

## IV. Armed conflict in South America

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This section discusses the armed conflicts in Colombia, Brazil and Venezuela. The main focus is on Colombia, where at least three parallel and overlapping conflicts continued in 2021: one between the government and the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, ELN) and another between the government and dissident armed groups of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo, FARC-EP)'s former Eastern Bloc; and one between rival cartels the ELN and the Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, AGC). In Brazil the armed conflict involved a complicated picture of state-gang violence, while in Venezuela the armed violence centred on rebel groups operating along the border with Colombia, as well as armed criminal activity.

### Colombia

Armed conflict worsened in Colombia in 2021, with a 70 per cent increase in organized political violence compared to the previous year and civilians targeted in over half of documented attacks.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, there was an increase in violent events from 778 in 2020 to 1766 in 2021, as well as a 46 per cent increase in the resulting reported fatalities, from 847 in 2020 to 1238 in 2021 (see table 3.3).<sup>2</sup>

Colombia continued to experience three parallel non-international armed conflicts (NIACs): one between the Colombian government and the ELN; the second between the Colombian government and fighters of the former Eastern Bloc (Bloque Oriental); and the third between the ELN and the AGC.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reports that two additional NIACs exist in the country: one between the Colombian government and the People's Liberation Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación, EPL), and one between the ELN and the EPL in Catatumbo region.<sup>4</sup> No peace agreement has yet been negotiated between the Colombian government and the ELN. Colombia is also experiencing forms of violence that are not considered NIACs by international humanitarian law experts, but which are governed by domestic law and international human rights law.

<sup>1</sup> Castro, B., '10 conflicts to worry about in 2022: Colombia', Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), accessed 25 Mar. 2022.

<sup>2</sup> ACLED, 'Dashboard', accessed 22 Jan. 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Rule of Law in Armed Conflicts (RULAC), 'Colombia', 19 Mar. 2021.

<sup>4</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Colombia: Five armed conflicts—what's happening?', 30 Jan. 2019.

November 2021 saw the fifth anniversary of the 2016 peace agreement that brought an end to the 52-year conflict between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP, the country's largest armed group. The accord resulted in the formal dissolution of the FARC-EP and the demobilization of its members—according to the United Nations, by the end of 2021 a total 13 613 former FARC-EP members were accredited as demobilized.<sup>5</sup> Though most FARC-EP fighters demobilized, a small minority rejected the peace agreement and formed their own FARC-EP dissident groups, and some who had demobilized subsequently joined the FARC-EP dissidents in response to attacks by other armed groups. These groups have filled the power vacuum created by the FARC-EP's demobilization, with conflict involving the dissidents and other armed groups continuing to increase in many rural areas in 2021.

While disarmament of the FARC-EP has been a major success of the 2016 peace agreement, demobilized ex-combatants have yet to be fully reintegrated into civic life and several political, economic and rural reforms have stalled.<sup>6</sup> By September 2021 some 29 per cent of the accords had been fully implemented, a mere 2 per cent increase from 2020, reflecting the complexity of the aspects to be addressed.<sup>7</sup>

### *Multilateral peace operations*

The UN Verification Mission (UNVM) in Colombia verifies the reintegration of former FARC-EP members into political, economic and social life; the security guarantees for former FARC-EP members, their families and communities; and the comprehensive security and protection programmes for communities in the territories most affected by the conflict.<sup>8</sup> On 31 December 2021 the UNVM counted 216 international personnel, of whom 53 were military, 52 police and 111 civilians.<sup>9</sup> In 2021 the UNVM was further mandated with verifying compliance with and implementation of the sentences issued by the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz, JEP).<sup>10</sup> The jurisdiction of the JEP encompasses all crimes that took place during the armed conflict over the course of its 50-plus years—as well as being responsible for prosecuting the most serious 'international crimes',

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia, Report of the Secretary-General, Infographics, 25 Sep. 2021 to 27 Dec. 2021, S/2021/1090.

<sup>6</sup> International Crisis Group, *A Fight by Other Means: Keeping the Peace with Colombia's FARC*, Latin America Report no. 92 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 30 Nov. 2021), pp. 32–33.

<sup>7</sup> Long, G., 'Colombia: Why peace remains elusive five years after Farc deal', *Financial Times*, 19 Sep. 2021.

<sup>8</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2366, 10 July 2017; and UN Security Council Resolution 2377, 14 Sep. 2017.

<sup>9</sup> SIPRI, Multilateral Peace Operations Database, accessed 1 Apr. 2022.

<sup>10</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2574, 11 May 2021.

**Table 3.3.** Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Colombia, 2018–21

Event type	2018	2019	2020	2021
Battles	233	188	148	325
Explosions/remote violence	87	83	18	51
Protests, riots and strategic developments	21	21	63	117
Violence against civilians	520	434	618	745
<b>Total</b>	<b>861</b>	<b>726</b>	<b>847</b>	<b>1 238</b>

*Note:* The first available year for data on Colombia in the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database is 2018. For definitions of event types, see ACLED, ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019.

*Source:* ACLED, ‘Dashboard’, accessed 15 Feb. 2022.

such as crimes against humanity, it can also grant amnesties and pardons for regular crimes linked to the conflict.<sup>11</sup>

The Organization of American States Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz en Colombia) is a political and technical mission tasked with assisting peace efforts in the areas most affected by internal armed conflict, crime and inequality.<sup>12</sup> In 2021 it had 24 civilian international personnel.<sup>13</sup> The mission—whose mandate was renewed for a further three years on 12 October 2021—is currently involved in verifying ceasefire and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration activities.<sup>14</sup>

### *The armed groups*

The ELN is Colombia’s largest remaining leftist guerrilla group following the 2016 peace agreement. It has an estimated 4000–5000 members, and has strengthened its position and presence in recent years.<sup>15</sup> Although the ELN entered negotiations with the government in 2017, no peace deal was agreed and talks were suspended in 2019 after the group bombed a police academy, killing 21 people.<sup>16</sup> Duque’s government has since increased counter-insurgency operations against the ELN, killing one of its top commanders in October 2021.<sup>17</sup> The Colombian government demands that if peace talks

<sup>11</sup> Morales, A., ‘The rocky road to peace: Current challenges at the Special Jurisdiction for Peace in Colombia’, EJIL: Talk! Blog of the European Journal of International Law, 3 May 2021.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Convenio entre el Gobierno de la Republica de Colombia y la Secretaria General de la Organización de los Estados Americanos para el Acompañamiento al proceso de proceso de paz en Colombia’ [Agreement between the government of the Republic of Colombia and the Secretary General of the Organization of American States for accompaniment to the peace process in Colombia], 4 Feb. 2004.

<sup>13</sup> SIPRI (note 9).

<sup>14</sup> ‘OEA amplía mandato de misión de apoyo a la paz en Colombia’ [OAS extends mandate of peace support mission in Colombia], AP News, 12 Oct. 2021.

<sup>15</sup> ‘ELN: Ejército de Liberación Nacional/National Liberation Army’ [ELN: National Liberation Army/National Liberation Army], *Americas Quarterly*, 26 Jan. 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Villalba, J. and Riquez, R., ‘ELN car bomb in Bogotá takes fight to Colombia’s cities’, InSight Crime, 24 Jan. 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Charles, M., ‘Internal divisions hamper peace overtures from Colombia’s ELN’, *World Politics Review*, 20 Oct. 2021.

are to resume then the ELN must cease kidnapping, the forced recruitment of children, the use of antipersonnel mines, and drug trafficking. The ELN, meanwhile, maintains that its activities should be addressed through negotiations.<sup>18</sup> The ELN's complex decentralized structure contributes to the group's apparently contradictory approach whereby leaders express a commitment to resume peace negotiations while continuing to launch attacks on transportation and other infrastructure.<sup>19</sup>

The ELN has to an extent filled the vacuum created by the demobilization of the FARC-EP and derives an estimated 60 per cent of its income from illegal mining in Venezuela and Colombia.<sup>20</sup> Clashes between the ELN and state forces continued in Chocó, Valle del Cauca, Arauca, Catatumbo and Magdalena Media departments in 2021, causing forced displacement and confinement, and driving humanitarian need.<sup>21</sup> The ELN also continued to carry out attacks on energy infrastructure and oil companies.<sup>22</sup>

Fighters from the Eastern Bloc of the former FARC-EP—mainly the 1st, 7th and 40th 'fronts' that have not accepted the 2016 peace agreement—are also considered by Rule of Law in Armed Conflicts (RULAC) and the ICRC to be involved in a NIAC with the Colombian government.<sup>23</sup> Contrary to this view, however, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) does not regard any of the FARC-EP dissident groups as parties to a NIAC.<sup>24</sup> Numerous FARC-EP dissident groups of varying sizes have emerged since the peace agreement, often taking the names of the former FARC-EP fronts that held the area in question. These dissident factions contribute to the complex security situation, and are often involved in coercing local communities and criminal rackets.<sup>25</sup> Several dissident commanders have also sought to regain land and property handed over by the FARC-EP under the peace agreement to compensate victims, which was a major cause of violence in the departments of Meta and Caquetá in 2021.<sup>26</sup>

On 30 November 2021 the US State Department removed the original FARC-EP (it refers to this as the FARC), which signed the peace agreement, from its list of terrorist organizations. This de-listing enables the implemen-

<sup>18</sup> UN Verification Mission in Colombia, Report of the Secretary-General, S/2021/1090, 27 Dec. 2021, para. 95.

<sup>19</sup> Charles (note 17).

<sup>20</sup> 'ELN: Ejército de Liberación Nacional/National Liberation Army' (note 15).

<sup>21</sup> UN Verification Mission in Colombia (note 18), para. 96.

<sup>22</sup> Griffin, O., 'Colombia ELN guerillas claim responsibility for attacks on oil infrastructure', Reuters, 15 Oct. 2021; and International Crisis Group, *A Broken Canopy: Preventing Deforestation and Conflict in Colombia*, Latin America Report no. 91 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 4 Nov. 2021), p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Pappier, J. and Johnson, K., 'Does the FARC still exist? Challenges in assessing Colombia's "post conflict" under international humanitarian law', Human Rights Watch, 22 Oct. 2020.

<sup>24</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, 'Situation of human rights in Colombia', Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, A/HRC/43/3/Add.3, 26 Feb. 2020, para. 9.

<sup>25</sup> International Crisis Group (note 6), p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> Florez, A. and Acosta, L., 'FARC dissidents want old land back in Colombia's Caquetá and Meta', InSight Crime, 23 July 2021.

tation of certain peace accord provisions, including through reintegration programmes for demobilized combatants. However, the de-listing did not apply to dissident FARC units that have refused to demobilize, with two such units added to the US list of foreign terrorist organizations: the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército Popular (FARC-EP), an armed group under the leadership of Néstor Gregorio Vera Fernández (alias Iván Mordisco) that adopted the name of the now-demobilized FARC; and Segunda Marquetalia, a group founded in 2019 and led by former FARC-EP second-in-command Luciano Marin Arango (alias Iván Márquez), which operates independently of the former Eastern Bloc units.<sup>27</sup>

Rivalry between the Segunda Marquetalia and the dissident FARC group 10th Front increased in 2021 with clashes in Apure, Venezuela.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the 10th Front also increasingly engaged in conflict with the ELN in the Arauca region of Colombia, resulting in civilian deaths, kidnappings, and forced displacement and confinement. The former allies were allegedly competing over territorial control and linked economic interests, specifically extortion rackets.<sup>29</sup>

Elsewhere, the AGC, a right-wing paramilitary/criminal offshoot of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC), consolidated its control over the north of Chocó department. In August the ELN broke its non-aggression pact with the AGC and sought to expand towards the centre and south of the department, resulting in increased forced displacement and confinement, as well as homicides and violence against civilians, with indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities particularly impacted.<sup>30</sup> The AGC relies on the same illicit markets as the ELN.<sup>31</sup>

Insecurity in rural regions increased in 2021 due to attacks by ELN guerrillas, FARC dissidents, and paramilitary successor groups. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian leaders, human rights defenders, journalists and community activists were targeted.<sup>32</sup> According to the OHCHR, FARC dissidents, the ELN and paramilitary groups between them committed 82 ‘massacres’ (defined as the killing of three or more civilians in the same incident by the same perpetrator) between January and September 2021, exceeding the 76 documented in 2020.<sup>33</sup> Between January and November

<sup>27</sup> Hansler, J., ‘US removes Colombia’s FARC from terrorism blacklist’, CNN, 30 Nov. 2021; and Pappier and Johnson (note 23).

<sup>28</sup> InSight Crime, ‘Second Marquetalia’, 27 Jan. 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Collins, J., ‘Colombia’s “peace dividend” isn’t paying off’, World Politics Review, 7 Jan. 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Intersectoral Emergency Response Mechanism (MIRE) and ACAPS, ‘Colombia: Regional needs analysis: Chocó’, 22 Dec. 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Ebus, B., ‘Five years after the “peace”, the Colombian communities living in forced confinement’, New Humanitarian, 25 Nov. 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Human Rights Watch, ‘Colombia: Events of 2021’, World Report 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Human Rights Watch (note 32).

2021 at least 72 300 people were displaced by armed conflict, an increase of almost 196 per cent compared to the same period in 2020.<sup>34</sup>

According to a survey held in November 2021, perceptions of insecurity were most pronounced in urban areas, where 45 per cent reported feeling unsafe. Such feelings of insecurity were most pronounced in the capital Bogotá, where fully 84 per cent of respondents felt unsafe and 52.7 per cent stated they had been the victim of a crime in the preceding 12 months.<sup>35</sup>

### *Protests*

In 2020 Colombia's GDP suffered its biggest decrease in 50 years, dropping by 6.8 per cent—a result of Covid-19-related curbs that triggered mass unemployment and bankruptcies.<sup>36</sup> In 2021, however, the Colombian economy rebounded, with GDP expanding by a record 10.6 per cent, although poverty and unemployment rates remained above pre-pandemic levels.<sup>37</sup> In April, May and June massive but mostly peaceful protests and a general strike against the government were triggered by a proposal for regressive tax reforms—which would have hit working-class Colombians by increasing the cost of staples—a controversial health bill, and the proposal to pay \$4.5 billion for 24 F-16 fighter aircraft at a time when 42 per cent of Colombians are living in poverty.<sup>38</sup> The protests focused on continuing high levels of inequality, killings of social movement leaders, police violence, corruption and lack of government transparency. The violent response of the police and armed paramilitary groups under the protection of the police resulted in thousands of documented human rights abuses. For the period 28 April–31 July 2021 covering the national strike and widespread demonstrations, the OHCHR verified 46 deaths (44 civilians and 2 police officers); recorded numerous instances of unnecessary or disproportionate use of force, as well as sexual violence, by police; and highlighted a failure by police to respond to attacks by armed individuals on demonstrators.<sup>39</sup> Given this, the OHCHR stressed that law enforcement officers must abide by principles such as legality, precaution and necessity when policing demonstrations, and that force only be used as a last resort. It called on the Colombian government to make good its pledge to reform the Colombian National Police—which falls under the jurisdiction

<sup>34</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), 'Colombia: Impacto y tendencias humanitarias entre enero y noviembre de 2021' [Colombia: Humanitarian Impact and Trends between January and November 2021], 30 Dec. 2021.

<sup>35</sup> 'Qué tan inseguros se sienten los colombianos, estos son los datos según la encuesta de Invamer' [How insecure Colombians feel, these are the data according to Invamer's survey], Infobae, 6 Dec. 2021.

<sup>36</sup> World Bank, 'GDP growth (annual %)—Colombia', accessed 30 Mar. 2022; and Medina. O., 'Record expansion: Colombia's economy grows the most in 115 years', Al Jazeera, 15 Feb. 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Medina (note 36).

<sup>38</sup> 'Colombian government seems determined to buy the new fighter jets for \$4.5 billion', Infobae, 28 Mar. 2021.

<sup>39</sup> United Nations, 'UN rights office urges Colombia to reform policing of protests', UN News, 15 Dec. 2021.

**Table 3.4.** Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Brazil, 2018–21

Event type	2018	2019	2020	2021
Battles	3 055	2 616	2 391	2 620
Explosions/remote violence	1	0	0	3
Protests, riots and strategic developments	65	15	46	36
Violence against civilians	3 350	2 274	2 583	2 830
<b>Total</b>	<b>6 471</b>	<b>4 905</b>	<b>5 020</b>	<b>5 489</b>

*Note:* The first available year for data on Brazil in the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database is 2018. For definitions of event types, see ACLED, ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019.

*Source:* ACLED, ‘Dashboard’, accessed 15 Feb. 2022.

of the Ministry of Defence—and introduce civilian control, as well as improve oversight and accountability mechanisms.<sup>40</sup>

Colombia continues to be one of the most dangerous countries in the world for land and environmental activists, with at least 145 activists killed in 2021 compared to 182 murdered over the course of 2020.<sup>41</sup> According to Colombia’s ombudsman’s office overseeing the protection of human and civil rights, at least 145 community leaders, trade unionists and representatives of rural communities were killed in 2021, most by illegal armed groups. Even so, this represented a fall from the 182 activists reportedly killed in 2020.<sup>42</sup>

### *Outlook*

Although the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP has held and the majority of FARC fighters have been demobilized, Colombia saw increasing rates of armed conflict involving other non-state armed groups and FARC-EP dissident groups throughout 2021. Disproportionate police violence during the protests and general strike have weakened trust in the police, its overseers in the Ministry of Defence, and the administration of President Duque more generally. This will be an important factor should social unrest continue, which is a likely scenario given that the issues driving the general strike and protests remain largely unresolved. Increased urban perceptions of insecurity and the high rate of killings of environmental activists and indigenous and social leaders indicate public security challenges will, along with the parallel armed conflicts, continue to pose challenges for both national and local government into 2022.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Colombia’s Duque announces police reforms as protest leaders call off talks’, France 24, 7 June 2021; and United Nations (note 39).

<sup>41</sup> ‘Nearly 150 activists killed in Colombia in 2021: Rights ombudsman’, Al Jazeera, 18 Jan. 2022.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Colombia saw 145 activists killed in 2021, ombudsman says’, BBC News, 18 Jan. 2022.



## Brazil

In the four-year period of 2018–21 estimated conflict-related deaths in Brazil averaged around 5470 per year, largely divided between two categories: ‘battles’ and ‘violence against civilians’ (see table 3.4). Approximately 57 per cent of the 2620 battle-related deaths in 2021 were attributable to violence between state forces and unidentified armed groups or violence between police and political militias (sometimes associated with a particular politician or party), while 42 per cent involved inter-political militia violence. ACLED reported Brazil as having 3262 events with direct civilian targeting in 2021, the second highest in the world after Mexico. Anonymous or unidentified gangs were the primary perpetrators of this civilian targeting, which was particularly noticeable in the northern Amazonas state.<sup>43</sup>

Many poor urban communities in Brazil, especially in the city of Rio de Janeiro, have been subject to severe levels of armed violence for decades, involving armed gangs, paramilitary militias formed in opposition to the gangs, and the police and security forces. Two of the most powerful criminal groups—First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital, PCC) and Red Command (Comando Vermelho)—began as prison gangs but have since transformed into transnational crime organizations.<sup>44</sup> The proliferation of firearms—new gun registrations in Brazil doubled in 2020 compared to 2019—has added to the complex landscape of armed violence (see box 3.1).<sup>45</sup> Police violence remains an important factor: in 2020 the number of people killed by Brazilian police rose to 6416 (an average of over 17 per day), the seventh year in a row this figure has increased.<sup>46</sup>

President Jair Bolsonaro’s popularity waned in 2021 as internal and external criticism intensified. Rising unemployment, high inflation and an end to the preceding year’s federal emergency aid meant a population already severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic experienced further economic strains.<sup>47</sup> In 2021 the country registered almost 40 000 homicides—though in absolute terms this figure far exceeds those of Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela, Brazil’s homicide rate of 18.5 per 100 000 fell well below those countries and represented a slight decline from the 2020 rate.<sup>48</sup> Brazil has one of the world’s highest mortality rates from the Covid-19 pandemic,

<sup>43</sup> Lay, T., ‘ACLED 2021: The year in review’, ACLED, Mar. 2022, pp. 20–21.

<sup>44</sup> InSight Crime, ‘Brazil profile’, 8 Sep. 2020; and Hinz, C., ‘Brazil’s policing is a war of men: Civilians are caught in the crossfire’, openDemocracy, 13 Feb. 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Watson, K., ‘Jair Bolsonaro and guns: A US culture war waging in Brazil’, BBC News, 15 Nov. 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Barbon, J., ‘Mortes pela polícia crescem de novo e triplicam em 7 anos no Brasil’ [Police killings increase again and triple in 7 years in Brazil], *Folha de Sao Paulo*, 15 July 2021.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Brazilians are increasingly going hungry’, *The Economist*, 15 May 2021; and Rosati, A., ‘Brazil’s inflation ends 2021 above 10%, testing central bank’, Bloomberg, 11 Jan. 2022.

<sup>48</sup> InSight Crime, ‘InSight Crime’s 2021 homicide round-up’, 1 Feb. 2022.



**Box 3.1.** The blurred nature of armed conflict in Brazil

The complex nature of Brazil's conflict landscape presents difficult methodological challenges. Classifying Brazil as having multiple armed conflicts (as a result of battle-deaths being above 25 or more per year) may be seen as controversial, due to the nature of the organized armed groups in Brazil. Unlike the situation in Mexico, which has a handful of highly organized and long-standing criminal groups, in Brazil the degree of organization, structure, power and capacity of these groups is much more diffuse. There are two main types of non-state armed groups that operate in Brazil: drug trafficking groups and local armed groups. The latter are often referred to as political or police militias (and largely consist of current and former police officers and soldiers). However, these armed groups are also continuously evolving and forming alliances incorporating both state and criminal actors. This merging of crime and politics has been described as 'criminal insurgency'. Thus, the armed groups control large urban areas and carry out protection, welfare assistance, and other services that should be provided by state institutions. Moreover, the level and nature of gang violence affects and challenges the existing political order, and, as shown by table 3.4, the level of battle and other conflict-related fatalities is in keeping with a high-intensity armed conflict.

*Sources:* ACLED, 'ACLED methodology and coding decisions around political violence and demonstrations in Brazil', Feb. 2020; ACLED, 'Gang violence: Concepts, benchmarks and coding rules', Feb. 2020; InSight Crime, 'Brazil profile', 9 Sep. 2020; AFP, 'Brazil militias control more than half of Rio: Study', TRT World, 20 Oct. 2020; Baker, N. D. and Leão, G., 'Parties of crime? Brazil's *facções criminosas*: Good governance and bad government', *Small Wars Journal*, 19 July 2021; Hernandez, A., 'Against the current: Brazil's dangerous militias', *Deutsche Welle*, 4 Sep. 2019; and Ramos da Cruz, C. and Ucko, D. H., 'Beyond the *Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora*: Countering Comando Vermelho's criminal insurgency', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2018), pp. 38–67.

with over 619 000 confirmed deaths by the end of 2021.<sup>49</sup> By October 2021 mass protests were taking place demanding the impeachment of President Bolsonaro over his mishandling of the response.<sup>50</sup>

## Venezuela

Armed conflict in Venezuela in 2021 involved clashes between state security forces and Colombian armed groups in the border state of Apurea, as well as recurring (but seemingly declining) levels of urban gang warfare and killings by security forces of citizens 'resisting authority'.<sup>51</sup> The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) recorded 229 conflict-related

<sup>49</sup> Statista, 'Number of confirmed cases and deaths of coronavirus (COVID-19) in Brazil from Feb. 26, 2020 to Mar. 27, 2022', accessed 30 Mar. 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Phillips, T., 'Mass protests in Brazil call for Jair Bolsonaro's impeachment', *The Guardian*, 2 Oct. 2021. See also Brito, R., 'Brazil Senate committee approves report calling for Bolsonaro to be indicted', Reuters, 26 Oct. 2021.

<sup>51</sup> InSight Crime, 'Venezuela profile', 10 Nov. 2020; Reuters, 'Venezuela: Intense gun battles rage in Caracas between gangs and police', *The Guardian*, 8 July 2021; Poulet, M., 'Venezuela–Colombia border: A look back at several months of conflict in Apure State', *France 24*, 4 June 2021; and Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, 'Informe annual de violencia 2021' [Annual Report on Violence 2021], 28 Dec. 2021.

deaths in Venezuela in 2021 (the second consecutive year of decline and a significant decrease from the 1106 estimated conflict-related deaths in 2019), 90 of which were attributed to ‘battles’ between the different armed gangs and groups, including their clashes with Venezuelan state security forces.<sup>52</sup>

Following sporadic military clashes that began in September 2020 and resumed in the first two months of the 2021, the Venezuelan military launched ‘Operation Bolivarian Shield 2021’ in March in Apure, near the Colombian border, against the 10th Front, a dissident FARC armed group. For decades the FARC was seen as an ally of the Venezuelan state after President Hugo Chávez invited the rebel group to take sanctuary on its territory in support of his ‘Bolivarian revolution’. After the 2016 peace agreement and the FARC’s demobilization, the dissident 10th Front faction had taken over territorial operations in the cross-border criminal economy, allegedly in league with the local Venezuelan military.<sup>53</sup> The falling out between the 10th Front and the Venezuelan state has been attributed to the emergence of factional rivalries and competition among the 10th Front, Second Marquetalia and the ELN over criminal markets, with the state’s presence having declined across the country.<sup>54</sup> In particular, the 10th Front has become involved in a struggle for control of territory, trafficking and other illegal operations with the Second Marquetalia—another Colombian armed group formerly linked to the FARC-EP, which is alleged to have political connections in Caracas.<sup>55</sup>

Significant numbers of state security forces, albeit poorly trained and equipped, were deployed to Apure. However, the estimated 300 members of the 10th Front benefited from close familiarity with the area and long-established relations with local communities, as well as contacts within the local military, which leaked information about upcoming operations. This enabled the group to successfully wage guerrilla warfare, which in turn led to rapidly increasing rates of desertion from the state security forces following an ambush on 23 April 2021 in which 12 soldiers were killed and 8 captured.<sup>56</sup> The military subsequently withdrew in late May.<sup>57</sup>

The perception that the Venezuelan military was deployed at least in part to aid the Second Marquetalia in its inter-factional struggle with the 10th Front over control of territory for illegal operations, together with the apparent failure of the operation, allegedly undermined the confidence in President Nicolás Maduro and the high command felt by those within the security forces’ ranks.<sup>58</sup> It also underscored that, having provided a safe

<sup>52</sup> ACLED (note 2), accessed 15 Feb. 2022.

<sup>53</sup> InSight Crime, ‘Apure’s proxy war’, 13 Oct. 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Martínez-Gugerli, K., ‘FAQ on recent borderland violence in Apure’, Venezuelan Politics and Human Rights blog, 3 June 2021; and InSight Crime (note 53).

<sup>55</sup> InSight Crime (note 53).

<sup>56</sup> ‘Colombian armed group captured 8 Venezuelan soldiers—NGO’, Reuters, 10 May 2021.

<sup>57</sup> InSight Crime, ‘The Venezuelan military: Outfought and outmatched’, 13 Oct. 2021.

<sup>58</sup> InSight Crime (note 57).

haven for Colombian armed groups, Venezuela no longer controls parts of its own territory.

Venezuela had the second highest homicide rate in Latin America in 2021 at 40.9 per 100 000—although if one excludes disappearances, this falls to 33 per 100 000.<sup>59</sup> Homicides were highest in the capital Caracas, where in January 2021 the state security forces launched raids on the gang led by Carlos Luis Revete (alias ‘El Koki’), which had taken over the La Vega neighbourhood, leaving at least 23 people dead, and in June in Cota 905 neighbourhood, leaving 27 dead.<sup>60</sup> El Koki had ruled Cota 905 with seeming impunity since 2017, when the state designated the area a Peace Zone, rendering it off-limits to local police.<sup>61</sup> In a context of state erosion through corruption and the effects of sanctions, the gang has provided a variety of services to the population, including food, financial assistance for medicine and funerals, and the sponsoring of sports teams and cultural events.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, other organized crime gangs allegedly exercise territorial control over several of the capital’s neighbourhoods.<sup>63</sup> Renewed state efforts in 2021 eventually pushed El Koki out of La Vega and Cota 905, with El Koki still at large by year end.<sup>64</sup>

### *Economic and political developments*

A long-running and increasingly severe economic crisis in Venezuela resulted in three out of every four (76.6 per cent) Venezuelans living in extreme poverty in 2021, a rise from 67.7 per cent in 2020.<sup>65</sup> By mid 2021, 2.3 million people were severely food insecure and a further 7 million people moderately food insecure. The resulting humanitarian crisis has led to over 5.6 million people leaving the country.<sup>66</sup>

Despite the collapse of the oil industry, which is the main source of government revenue, President Maduro maintained his grip politically with the military’s support.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>59</sup> InSight Crime (note 48).

<sup>60</sup> Glorimar Fernández, ‘Monitor de Víctimas contabilizó 27 personas asesinadas en operativos contra banda del “Koki”’ [Victims’ Monitor counts 27 people killed in operations against the “Koki” gang], *El Pitazo*, 29 July 2021; and InSight Crime, ‘El Koki’s victory—An urban invasion in Caracas’, 25 June 2021.

<sup>61</sup> InSight Crime (note 60).

<sup>62</sup> Herrera, I. and Kurmanaev, A., ‘Bouncy castles and grenades: Gangs erode maduros’ grip on Caracas’, *New York Times*, 30 May 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Herrera and Kurmanaev (note 62).

<sup>64</sup> InSight Crime, ‘Why did Venezuela’s peace zones backfire so badly?’, 25 Jan. 2022.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Venezuela crisis: Three in four in extreme poverty, study says’, BBC News, 30 Sep. 2021.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Venezuela crisis’ (note 65).

<sup>67</sup> Otis, J., ‘The US predicted his downfall but Maduro strengthens his grip on power in Venezuela’, NPR, 8 Dec. 2021.