



Photo: EFE/Ana Inés Vega

# Urgent need for a sustainable response amid escalating violence and persistent insecurity in Catatumbo

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## Key Messages:

- The **outbreak of violence** caused by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in the Catatumbo region has **exacerbated an ongoing humanitarian crisis**, heightening the need for both **emergency and long-term solutions** to **stabilise** the region.
- **Mass displacement** and **restricted access** compounds risks and needs of the population, especially those confined in remote locations facing **violence, food insecurity, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) needs**.
- **Access** to the Catatumbo region remains a critical gap in the response to ongoing conflict in the region. **Low state and humanitarian presence** expose populations, many of which are rural, to **violence, illegal occupation and recruitment by NSAGs**. Individuals and families have been forced to flee with minimal belongings to overcrowded urban centres, exposing them to additional **security and health risks**.
- The crisis poses heightened risks for **vulnerable groups**, including **children, peace agreement signatories and social leaders** who are especially targeted with violence.

## Escalating violence in Catatumbo, Norte de Santander

An [intensification of fighting](#) between two NSAGs in Norte de Santander has resulted in at least [80 civilian deaths](#) and the [displacement of 51,938 people](#). Since 16 January 2025, 6 peace agreement signatories have been [killed](#), and disappearances and illegal home occupations have been reported in the Catatumbo region. The crisis follows years of conflict and the recent [suspension](#) of "Total Peace" talks with one of the NSAGs involved.

Catatumbo, bordering Venezuela, remains a [battleground](#) for territorial control among armed groups, vital for mining, coca production, and illicit [trafficking](#) through Venezuela. Between 1 January 2021 and 30 September 2024, 54,784 forced displacements were [recorded](#) in the department.

In response to the clashes and subsequent humanitarian crisis, the presidency [declared](#) a "state of commotion" in the Catatumbo region and [deployed](#) rapid force units to Ocaña, Norte de Santander.

This brief draws on secondary data from rapid assessments in Catatumbo and other areas in Norte de Santander, **highlighting urgent humanitarian needs, access limitations, and the necessity of coordinated response efforts**.

# 57,116

People [affected](#) by displacement and confinement.

# 46,500

Children and adolescents [affected](#).

# 1,654

Refugees and migrants [affected](#).

## Humanitarian Needs & Response Priorities

### 1. Improving access, a necessity to address mass displacement and humanitarian crisis

The crisis has [displaced](#) 51,938 people, with [Cúcuta \(23,538\)](#), [Tibú \(13,541\)](#) and [Ocaña \(10,285\)](#) receiving the highest numbers. 1,376 of these are [Venezuelan refugees or migrants](#). The Government of Norte de Santander [reported](#) that 17,733 have been confined. 200 people from indigenous villages have been [affected](#). An estimated 1,000 Colombians have been displaced to Venezuela, mainly to Jesús María Semprún, Zulia.

There is a critical need for emergency humanitarian assistance as the conflict is [expected](#) to worsen. The [recurrence](#) of violence and critical access limitations in the region [suggest](#) that already severe needs, of the civil population have risen. Protection, and food security and WASH assistance is [critical](#) for those with reduced mobility. This reinforces the need for a comprehensive and sustained humanitarian response that can cover basic needs in the long term.

Humanitarian access to the Catatumbo region is critically [limited](#) due to NSAG presence, risks from armed engagements, landmines, unexploded ordnance, and the region's challenging terrain and remote rural communities. Lack of access makes it difficult to determine who is affected by confinement and what their needs are. Coordination with the few actors able to access the area (e.g. the Catholic Church) is key to ensure the population's needs are accounted for.

### 2. Preventing threats to public health by improving WASH conditions

Health facilities have been [overwhelmed](#) with an influx of displaced persons, leading to shortages of essential medical supplies. There has been a concerning [rise](#) in disease outbreaks, with dengue fever reported in Ocaña and Cúcuta, while the State Department for Health (IDS) for Norte de Santander has [identified](#) cases of malaria, dengue, hepatitis A, as well as malnutrition among children under five.

Overcrowded living conditions further heighten the risk of infectious disease outbreaks, requiring urgent attention from humanitarian actors. Given these risks and the region's prolonged instability, long-term investments in WASH infrastructure are essential to ensure sustainable access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene services.

### 3. Ensuring safe accommodation for displaced persons

The crisis has caused a surge of displaced persons to [flee](#) to temporary shelters, including hotels and the General Santander Stadium in Cúcuta. Project Hope [reports](#) that many families fled with little to no belongings due to acute fears for their lives. Women and children are [experiencing](#) heightened safety concerns in inadequately lit and shared accommodation. Due to the protracted crisis and lack of humanitarian access to affected region, provision of long-term shelter is a priority for the safety and stability of displaced populations.

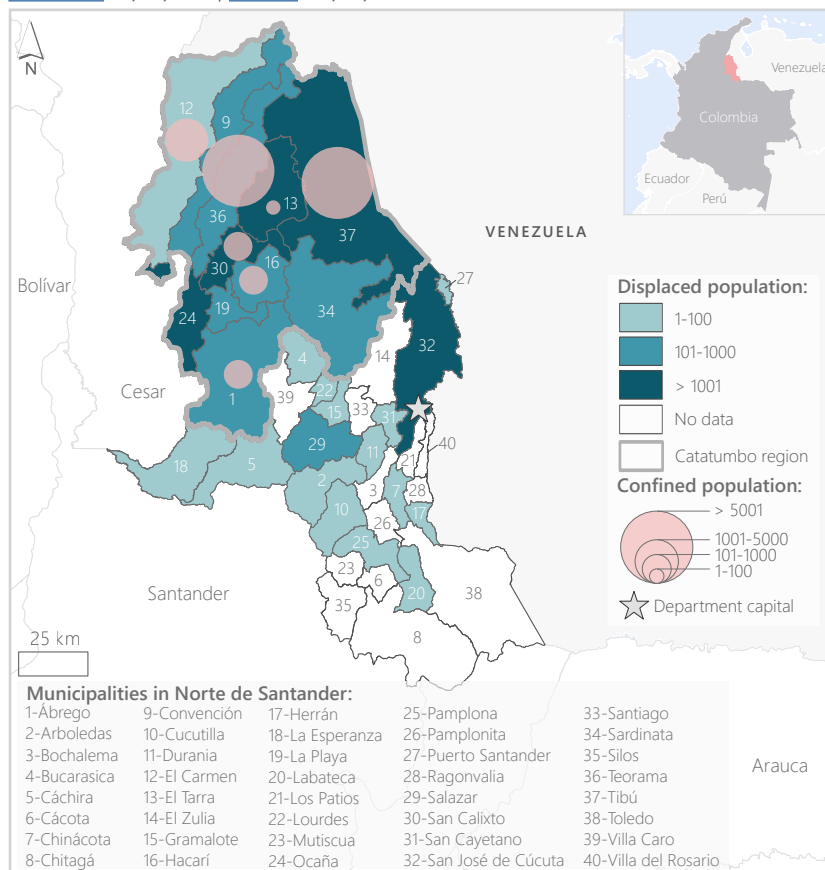
### 4. Strengthening protections for vulnerable groups

Peace signatories and social leaders have been consistently [targeted](#) and killed by NSAGs across Colombia. Since 2017, 32 [peace signatories](#) and 81 [social leaders](#) and human rights defenders have been killed in Norte de Santander. As of 30 January 2025, 6 [signatories](#), 2 social leaders, and 4 minors have been [killed](#) in the outbreak of conflict in Catatumbo. The access gap exposes these vulnerable groups to violence and forced recruitment with limited options for protection and safety.

Protection risks are particularly [high](#) for children. With children [facing displacement](#), separation from families, and 46,000 children missing school, they are at heightened risk of recruitment by NSAGs and risk dropping out of school in the long term. The protection crisis, perceived doubts about reunification and stability, and revictimisation is causing acute [emotional distress](#) among families, directly affecting their wellbeing.

Sustainable protection measures and psychological support provided by government agencies, NGOs, and international partners will mitigate this distress.

Displacement and confinement in Norte de Santander. [Gobernación de Norte de Santander](#) 30/01/2025, [GIFMM](#) 24/01/2025



For more information regarding the response, visit the [dedicated webpage](#). Visit IMPACT's [page](#) to learn more about our work.