tropas del ELN ya residen en Venezuela”, VOA, 8 November 2019.

plement to the state's border defences and seem willing to overlook occasional clashes between its fighters and the Venezuelan military.¹⁴²

A central figure in Caracas' efforts to exert more effective control over the border is Freddy Bernal, a veteran *chavista* appointed by Maduro in January 2018 as "protector" of Táchira state. Although the opposition governor Laidy Gómez, elected in October 2017, is formally in charge, Bernal is the real executor of state power in Táchira. His responsibilities include safeguarding the border and running the CLAPS, the national state-subsidised food handout program, assuring him influence over a population prone to food shortages.¹⁴³ Bernal is also reported to have strong links with the *colectivos* deployed in the region since 2019. In September 2019, Carlos Holmes Trujillo, then Colombia's foreign minister, accused Bernal of operating as the link between the Maduro government and the ELN in the border areas.¹⁴⁴

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, Bernal has also assumed responsibility for containing the pandemic in the area, warning Venezuelan returnees not to come back using informal crossings.¹⁴⁵ He accuses the U.S. of conducting psychological warfare in the borderlands, and frequently posts videos on his Twitter account displaying the military equipment and heavily armed men at his disposal. In one video with a symphonic soundtrack, a caption says he is fighting "two enemies – mercenaries and COVID-19".¹⁴⁶

B. Shelter for "Terrorists" and Military Build-ups

Colombia and Venezuela have continued to accuse each other of harbouring terrorists along the frontier. President Duque and Guaidó repeatedly claim that the Maduro government is supporting and sheltering terrorist organisations. These include the ELN, whose peace talks with the Colombian government broke down in January 2019, and FARC dissidents, above all the faction led by two former guerrilla commanders that announced itself to the world from a location close to the border on 29 August 2019.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² Crisis Group electronic communication, Venezuelan border expert, 8 October 2020.

¹⁴³ The World Food Programme estimates that one in three Venezuelans is food-insecure and in need of assistance. "Venezuela Food Security Assessment", WFP, February 2020.

¹⁴⁴ In 2011, the U.S. Treasury accused Bernal, then a congressional deputy, of supplying the FARC with weapons. "¿Quién es Bernal, el 'protector del Táchira' denunciado en la OEA?", *El Tiempo*, 12 September 2019.

¹⁴⁵ Mariana Duque, "Freddy Bernal informó que reforzarán vigilancia en trochas con Colombia", *El Pitazo*, 19 May 2020.

¹⁴⁶ Tweet by Freddy Bernal, @FreddyBernal, protector of Táchira state, 10:22am, 24 May 2020. Bernal has also warned that if the U.S. military were to attack the Venezuelan army, it would be "suicide". See "Freddy Bernal: Sería un suicidio enfrentarnos a EE UU", *El Nacional*, 14 February 2020.

¹⁴⁷ On the FARC split, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Containing the Border Fallout of Colombia's New Guerrilla Schism*, op. cit. The government abandoned talks with the ELN after the group attacked a police academy in Bogotá on 17 January 2019, killing 22. Kyle Johnson, "Bogotá Bomb Shatters Peace Talks with Colombia's Last Guerrillas", Crisis Group Commentary, 22 January 2019. The Venezuelan opposition also claims (so far without proof) that Hizbollah, the Lebanese Shiite militia, and the Iranian government use Venezuela as a base for terrorist operations. "Opositores denuncian 'el final de Venezuela como nación de libertades'", *El Tiempo*, 16 June 2020.

The announcement of this new rebel group, with allegedly strong ties to Venezuelan authorities, further soured the two countries' already wretched relations. Speaking to the UN General Assembly in September 2019, Duque said: "My government has reliable and conclusive evidence that corroborates the support of the dictatorship to criminal groups and narco-terrorists that operate in Venezuela to attack Colombia".¹⁴⁸ At the same time, social media users shared photos of Guaidó posing with Rastrojos members when he crossed into Colombia to support the humanitarian convoy, prompting Maduro's government to accuse Colombia and the opposition of consorting with criminals. Maduro said the photos proved that Guaidó had a "criminal alliance with a gang of drug traffickers".¹⁴⁹

The harsher rhetoric raised the danger of direct clashes between the two states. In September 2019, responding to Duque's accusations that Venezuela was harbouring dissident guerrillas, Maduro declared an "orange alert" due to the "threat of aggression from Colombia" and announced a series of military exercises near the border.¹⁵⁰ The same month, sixteen Western hemisphere governments invoked a mutual defence pact, the Rio Treaty, arguing that the Venezuelan crisis posed a threat to the whole region.¹⁵¹ Maduro ordered more military exercises in February 2020, and in August, Duque accused Caracas of seeking to buy medium and long-range missiles from Iran.¹⁵² Unspecified Venezuelan state forces entered Colombian territory twelve times in 2019, according to a Colombian government official.¹⁵³ According to this official, these incidents were not orchestrated incursions, but spontaneous forays by hungry soldiers looking to steal food from farmers or border residents.

The COVID-19 outbreak brought a renewal of minimal cooperation between the two states (see Section VI), but it neither ended the border tensions nor banished the spectre of foreign military intervention. In May 2020, a group of 60 soldiers, including an ex-U.S. Green Beret and several former Venezuelan officers, attempted to invade Venezuela.¹⁵⁴ The plot failed, amid international derision and disbelief. Seeing the global reaction, the U.S. and Colombian governments distanced themselves from the undertaking, but their intelligence agencies had been aware of the plan, which was hatched in camps in Colombia's La Guajira region.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁸ Some of the pictures Duque displayed as proof of the ELN's presence in Venezuela were later revealed to have been taken in Colombia. "Las polémicas fotos 'erróneas' del ELN en Venezuela que Iván Duque presentó ante la ONU para acusar a Maduro", BBC Mundo, 28 September 2019.

¹⁴⁹ "Venezuela investigates Guaidó over photo with suspected Colombian criminals", Reuters, 13 September 2019.

¹⁵⁰ "Frontera Venezuela-Colombia: por qué Maduro activó la 'alerta naranja' en la frontera y qué consecuencias reales puede tener", BBC Mundo, 6 September 2019.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°41, *Peace in Venezuela: Is There Life after the Barbados Talks?*, 11 December 2019.

¹⁵² Maduro denied the accusation but added that "it wouldn't be a bad idea". "Maduro dice que 'no es mala idea' comprar misiles a Irán", Deutsche Welle, 22 August 2020.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interview, senior Colombian government official, 31 January 2020.

¹⁵⁴ Joshua Goodman, "Ex-Green Beret led failed attempt to oust Venezuela's Maduro", Associated Press, 1 May 2020.

¹⁵⁵ Anthony Faiola, "Venezuela raid: how an ex-Green Beret and a defecting general planned to capture Maduro", *The Washington Post*, 10 May 2020. Four Venezuelans linked to the failed invasion were arrested in September 2020 in Bogotá and Barranquilla. Joshua Goodman, "Colombia targets ex-US Green Beret behind anti-Maduro plot", Associated Press, 3 September 2020.

Colombian military operations in the borderlands have also continued, though accompanied by less bravado than Venezuela's, since they tend to focus on internal security. Soon after assuming power in 2018, Duque deployed 5,000 additional soldiers in Catatumbo, raising to a total of between 15,000 and 17,000 the number of Colombian troops in this border region.¹⁵⁶ In May 2020, Bogotá announced that a U.S. unit of special advisers would also be stationed there on a counter-narcotic mission.¹⁵⁷

C. *Containing the Risks of Conflict*

In spite of the bombast and the military reinforcements, both governments are keenly aware of the dangers of sparking an armed confrontation in a region already plagued with violence. Maduro has been seeking to restore diplomatic relations with Colombia, though thus far he has failed to convince Bogotá.¹⁵⁸

The Colombian army, for its part, is under orders not to rock the boat. A law enforcement officer in Vichada said “the [border] issue is treated with silk gloves”.¹⁵⁹ In practice, the army's hands-off approach leaves room for cross-border illicit economies so long as levels of violence generated by non-state armed groups remain tolerable and the risk of provoking a Venezuelan military reaction on the border stays low. Battalions receiving information about enemy targets on the border, whether the ELN or others, require an order from central command in Bogotá before they can take any action, often impeding a swift response.¹⁶⁰ One source in Norte de Santander observed that soldiers barely leave their bases.¹⁶¹

The heightened military preparedness along the border nevertheless intensifies local concerns. Residents said they do not perceive the armies across the border as a major threat to their safety, since the biggest dangers to them come from local conflicts involving competing armed groups.¹⁶² But some Catatumbo residents worry that a spike in hostilities between the two states could be an excuse for the Colombian armed forces to clamp down on illicit economic activity in the countryside. “A war with Venezuela would be an excuse to kill in Catatumbo”, he said. “This instils fear because we have nowhere to go”.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁶ “Con 5.000 militares más, Duque responde a la guerra que ahoga el Catatumbo”, *Semana*, 29 October 2018. Crisis Group telephone interview, human rights observer in Norte de Santander, 21 September 2020.

¹⁵⁷ Tweet by the Colombian Military, @FuerzasMilCol, 11:27pm, 27 May 2020. The U.S. military mission is deployed in various areas, including Catatumbo. “Bajo el mayor hermetismo llegaron militares de EE. UU. a Bogotá”, *El Tiempo*, 2 June 2020.

¹⁵⁸ “Colombia rejects Venezuelan proposal to resume diplomatic relations”, Reuters, 30 January 2020.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior law enforcement officer, Cumaribo, 26 November 2019.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior military representative, Cumaribo, 25 November 2019.

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, public health worker, 30 January 2020.

¹⁶² Crisis Group field and telephone interviews, border residents, September 2019.

¹⁶³ Crisis Group interview, social leader from El Tarra, Cúcuta, 20 December 2019.

VI. The Health and Humanitarian Crisis

COVID-19 arrived in the borderlands on the heels of four years of relentless exodus from Venezuela. In light of the lack of preparedness for the pandemic, as well as the perpetual traffic through the *trochas* and the return of over 100,000 migrants and refugees to Venezuela, the two countries have made gestures at renewed cooperation to cope with the health crisis. But mutual suspicion and mistreatment of returning Venezuelan migrants threaten to scupper these efforts.

A. Migration

Venezuelan emigration accelerated in 2013 when the country's economy began to contract. Wealthy emigrants left first, followed in 2016-2017 by middle-income families, most of whom headed to other South American lands. Since 2018, refugees – including many poor or chronically ill people without documentation and with little money – have poured over the Colombian border on foot.¹⁶⁴ According to the UN, a total of 5.4 million citizens had fled Venezuela by November 2020, 1.7 million of them to Colombia.¹⁶⁵

Migrants and refugees leave for Colombia via the seven formal and hundreds of informal crossings. Close to half a million have stayed in the Colombian borderlands due to lack of resources or because they wish to stay closer to home, though conditions are far from easy.¹⁶⁶ Many border towns that have received Venezuelan migrants are themselves poor and insecure, giving rise to labour tensions and occasional bouts of xenophobia.¹⁶⁷ The town of Villa de Rosario, for example, has 90,000 Colombian inhabitants and 36,605 Venezuelans registered with state authorities as migrants as of January.¹⁶⁸ Puerto Carreño, in Vichada province, has 14,000 inhabitants, alongside 6,000 Venezuelans living in and around the city.¹⁶⁹ Venezuelan workers in Catatumbo usually wire a chunk of their income to their families back home, leading locals to bemoan the revenues draining out of the economy.¹⁷⁰

Informal settlements have spread rapidly to house Venezuelan refugees as well as people displaced by Colombia's years-long conflict and Colombian returnees from Venezuela.¹⁷¹ Public health problems are frequent, as there is no running water and

¹⁶⁴ About 83 per cent of the Venezuelan migrants and refugees who left their country reported that they did so to earn a living. "National Survey of Living Conditions", Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, July 2020.

¹⁶⁵ For statistics about the Venezuelan refugee crisis, see the R4V Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela.

¹⁶⁶ "Radiografía venezolanos en Colombia", Migración Colombia, 8 September 2020.

¹⁶⁷ In Colombia, xenophobia toward Venezuelans has been a problem since the beginning of the refugee crisis, but it has worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. See "Coronavirus aviva la xenofobia en Colombia", *La Opinión*, 14 April 2020.

¹⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, local state body representative, Villa de Rosario, 28 January 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, government representative, Puerto Carreño, 8 May 2020.

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, civil society member, Catatumbo, 29 April 2020.

¹⁷¹ Informal settlements house over 10,000 Venezuelans in La Guajira and in the hills around Cúcuta. Crisis Group interviews, senior government official, La Guajira, Riohacha, 5 September 2020; academic and expert on refugees, Cúcuta, 28 August 2020. Many Colombians fled to Venezuela during the conflict with the FARC. Many have since chosen to come back to Colombia, where they face dif-

residents are often far from the nearest clinic. Venezuelans have also been denied access to hospital emergency rooms, to which they are legally entitled, and forced to pay for medical services that are normally free of charge.¹⁷²

B. *Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation*

Amid the chaotic migration flows, victims of human trafficking also head to Colombia, mostly to face sexual exploitation.¹⁷³ Quantifying the phenomenon is extremely hard since the authorities are rarely able or willing to identify or track the victims.¹⁷⁴ People who have been trafficked are also afraid to denounce the crimes against them.¹⁷⁵

Colombian and Venezuelan criminals run human trafficking networks, but law enforcement officers are also implicated. Four members of the metropolitan police in Cúcuta were arrested in August 2019 for belonging to one such network.¹⁷⁶ If the charges stick, it will not be an isolated incident in Norte de Santander, where a number of Colombian law enforcement and migration officials reportedly extort payment for bringing Venezuelan refugees across the *trochas*. Women who are unable to pay are sexually abused and maltreated.¹⁷⁷ According to one Colombian government source, there are also cases of pregnant women selling their unborn babies for a spot price at the informal crossings.¹⁷⁸

Many other women are not victims of human trafficking when crossing the border, but find themselves driven to sex work out of necessity once in Colombia. Arriving without resources in border hubs such as La Parada, near the Simón Bolívar bridge, they often must take whatever informal work they can find due to their need for cash for food and lodging. Selling coffee from flasks on the streets is one common line of work, but the pay is too low to survive. Pimps, often women previously introduced to sex work themselves, are constantly looking for new recruits.¹⁷⁹

Various armed and criminal groups in Norte de Santander are squarely opposed to sex work, seeing it as a lapse in the social discipline they expect and impose, and show zero tolerance for Venezuelan sex workers. “You go or we kill you”, is a com-

fortunities in proving their citizenship. An estimated 500,000 Colombians have returned from Venezuela, according to government estimates, but only 20,000 of them have registered with a state program for returnees. “Migrantes de ida y vuelta: la vida de los colombianos que retornan”, Proyecto Migración Venezuela, 27 December 2019.

¹⁷² Crisis Group interview, health expert in Norte de Santander, 5 September 2020.

¹⁷³ In December 2019, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet called for more attention to human trafficking in Venezuela. “Venezuela: High Commissioner Bachelet Details Plans for New Human Rights Assistance”, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 18 December 2019.

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, criminal lawyer, Medellín, 9 November 2020.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, women’s rights activist, Bogotá, 4 February 2020.

¹⁷⁶ Audrey Carrillo, “Capturados cuatro policías en Cúcuta por trata de personas”, W Radio, 22 August 2019.

¹⁷⁷ “El drama de las violaciones en la frontera con Venezuela”, *Semana*, 12 March 2020.

¹⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, local state body representative, Villa de Rosario, 28 January 2020; municipal council representative, Juan Frío, Villa de Rosario, 28 January 2020.

¹⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, women’s rights activists, Bogotá, 13 November 2019, 4 February 2020; sex worker representatives, Cúcuta, 20 November 2019.

mon threat in the town of Tibú, one young Venezuelan woman reported.¹⁸⁰ Multiple femicides have occurred in Catatumbo.¹⁸¹ In Puerto Santander, the ELN distributed pamphlets threatening women who have relations with Rastrojos members or are possible informants for them.¹⁸²

Criminal actors also make use of minors to earn money. In towns near the border, it has become a common sight to see children begging for coins at traffic lights. Parents rent out their children for the day to criminal groups and receive about 10,000 Colombian pesos (close to \$2.80), plus an additional average of 5,000 pesos (\$1.30) in earnings. A source working for a foundation claims that she has cases of parents whose children came home in the evening to reveal that they had been raped.¹⁸³

C. *The COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown*

President Duque closed the official border crossings with Venezuela on 14 March 2020, days after authorities detected the first COVID-19 case in Colombia. His government introduced internal travel restrictions and a national lockdown on 24 March. Although some of these measures were slowly loosened over the following months, many remain in place to this day. The restrictions immediately threatened the livelihoods of border populations as well as migrants and refugees at higher risk due to their dependence on informal cash-based jobs.

In May, most shelters and soup kitchens in Colombian border towns decided to stop receiving people and to hand out food instead.¹⁸⁴ At the same time, an estimated 130,000 Venezuelans living in Colombia, but also coming from as far afield as Ecuador and Peru, decided to return to Venezuela, where they at least have a house or family members with whom they can stay.¹⁸⁵ The flows have since reversed once again in step with the slow reopening of Colombia's economy. The mayor of a Venezuelan border municipality in Táchira state declared in November that about 3,000 Venezuelans had crossed back into Colombia over the course of the previous month.¹⁸⁶

The risk of uncontrolled disease transmission along and across the border persuaded parts of the Venezuelan and Colombian state to resume working-level contacts after over a year of total estrangement, although bilateral communication has largely ceased since then.¹⁸⁷ At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Vene-

¹⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, youth leader from the Catatumbo region, Cúcuta, 18 November 2019.

¹⁸¹ "Femicidios de migrantes venezolanas en Colombia", Red Feminista Antimilitarista, 29 June 2020.

¹⁸² "Alerta Temprana N° 035-2020", op. cit.

¹⁸³ Crisis Group interview, women's rights activist, Bogotá, 4 February 2020.

¹⁸⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, university professor in Cúcuta, 4 September 2020.

¹⁸⁵ "Venezuela: Abusive Treatment of Returnees", Human Rights Watch, 13 October 2020.

¹⁸⁶ Mariana Duque, "Alcalde registra salida de 3.000 venezolanos que retornaron en pandemia", *El Pitazo*, 16 November 2020.

¹⁸⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Colombian government official, 25 November 2020. By 23 November, there were over 72,000 COVID-19 cases in Colombian departments bordering with Venezuela, according to Colombia's health ministry. In the first two weeks of September 2020, COVID-19 cases increased tenfold in the border area. "WHO director warns Latin America is opening too early, COVID-19 still a risk", Reuters, 16 September 2020. Venezuela's border states registered over 23,000 cases, according to the government. Local investigators and journalists pointed

zuelan and Colombian ombudsmen, state agencies charged with protecting civil and human rights in each country, issued a joint statement to activate a channel of communication. Both health ministers also opened a line for joint consultation at the same time.¹⁸⁸ Venezuelan and Colombian authorities established a basic procedure for returnees to cross the official border, although distrust between the two states remains visceral and is reflected in the treatment meted out to migrants. At present, Venezuela allows 200 people to cross back into the country over the Simón Bolívar bridge each day, and another 100 per day over the official border crossing between Arauca and Apure.¹⁸⁹

Returnees to Venezuela are placed in “quarantine” centres for at least fourteen days.¹⁹⁰ Reports indicate that these centres are dirty, cramped and patrolled by *colectivos* looking for signs of political dissent. One person in a quarantine centre in Táchira said these armed outfits insult returnees for leaving home in the first place, taking some to a small room for a beating. “People who served in the [Venezuelan] military are detained at once”, this person recounted. “One of them was taken to a cell where they beat him up, stripped him naked and threw water over him before applying electricity [to his body]”.¹⁹¹ Venezuelan officials have characterised returning migrants as “biological weapons”, claiming that the Colombian government has sent them to spread the pandemic in Venezuela.¹⁹²

out that official statistics regarding COVID-19 cases in Venezuela are not reliable. Isayen Herrera, “La contabilidad en negro de la pandemia”, *Armando Info*, 9 August 2020.

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group Briefing, *Broken Ties, Frozen Borders: Colombia and Venezuela Face COVID-19*, op. cit. On 2 June, the Maduro government and the Venezuelan opposition also reached an agreement to coordinate efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic with support from the Pan American Health Organization. Guillermo D. Olmo, “Coronavirus en Venezuela: el inesperado acuerdo entre Nicolás Maduro y Juan Guaidó contra el coronavirus y qué significa para el país”, *BBC Mundo*, 3 June 2020.

¹⁸⁹ The humanitarian channel has been frequently closed and reopened, causing thousands of Venezuelans to get stuck close to the border crossing. “Tránsito en el Puente Internacional Simón Bolívar se restituirá el próximo lunes”, *Noticias RCN*, 21 August 2020.

¹⁹⁰ Kurmanaev, Herrera and Urdaneta, “Venezuela deploys security forces in coronavirus crackdown”, op. cit.; “Stuck at Venezuela’s Border with COVID-19 All Around”, *Human Rights Watch*, 15 July 2020.

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Venezuelan returnee in quarantine, May 2020.

¹⁹² Sarah Kinosian, “Los migrantes venezolanos que regresan encuentran una fría bienvenida en medio de la pandemia”, *Reuters*, 27 August 2020.

VII. Extinguishing the Border Fires

Despite the verbal attacks, a direct confrontation between Colombian and Venezuelan militaries remains unlikely. A far more probable scenario involves the continuation or escalation of low-intensity conflicts pitting various armed groups against one another and state forces for control of illicit economies. These borderland clashes are not new, especially not on the Colombian side, and do not imply proxy warfare between the two governments. Even so, certain armed groups are more clearly allied with one side or the other. Given the political crisis in Venezuela, Colombian alignment with the opposition in Caracas, military tensions between the two countries and the likelihood of continuing cross-border insecurity, the risk is high that both governments will blame borderland violence or instability on the other side's alleged misconduct.

A prerequisite for preventing an escalation in hostilities is to clear up responsibility for acts of border violence to the satisfaction of both sides. Fluid communication between the two governments is the best way to achieve this end. It could be supported by a mechanism for resolving incidents, perhaps under international auspices, that would enable both governments to exchange information and arrive at an agreed-upon version of events rapidly.¹⁹³ Stronger ties between local authorities, law enforcement agencies and military commanders serving the two states along the frontier would also serve to allay mistrust. A model could be the April meeting between local authorities from Norte de Santander and Táchira on the Venezuelan side of the border to discuss the pandemic, environmental issues and returning migrants. Both capitals will have to support cooperation of this kind if it is to prosper.¹⁹⁴ A return to the negotiating table by government and opposition in Venezuela would give these efforts a huge boost.

At the same time, the conditions that afflict the borderlands, such as state abandonment, lack of investment and job opportunities, poor public services and judicial impunity, continue to encourage illicit economies and foment violence. The 2016 peace agreement with the FARC marked a comprehensive attempt to address these issues on the Colombian side of the frontier, but faltering implementation and rising insecurity have hit areas historically affected by conflict. Funds to fulfil the accord's

¹⁹³ A communication channel between Bogotá and Caracas could resolve flare-ups of violence, whether due to cross-border intrusions, attacks by armed groups or forced displacement. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Containing the Border Fallout of Colombia's New Guerrilla Schism*, op. cit. One possible model is the international body patrolling the lines of separation between Georgia and the de facto statelets of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, although its efforts have been hindered by continuing mistrust and occasional operational paralysis. See "Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism", Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, n.d. For more on the mission's problems, see Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°90, *Georgia and Russia: Why and How to Save Normalisation*, 26 October 2020.

¹⁹⁴ "Delegación de Norte de Santander se reunió con autoridades del estado Táchira en Venezuela", *La Opinión*, 22 April 2020.

promises have fallen short already, and they may dwindle further as a result of the pandemic.¹⁹⁵

On the Venezuelan side of the border, violence primarily bedevils areas that are home to competing criminal outfits and armed groups. But the ELN's continuing growth with the Venezuelan authorities' seeming endorsement raises the possibility that it might become the dominant armed faction. That development could reduce levels of violence on the Venezuelan side of the border, but it would put Colombia, the Venezuelan opposition and the U.S. government on high alert as to the danger of state sponsorship of a "terrorist" group.¹⁹⁶

Colombia should consider rekindling peace negotiations with the ELN and provide the guerrillas with reasonable guarantees to encourage them to resume talks. It does not help that in May the U.S. State Department certified Cuba as a country "not cooperating fully with counter-terrorism efforts" under the U.S. Arms Export Control Act.¹⁹⁷ Cuba facilitated previous rounds of talks and continues to host senior ELN leaders; Washington's move to classify Havana as "not cooperating" could become an obstacle to Bogotá restarting negotiations with the guerrilla group.¹⁹⁸ The U.S. should consider reversing this designation if it wishes to encourage fresh talks with the ELN. In turn, both the Venezuelan government and ELN leadership should be more transparent about the guerrillas' operations and social, military and political objectives in Venezuelan territory for new negotiations to be effective.

More immediately, the two governments and international partners need to address the extreme hardships in Venezuela and in border areas that cope with the spillover of the country's political crisis through enhanced humanitarian aid. Relief organisations face huge problems in reaching remote and often conflict-affected border areas, where entire communities have been unable to travel to seek health care due to the quarantines enforced by armed groups.¹⁹⁹ Building on the progress made in health coordination between Colombia and Venezuela, as well as the June humanitarian accord between government and opposition in Caracas, the two governments should set aside political differences to enable charities and UN agencies to distribute additional aid and operate more freely in border areas, even if that means negotiating access to specific communities with armed groups. Reopening formal border crossings should be a priority for the livelihoods and security of border residents and migrants. But to make the reopening safe for migrants and refugees, it is essential that local clinics be properly staffed and can count on sufficient medical supplies, and that state and humanitarian bodies provide the support needed to enable migrants to continue on their journeys.

¹⁹⁵ Each year between 2017 and 2019, Bogotá spent only 65 per cent of its budget for implementation of the 2016 agreement. Laura Soto, "La implementación de la paz, cada vez más desfinanciada", *La Silla Vacía*, 7 September 2020.

¹⁹⁶ See the list of "Foreign Terrorist Organizations" at the U.S. Department of State website.

¹⁹⁷ "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Cuba", U.S. Department of State, n.d. Cuba's classification as "not cooperating fully" on counter-terrorism was its first such designation since 2015. The move will have few practical effects, however, since the main penalty, a ban on trade in defence equipment and services, already applies to the country.

¹⁹⁸ "Inaccurate Trump Administration Charges Against Cuba Damage Prospects for Peace Talks in Colombia and Elsewhere", Washington Office on Latin America, 14 May 2020.

¹⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian expert, Bogotá, 7 September 2020.

To achieve this end, state foreign donors, including national governments, the EU and UN, should redouble their efforts to support Venezuelan migrants and refugees, who have until now enjoyed far less humanitarian support than victims in other crises. The international community is estimated to have spent \$1,500 on each Syrian refugee versus \$125 per Venezuelan refugee by late 2019, while only 20 per cent of the Humanitarian Response Plan, destined to address essential needs within Venezuela, has been funded.²⁰⁰ The UN High Commissioner for Refugees warned in September 2020 that a shortfall in funds prevents it from assisting Venezuelan families in key border areas, including in Colombia, heightening concern about the difficulty of securing additional funding during the pandemic.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Dany Bahar and Meagan Dooley, “Venezuela refugee crisis to become the largest and most underfunded in modern history”, Brookings Institute, 9 December 2019; “Financial Tracking Services”, OCHA, 23 November 2020.

²⁰¹ “Consequences of Underfunding 2020”, UNHCR, September 2020; Megan Janetsky, “COVID-19 is Making the Latest Migrant Exodus From Venezuela Even Worse”, World Politics Review, 11 November 2020.

VIII. Conclusion

The Colombia-Venezuela border – one of Latin America’s longest – is an inhospitable place for many who live along or seek to cross it. State abandonment and stunted economic growth have enabled illicit business to flourish along a largely unsupervised frontier. Borderlands such as Norte de Santander were hotspots in Colombia’s internal conflict and hotbeds of crime and trafficking before 2016. Now they could become battlegrounds between Colombia and Venezuela. The COVID-19 outbreak has allowed channels of official communication to reopen, but these remain modest and vulnerable to upticks in the animosity between Bogotá and Caracas.

The two governments’ estrangement, the migrant exodus from Venezuela and the years of border closures have fuelled the emergence of lucrative illicit businesses and reshaped the powers of rival armed outfits. Border residents have faced new or resurgent dangers, including forced displacement and the spectre of death in and around the illegal crossings between the countries.

These risks of violence would multiply many times over if an incident along the border were to trigger an escalation in hostilities between Bogotá and Caracas. Authorities on both sides appear cognisant of the perils that an inter-state conflict would represent. An incident resolution mechanism connected to both governments and charged with investigating violent acts involving armed groups could be an effective way to assuage their mutual suspicions. Restraint in Bogotá’s efforts to eradicate coca on the Colombian side, coordinated moves by both countries to restart peace talks with the ELN, and greatly enhanced humanitarian aid for residents and migrants hit by the pandemic would also play important roles in defusing the many threats to peace and improving the conditions of the area’s residents.

A human security calamity looms along the Colombia-Venezuela frontier. Avoiding another sudden deterioration in bilateral ties and hiking humanitarian aid will be essential to protecting borderland residents and fleeing migrants from a worsening ordeal.

Bogotá/Caracas/Brussels, 14 December 2020

Appendix A: Map of the Colombia-Venezuela Border



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

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