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## Colombia can only be compared with Colombia

*In September 2021, the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) conducted a mission to support the National Protection Cluster (NPC) in Colombia and to raise awareness of the ongoing protection crisis. The mission met with people affected by the crisis, authorities, NGO fora, local organisations, INGOs, UN Agencies, Protection Cluster and Areas of Responsibility (AoR) and their Lead Agencies, OCHA, Intercluster groups, humanitarian-development-peace nexus group, local ombudsman bodies (Personeria, Defensoria) and the Resident Coordinator.*

*Boris Aristin, the Head of the GPC Analysis and Information Management Pillar, was the team leader of this mission. Together with colleagues from the national and sub-national Protection Cluster in Colombia, he travelled to some of the most isolated areas of the country, which are experiencing huge tensions, protracted displacement and increased violence.*

*In this interview, he talks about the ongoing protection crisis in Colombia and describes the challenges that one million people in need of protection face on a daily basis. He reflects on his observations during his mission as well as the discussions he had with individuals and communities affected by the conflict – sharing five concrete actions that we can collectively take to avoid the situation quickly escalating.*



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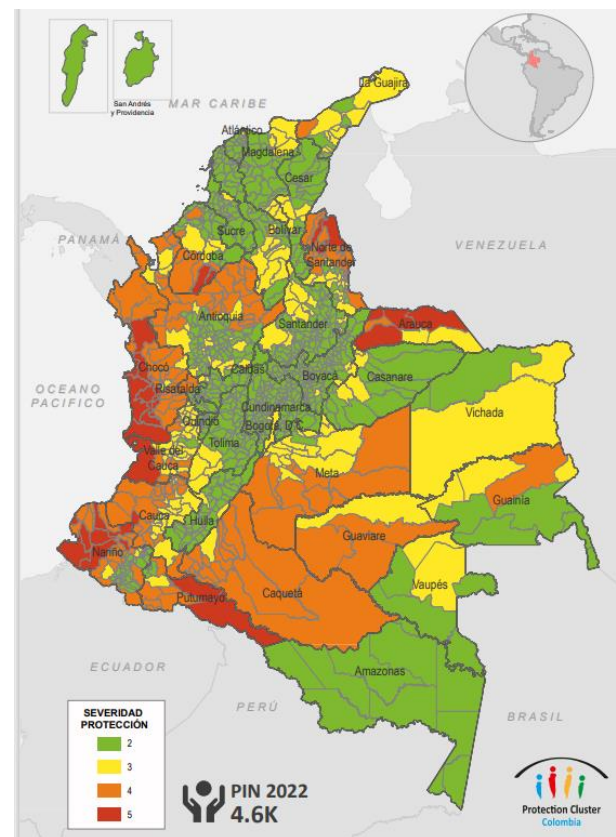
## What is happening in Colombia?

**Boris Aristin:** Colombia faces several threats simultaneously, which only contributes to the complexity of the context. The most important one is that the **internal armed conflict still exists**. Despite the hopes put on the Peace Agreement – signed between the Government of Colombia (GoC) and the FARC-EP in 2016 – seeking an end to more than 50 years of conflict – we are not seeing peace reach Colombia. The lack of an effective introduction of GoC Civil Authorities, combined with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, has fostered the reorganization and the development of a multiplicity of armed groups, which are trying to either consolidate or expand their areas of control, following different or no ideology – like guerrillas or paramilitary groups – and including some groups associated with narcotraffic. This is happening in the Cauca and in the border areas, such as the Pacific coast and the border with Venezuela.

We also see an ongoing protection crisis in Colombia, with an estimated 4.6 million people at risk of violations of their human rights as a direct consequence of the internal conflict. From those, **at least 1 million Colombians are facing high protection risks as per international law** in the coming period, as they live in the 22 municipalities most affected by the conflict. This includes farmers, afro-Colombians and indigenous communities who are often surrounded by one of the armed groups and cannot access land to cultivate their crops nor access basic social services like education and health.

Colombia is also facing an increase of **massive displacement** with entire communities forced to move from one location to another. To give you an example, in the Valley of Cauca, a massive displacement is reported every two weeks. As a reminder, Colombia has faced one of the world's most acute internal displacement situations from conflict and violence over five decades. Despite the peace agreement, 4.9 million<sup>1</sup> Colombians are

internally displaced – not including the additional 1.7 million<sup>2</sup> Venezuelan refugees in the country, ranking Colombia the second highest host country in the world.



Protection Severity Map, October 2021

## Why is it important?

**Boris Aristin:** What is happening in Colombia should be on top of our agenda.

**Firstly, because the call to action is immediate.**

The Protection Cluster has identified 22 from the 1,200 municipalities<sup>3</sup> across Colombia as municipalities under a high risk of facing systematic violations of human rights. Some of the most common violations identified during my deployment are internal displacement, confinement, and limitation of freedom of movement (individual and communities), enforced disappearance, extrajudicial executions, recruitment, sexual assaults, presence of mines and other explosive ordnance, torture, and killings.

<sup>1</sup> [IDMC - Colombia](#)

<sup>2</sup> [GIFMM - Colombia](#)

<sup>3</sup> National Protection Cluster, Colombia Protection Analysis, October 2021

The intensity of the conflict has only increased in the most affected areas from 2017 until today, and we can be almost certain that it will worsen in the coming months and ahead of the 2022 national elections.

**Secondly, because the international humanitarian response has focused on the other crisis that Colombia is facing - the influx of Venezuelans.**

Colombia has demonstrated extraordinary generosity and commitment to ensure protection for displaced Venezuelans. The decision of the Government of Colombia to provide ten-year temporary protection status to Venezuelans in the country serves as a model of solidarity. Yet, we are starting to notice that Venezuelans are also affected by the active internal armed conflict, with armed groups and the army operating across the border with Venezuela, which is escalating hostilities and tensions between the two countries. The NPC should pay special attention to ensuring that the Venezuelan population affected by displacement as direct aftermath of the internal conflict are included as victims of the conflict by both the cluster responses and GoC National Protection systems.

**Thirdly, because Colombia can only be compared with Colombia.**

The international community has had the tendency to minimize the Colombian context and impact of the crisis, arguing that it cannot be compared with other major crises, such as Syria, Yemen or Afghanistan, etc. We should support the narrative that the dimension of the crisis cannot be compared by intensity. The crisis in Colombia has a unique profile and changes from one Department to another, therefore a) cluster support functions, b) protection partners engagement and c) donor support should focus on addressing the protection needs and reducing the risks of the at least 1 million Colombians identified as the population living in the areas most affected by the conflict.

## What can we do about it?

**Boris Aristin:** Here are five things that we believe can be done to respond to conflict dynamics and humanitarian needs in Colombia and ensure proper attention is given to the protection crisis.

### 1- Recognize national leadership

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We need to acknowledge and preserve national leadership of the Protection Cluster, as well as recognize the role played by the affected communities. The levels of trust and acceptance by affected communities is only possible thanks to the commitment and compromise of protection partners' national staff, some of them with over 15 years of humanitarian work in conflict affected areas. They understand the context, they know the actors, they know how to operate and grant access for protection partners even in areas controlled by armed groups. The model of national leadership in Colombia has been a success and should continue and be reinforced. To ensure this leadership modality in the long run, it might be necessary to increase the percentage of time dedicated to cluster functions by some of the staff members on a case-by-case basis, as well as count on the GPC's team support on specific areas, either remote or through deployments.

### 2- Share vital information and analysis

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The Protection Cluster needs to scale the capacity and the regularity of the analysis of the crisis as part of the cluster's core functions. This is key for the visibility and understanding of the situation; and ultimately to drive the narrative in terms of protection – serving both the operational and advocacy efforts of the cluster as a leading actor. The process initiated during the current deployment of producing regular Department level Protection Analysis Updates following the PAF methodology<sup>4</sup> should be consolidated and continue after the first round of products.

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<sup>4</sup> [Global Protection Cluster, Protection Analytical Framework](#)



### 3- Put the protection crisis back on the humanitarian agenda

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People in Colombia are facing systematic violations of their most fundamental rights. We need to put the protection crisis in Colombia back on the humanitarian agenda through a well-defined medium-term (i.e., 4-6 months) advocacy strategy and stand firm on our upholding of human rights for a protection environment. Taking the Protection Analysis products as a baseline, the GPC Advocacy Task Team can support the national Protection Cluster in this task.

### 4- Step up the protection response to address protection needs of farmers, indigenous and afro-Colombians communities

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We must fulfil our mission to stand by those affected by the conflict and take the responsibility of leading the protection response. Protection partners should resume regular presence and operational response, prioritising the identified municipalities that are most affected. In some Departments, such as Nariño or Chocó, resuming operations would require strengthening Cluster members' logistics (i.e., long boats for accessing communities by river). We must urgently address those areas most in need; as well as reinforce the response for the protection of farmers, indigenous and afro-Colombians communities, while concentrating our efforts in building closer collaboration with non-protection partners to restore basic services, such as health, education, and livelihoods. We must also strengthen the mental health and psychosocial support response to fill the gap in MHPSS services.

### 5- Restart the practice of protection by presence and finding solutions side by side with communities

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It is critical to go back to the field, to go back to communities. We need to restart the practice of Protection by Presence. This should be prioritized in communities under confinement or under the control of armed groups and should come hand-in-hand with community-based programs and quick impact projects to identify long-lasting solutions to violence and internal displacement. We have great

examples in several Departments of Colombia of successful experience of low investment in terms of resources but great impact in terms of community self-protection mechanisms. The neighbourhood of La Victoria, in the City of Quibdó, is the only neighbourhood not controlled by gangs but managed by the local authorities thanks to the support of a community services centre, which empowered the leadership of communities living in that neighbourhood. Community-driven initiatives have a greater potential of being sustainable and solution-oriented. These types of initiatives should be analysed, show cased and expanded.

Supporting local partners, authorities and communities in Colombia is key to deliver, to access and to sustain humanitarian impact and protection response, and to find durable solutions to address the root causes of displacement. This approach should be central to humanitarian work in Colombia.



GPC mission team during a field visit, September 2021