



Mapping Forced Displacement in Conflict:

Open-Source Investigation and
the Crisis in Catatumbo

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Key words: Forced Displacement, Open-Source Investigation, Armed Conflict, Colombia, Catatumbo, Transitional Justice

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Executive Summary

Between late 2024 and early 2025, the Catatumbo region in northeastern Colombia experienced one of the most severe forced displacement crises in recent years. Escalating armed violence between the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), dissident factions of the former FARC (notably the 33rd Front), and Colombian state forces resulted in the mass displacement of more than 100,000 civilians, alongside widespread threats, confinement, and the forced recruitment of minors. This crisis unfolded in a context of longstanding structural violence, territorial dispute, and fragile peace implementation, exposing persistent gaps in protection, humanitarian response, and accountability.

This report examines the Catatumbo crisis through the combined lenses of forced displacement, transitional justice, and opensource investigation (OSINV). It explores how publicly available digital data—particularly social media content and satellite imagery—can be used to document, visualise, and analyse patterns of armed violence and displacement in contexts where access is restricted, violence is ongoing, and formal accountability pathways remain uncertain.

Methodologically, the study combines documentary review with systematic opensource data collection and geospatial analysis. A total of 169 opensource publications from December 2024 to December 2025 were identified and analysed, covering incidents of armed violence and threats, forced displacement, humanitarian assistance, and the recruitment of minors. Of these, 123 entries were geolocated and mapped using ArcGIS, allowing for the visualisation of displacement routes, points of origin and reception, and concentrations of violence and humanitarian response. The research adopts a cautious and ethically grounded approach, particularly in relation to sensitive content involving children.

The report situates forced displacement within international humanitarian law and transitional justice frameworks, highlighting both the recognition of displacement as a serious violation and the persistent difficulties of establishing accountability. While Colombia has developed an extensive legal architecture for victim assistance and reparation, including under the Victims' Law and the transitional justice system established by the 2016 Peace Agreement, recent displacement in Catatumbo largely falls outside the temporal and personal jurisdiction of these mechanisms. As a result, victims face renewed risks of invisibility, impunity, and revictimisation.

The Catatumbo case study demonstrates how armed actors increasingly use digital platforms not only to document violence but also to issue threats, exert territorial control, and recruit minors, particularly through social media aesthetics and narratives tailored to younger audiences. At the same time, these same platforms generate a digital trace that can be mobilised by researchers, civil society, and accountability actors to corroborate events, identify patterns, and preserve a record of harm.

Overall, this report finds that OSINV offers significant potential for documenting forced displacement in real time, complementing victim testimonies and institutional data, and supporting future accountability processes. However, it also underscores the method's limitations, including evidentiary gaps, ethical risks, platform dependency, and the danger of exposing already vulnerable populations. The findings therefore point to the need for continued methodological refinement, stronger ethical safeguards, and closer integration between opensource practices, humanitarian protection, and transitional justice processes.

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Introduction

Between late 2024 and early 2025, the Catatumbo region in north-eastern Colombia experienced one of the most severe humanitarian crises in recent years. The escalation of armed conflict, driven by clashes between the non-state armed groups Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and the 33rd Front of the FARC, a dissident faction of the now-defunct guerrilla group Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), forced over 100,000 civilians to flee their homes.¹ In January alone, the United Nations estimated that approximately over 60,000 individuals were forcibly displaced, reflecting the intensity and severity of the armed violence in this region.²

While forced displacement is not a new phenomenon in Colombia, particularly in regions such as Catatumbo, this crisis highlights how both armed conflict and forcible displacement are increasingly mediated through digital platforms and social media, routinely used for documenting events and actions by armed actors and civilians alike. It is against this backdrop that we sought to explore how open-source data can be used to visualise and document incidents of armed violence, such as forced displacement. This approach is crucial, not only for corroborating information from state agencies, NGOs, and international organisations, but also for creating a documented record of violent events fuelling forced displacement that could support future judicial investigations in Colombia.

Such documentation has the potential to provide evidence of serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, particularly in contexts like Catatumbo, where cycles of violence persist and pathways to accountability and justice remain unclear today. Open-source documentation may also provide a valuable resource for scholarly research seeking to understand contemporary forms of displacement and conflict in Colombia.

It is important to stress that this research is exploratory. Given limitations of time and resources, the findings should not be read as definitive or conclusive. Rather, this study is intended as a starting point for understanding both the potential and the limitations of Open-Source Investigation (OSINV) in contexts of ongoing and cyclical forced displacement, such as the one in the Catatumbo region.

The report is structured as follows: we begin by outlining our methodology, describing the approaches employed, their scope, and constraints. The first part of the report then offers a brief literature review on forced displacement in conflict settings, particularly through the lenses of international humanitarian law and transitional justice. The second part introduces Open-Source Investigation (OSINV), critically examining its opportunities and limitations for documenting and analysing armed violence. The third part presents the case study of Catatumbo, beginning with an overview of forced displacement in Colombia and then focusing on the particular dynamics in this region. Within this section, we analyse four areas of focus: patterns of armed violence, dynamics of forced displacement, humanitarian assistance efforts, and the forced recruitment of minors. Then we examine accountability opportunities and limitations in Colombia's transitional justice for the case of Catatumbo. The report concludes with a reflection on the lessons learned and limitations of employing Open-Source Investigation in this case study.

Methodology

This research combines documentary review and analysis with the use of open-source data to examine, document and visualise events of violence, forced displacement, humanitarian response, and the recruitment of minors in the Catatumbo region of Colombia. The study has a clearly defined temporal scope, focusing on the humanitarian crisis that unfolded in Catatumbo during 2025. Accordingly, the materials reviewed and analysed are limited to those published between December 2024 and December 2025. This temporal delimitation was a deliberate methodological decision, considering constraints related to time and financial resources associated with the funding of the project.

It is important to emphasise that this delimitation does not suggest that violence or forced displacement in Catatumbo ceased after December 2025. In fact, violence escalated again in late December 2025 and January 2026, leading to further displacement of civilians.³ However, events from January 2026 onwards fall outside the scope of this analysis.

In terms of geographical scope, while other regions of Colombia continue to experience significant levels of forced displacement, this research concentrates exclusively on Catatumbo. This decision reflects the region's status as the area with the highest number of reported displacement cases in Colombia during 2025.⁴

The study employs two principal methods. First, a documentary review of secondary sources was conducted, including reports and materials produced by Colombian public institutions, international organisations, and civil society actors. This was complemented by a review of journalistic reports.

Second, and centrally, the project draws on open-source data investigation to identify, document and visualise:

- i. incidents of armed violence and threats perpetrated by non-state armed groups, specifically the ELN and the 33rd Front of the FARC
- ii. instances of forced displacement in the Catatumbo region
- iii. humanitarian assistance efforts by state institutions (including the Colombian Ombudsman's Office, the Victims Unit, local councils in municipalities of Norte de Santander and the Norte de Santander Regional Government), United Nations agencies, and international humanitarian organisations (such as the ICRC and Médecins Sans Frontières)
- iv. incidents of forced recruitment of minors in the Catatumbo region

Between February and March 2026, open-source data was identified through systematic scanning of social and digital platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and YouTube. The material collected, comprising videos and photographs, originates from a wide range of social media profiles, including members of civil society, armed groups, politicians, state institutions, the Colombian Armed Forces, international cooperation agencies, humanitarian organisations, national, regional and local media outlets, and independent journalists.

Following data collection, the material was collaboratively organised and systematised within a database created in Microsoft Excel. Four separate sheets were created, corresponding to the four areas of focus: incidents of violence and threats; forced displacement; humanitarian assistance; and recruitment of minors.

Each individual data entry was assigned a unique identification number and accompanied by a brief description of its content, the platform on which it was published, the date of publication, available geolocation data, and the URL of the original post. It should be noted that the level of geolocation detail varied across entries. In some cases, precise location data was available, while in others only general or approximate information could be identified, or no location data was available at all. A further column was included to indicate data sensitivity, identifying whether content contained potentially identifiable personal information or graphic depictions of violence. In parallel, an evidence log was created for each thematic category. This consisted of screenshots of each social media post, organised by their unique identification number to preserve a record in case links became inaccessible or content was removed from the original platform.

Through this process, a total of 169 posts were systematised: 39 relating to incidents of violence and threats, 76 to forced displacement, 26 to humanitarian assistance efforts, and 28 to the recruitment of minors.

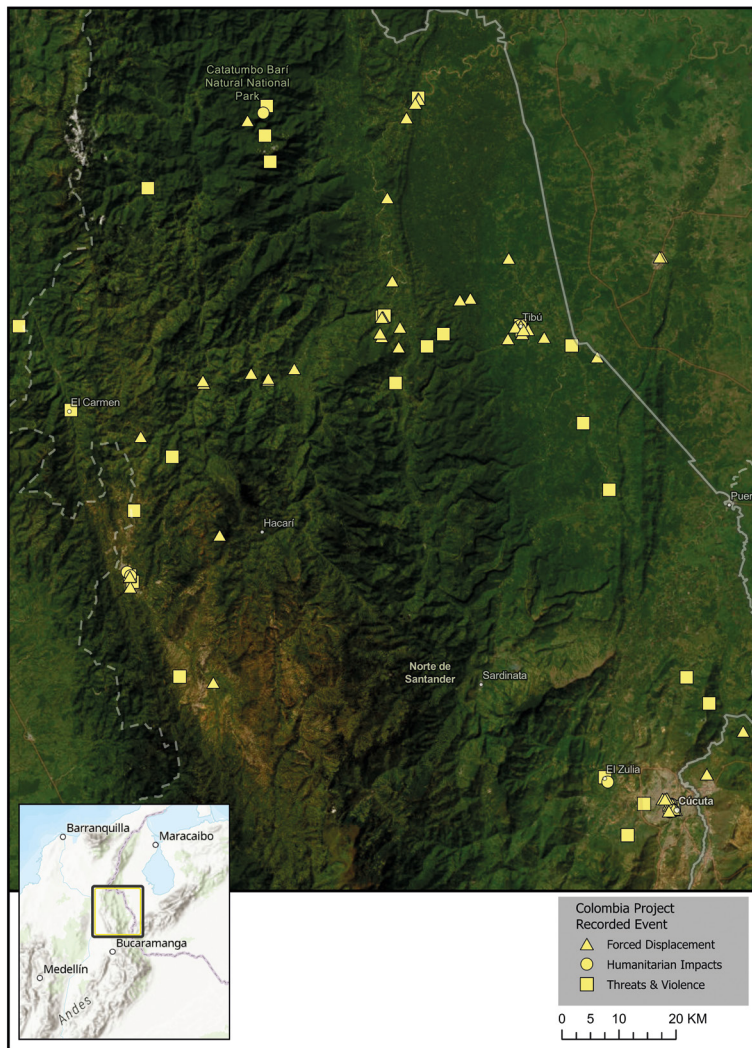
Following systematisation, the data was used for mapping and visualisation using ArcGIS. The number of entries included in this stage differs from the initial dataset, as some publications did not contain sufficient information to allow for geolocation. As a result, a total of 123 social media posts were mapped and visualised: 69 relating to forced displacement, 38 to incidents of violence and threats, and 16 to humanitarian assistance efforts.

Social media posts relating to the recruitment of minors were deliberately excluded from the mapping and visualisation process. This decision was taken to protect minors and individuals presumed to be minors appearing in the material, recognising their heightened



A screenshot of ArcGIS of Colombia with documented incidents

vulnerability. As the resulting map is intended to be publicly accessible, including such content was considered to pose potential risks to their safety and identification. Nevertheless, these data were used and considered within the broader analysis.



A screenshot of ArcGIS of the incidents in the Catatumbo region

This study is subject to certain limitations. The temporal and geographical scope is restricted, and the number of social media publications collected, systematised, and analysed is limited. These constraints are primarily due to the short timeframe funded (February–March 2026) for conducting all stages of the research. As such, the dataset is not representative, and the findings cannot be considered generalisable or conclusive. Rather, this research should be understood as an exploratory exercise aimed at identifying both the potential and the constraints associated with the use of Open-Source Investigation (OSINV) in contexts of ongoing conflict-related forced displacement, such as the Catatumbo case. This research is intended to provide a foundation for more extensive future research, subject to the availability of additional time and resources.

Part I: Forced Displacement in Contexts of Armed Conflict

1. Forced Displacement and International Humanitarian Law

Displacement of civilian populations is a common humanitarian consequence of armed conflicts, as civilians leave their homes, communities and property as a last resort to survive.⁵ International humanitarian law (IHL) is generally 'permissive' of displacement and only prohibits certain forms; as such IHL treats civilian displacement as 'merely a regrettable but inevitable fact of war'.⁶ IHL prohibits forced displacement where civilians are targeted or armed groups engage in 'acts or threats of violence the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population.'⁶ Under the principle of precaution it requires belligerents to provide an effective advance warning of an attack to a civilian population.⁷ The displacement of civilians may be unavoidable during times of armed conflict and can be in their interests if it removes them from an area of hostilities.⁸

Forced displacement can be lawful in circumstances where the 'security of the civilians involved or imperative military reasons so demand'.⁹ This 'evacuation' of civilians is considered to be a 'temporary and provisional measure'.¹⁰ At the International Criminal Court (ICC) there have been three convictions for forced displacement so far (Ntaganda, Yekatom and Ngaïssona). International criminal law over the past three decades has helped to fill in the gaps on the unlawful nature of forced displacement. The 'forced' aspect is one which under international criminal law reflects the lack of genuine choice or 'coercion' of the civilian population to flee.¹¹ This also includes considering 'the prevailing situation and atmosphere' and 'the victims' vulnerability'.¹² Aid provided by humanitarian agencies to displaced persons who are being transferred does not make the forced displacement lawful.¹³ The ICC has held that an explicit order does not have to be given to forcibly displace the civilian population to make it a crime, an act or omission which will result in such displacement is sufficient, nor it is required that the civilian population being under the territorial control or power of the perpetrator.¹⁴

The ICC has found that forced displacement results in people being 'illegally moved against their will or without having a genuine choice in the matter from the area in which they are lawfully present, leading to their exclusion from the economic and social life of their communities'.¹⁵ The Court has also recognised that the harm even from returned IDPs and refugees is long term that even if they can return home, 'does not mean that they were able to reach the same standards of living or live in the same conditions as before, and does not reduce the gravity of the crimes as such'.¹⁶ While IHL has been generally permissive of displacement in armed conflict, the ICC has helped to underscore the criminal nature of forced displacement and what it amounts to in practice. These parameters of forced displacement are relevant to understanding the violence and displacement in Catatumbo.

2. Transitional Justice and Forced Displacement

Land is fundamentally entangled with the identity, sense of belonging, and collective well-being of both individuals and communities.¹⁷ However, these essential bonds with home, land and place are often profoundly ruptured by violence and forced displacement.¹⁸ While the field of transitional justice has seen an increase in academic and practitioner engagement regarding victims' rights, the critical intersections of land and displacement remain notably marginalized within broader discourses on dealing with the past. This neglect is particularly evident in contexts like Northern Ireland, where a preference for "ordinary justice" has frequently prioritized short-term institutional reform over the deeper structural grievances rooted in dispossession and territorial contestation.¹⁹

Land dispossession can reverberate over time through embedding transgenerational asymmetries in social status and economic power.²⁰ Grievance-based narratives map current familial, local and communal understandings of land disputes articulated through violence onto collective historic experiences, thus collapsing any temporal distinction between land disputes before, during and after armed conflict.²¹ Land, housing and property rights claims are 'complicated, contested and often heavily burdened with historical baggage' that do not simply return to normal or can be easily restored to their pre-conflict state during peacetime.²² For instance, the experience of the land restitution programme in Bosnia demonstrates that such mechanisms are not immune from being usurped by political interests or by individual victims' unwillingness to return to their home and dissipate war-related segregation.²³

In Northern Ireland the experience of violence that forced tens of thousands of people from their homes resulted in "defensive displacement" as a means of 'self-segregation was a communal security response to violence'.²⁴ This exhibited the 'defensive need to be able to recognise everyone who lived in it and therefore in times of conflict to immediately recognise strangers'.²⁵ While such segregation was explicit in urban areas, such as Belfast and Derry with the peace walls, in rural areas communities would have their own cognitive maps of where each member of a community belonged and where they would shop, work and socialize.²⁶ These 'socio-spatial repercussions of violence' are well known in other contexts, including Guatemala, Mozambique, Somalia and Colombia.²⁷ In Northern Ireland providing replacement housing and compensation just formalized and made permanent segregation which continues decades after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, meaning subsequent generations have to live in an unresolved divided society, risking future violence.

There is a need for modesty and realism in what redress for displacement and segregation can achieve especially where there remains everyday social violence and social exclusion.²⁸ Some critical scholars have found that most approaches to redressing the past extend the effects of a 'culture politics of recognition' to those historically dispossessed of their lands and colonised, in particular Indigenous people, erasing their original land claims, decontextualizing their experience, failing to address the deep roots of colonialism and situating them as a minority group like others engaging in competing rights claims.²⁹ The pervading effects of colonialism on land holdings and broader social understandings and perceptions of communities, classes and groups in many societies see continuing exclusion of one community over another is 'mimicry' of past divide and rule strategies of colonial masters.³⁰ This raises difficult questions of how to transform such deeply rooted histories, social practices, and economic structures, as well as the limits of human rights and equality in addressing the historical context of displacement and preventing future violations.

The involvement of regional human rights courts in displacement cases has generally reluctance to second-guess states' discretion on how they resolve justice for such victims.³¹ In the situation of mass displacement of Croatian Serbs from Croatia during Operation Storm in 1995, the provision of a lengthy civil claims procedure, the European Court recognized that States in such circumstances have a 'wide margin of appreciation', given the 'exceptionally difficult task' of finding a balance between those displaced owners and temporary occupants.³² Often human rights courts can trigger the precedent for a group of victims to receive redress or encourage the State to establish a domestic reparation programme to avoid costly court proceedings.³³

The Inter-American Court has held that a domestic reparation programme for large numbers of victims of armed conflict is "one of the legitimate ways of satisfying the right to reparation".³⁴ While awards under such programmes may be lower than those ordered by courts, they must still be guided by human rights law and the principle of justice. This ensures that reparations "do not become illusory or derisory and make a real contribution to helping the victim address the negative consequences of human rights violations".³⁵ In Colombia, despite various efforts to address conflict-related land grabbing and land dispossession -such as the Land Restitution Law (Law 1448 of 2011) and the newly created Agrarian Jurisdiction (Legislative Act 03 of 2023 and Statutory Law 2570 of 2026)- as well as the peace agreement with FARC a decade ago, armed conflict and forced displacement persist. This ongoing violence continues to add to the number of displaced persons in the country, as well as create a chronic challenge of redressing the harm caused to individuals, communities and society by such forced displacement.³⁶

Part II: Open-Source Investigations (OSINV)

1. What is it?

Over the past decade, the use of OSINVs has expanded significantly, becoming an integral component of international criminal, humanitarian, and human rights inquiries.³⁷ As their use for recording harms has matured, a corresponding body of terminology has emerged to describe these practices.³⁸ OSINV is rooted in terms such as open source information ('OSI') and open source intelligence ('OSINT'), which are sometimes treated as interchangeable across the literature. However, there are meaningful distinctions between the three concepts that bear examination.

The Berkeley Protocol, a widely regarded authoritative text designed to guide open source investigators in conducting their work in alignment with professional standards, legal requirements, and ethical norms, defines OSI as information available on the internet, encompassing public websites, online databases, and social media platforms.³⁹ Murray offers a simpler formulation, characterising OSI as, at its most fundamental level, any information that is publicly accessible.⁴⁰ Dubberley and Ivens reinforce this view, describing OSI as publicly available information in digital format, typically obtained via the internet.⁴¹ The sources that fall within the scope of OSI are broad and non-exhaustive, encompassing media content from newspapers, websites, blogs and social media platforms; public records such as government data, court filings, and census materials; academic and professional publications; commercial sources including financial reports and commercial imagery; and satellite imagery provided by platforms such as Google Maps, Google Earth, Planet Labs, and Sentinel Hub.

Research drawing on OSI has been facilitated by the ubiquity of publicly available digital information and the development of new technological tools, providing freely accessible means of communication that can be employed to distribute, amplify, and present findings in ways that were previously inconceivable.⁴² When direct physical access to conflict zones is restricted, as is currently the case in Gaza, OSI can yield invaluable insights into key incidents.⁴³ This capacity not only enables researchers to compile systematic records of incidents that may later be relied upon in accountability processes, but also holds democratising potential by giving voice to individuals who may not otherwise be readily reachable.

OSINT, as a concept distinct from OSI, is defined as the methodological collection and exploitation of information drawn from publicly available sources in order to satisfy an intelligence requirement.⁴⁴ According to U.S. National Intelligence, this definition underscores that OSINT is more than a mere aggregation of data; the collection and exploitation of open-source material must above all be purposeful, directed by a specific intelligence requirement.⁴⁵ The European Union similarly defines OSINT as the practice of collecting and analysing information from open sources with the aim of producing actionable intelligence.⁴⁶ Crucially, both OSI and OSINT are confined to legally obtained information, distinguishing them from covert intelligence-gathering methods employed by intelligence practitioners and hackers who manipulate human and technical sources.⁴⁷ While OSINT is a more widely adopted term

than OSI, some researchers prefer the latter in order to avoid associations with intelligence agencies such as the CIA, SIS, or KGB.⁴⁸ For these agencies, OSINT forms part of a broader intelligence ecosystem alongside HUMINT (human intelligence), SOCMINT (social media intelligence), and IMINT (imagery intelligence), among others.

By invoking the term OSI, open-source researchers, typically those affiliated with universities, strategically demarcate their practices from those of the intelligence community, thereby asserting epistemic independence and protecting the perceived legitimacy of their knowledge production. This distancing also signals a refusal to be absorbed into state-centric security logics, particularly where intelligence apparatuses may themselves be entangled in, or complicit with, the very violations under investigation. Nonetheless, both terms present difficulties: OSINT risks excessive association with governmental intelligence structures, while OSI risks under-emphasising the essential analytical dimension of the process. Gathering open sources alone does not constitute an investigation unless those sources are systematically interrogated and contextualised within a broader interpretive framework.

A third option has emerged from civil society investigative organisations such as Bellingcat, which have adopted the term OSINV to foreground the importance of systematic data collection, analysis, and dissemination in meeting a research requirement, while simultaneously distancing themselves from governmental and corporate intelligence practices.⁴⁹ In this sense, OSINV combines the analytical rigour implicit in OSINT with the independence and legitimacy foregrounded by OSI. The term OSINV is preferred here because it most accurately captures the methodological processes through which publicly available information is transformed into credible, justice-relevant findings, while maintaining a necessary critical distance from securitised conceptions of intelligence.⁵⁰ This framing aligns with the core concerns of transitional justice, where the visibility of victims and harms is bound not only to evidentiary practices but also to broader struggles over recognition, accountability, and epistemic legitimacy.⁵¹

Understood in this way, OSINV functions not merely as a technical evidentiary tool but as an inherently interdisciplinary framework. It draws upon and synthesises legal analysis with sociological, historical, anthropological, and scientific modes of knowledge production, enabling a more holistic approach to documenting and addressing mass harm. The capacity of OSINV to integrate diverse forms of expertise, from satellite imagery analysis and geospatial modelling to social media research and digital archiving, has made it an increasingly indispensable component of contemporary accountability efforts, particularly in contexts where conventional documentation methods are obstructed by restricted access, active hostilities, or the diffuse and slow-onset nature of the harm in question.

2. What are its implications for contexts of armed violence?

Over the past decade, OSINVs have brought about a fundamental transformation in how violations of international humanitarian law ('IHL') and international human rights law ('IHRL') are documented and prosecuted. Koenig describes a 'profound shift' in evidence collection whereby the work once largely confined to legally mandated investigators has been supplemented by a dispersed international network of digital documenters spanning journalism, law, and civil society.⁵² For example, Truth Hounds, a Ukrainian human rights NGO founded in 2014, has used OSINV techniques, including the geolocation and chronolocation of satellite imagery and social media footage, to build evidentiary records of alleged war crimes

intended for use in criminal proceedings.⁵³ In addition, the Yale Humanitarian Research Lab's ('HRL') work in El-Fasher, North Darfur illustrates the capacity of open-source investigative methods to function as the primary evidentiary record in environments where ground-level access is wholly denied.⁵⁴ Commencing in July 2023, the HRL produced over 65 reports documenting RSF atrocities against indigenous non-Arab communities during the siege of El-Fasher through satellite imagery analysis and open-source data fusion.⁵⁵ This body of work provided the evidentiary foundation for the UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan's February 2026 report concluding that the RSF had committed genocide, a determination subsequently corroborated by a further HRL and NASA Harvest study demonstrating the deliberate razing of at least 41 agricultural communities to engineer famine conditions.⁵⁶ Millett identifies a dual significance in these developments: OSINV rebalances information asymmetries between states and other actors while simultaneously underpinning accountability efforts, though it also creates risks of harm to civilians that are not yet fully understood.⁵⁷

Within formal accountability structures, OSINV has made significant inroads. Murray et al identify its principal advantages for UN human rights investigations as the ability to conduct remote inquiries in inaccessible areas, to corroborate witness testimony with visual or geospatial evidence, and to capture patterns of harm that conventional methods may miss.⁵⁸ The Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations, published jointly by the UN Human Rights Office and UC Berkeley, represents the most prominent attempt to codify minimum standards for the collection and preservation of such material in legal proceedings.⁵⁹ At the ICC, the evidentiary value of OSINV has been progressively recognised. Freeman traces this evolution across a series of cases, noting how the Court has become more receptive to satellite imagery, geolocated video, and social media posts as the digital information environment has matured.⁶⁰ The Al Mahdi case saw before-and-after satellite imagery prove decisive in demonstrating the systematic destruction of cultural heritage in Timbuktu, while the Al-Werfalli arrest warrant relied almost entirely on open source video evidence, making it the first ICC warrant substantially grounded in OSINV material. Bellingcat's geolocation of execution sites by matching architectural features and identifying bloodstains in satellite imagery illustrated the investigative power of these combined techniques.⁶¹

3. Limitations

Despite these advances, the limitations of OSINV for formal legal accountability are well documented. Murray et al observe that while open-source evidence can powerfully document the effects of an attack, proving an IHL violation requires demonstrating indiscriminate or excessive civilian harm and establishing individual criminal responsibility, elements that frequently demand contextual information beyond what user-generated content can supply.⁶² Content creators tend to capture the devastation of violence, rather than the details of command structure, munitions, or direction of fire that investigators require. McDermott, Murray, and Koenig add that human and machine processes involved in collecting and analysing open source material introduce further distortions: confirmation bias; selection effects arising from which incidents are filmed and shared; and the growing threat of digital manipulation – which can all undermine the integrity of the evidentiary record.⁶³ Koenig notes an additional structural tension between methodological transparency, which builds confidence in findings, and individual security, since publishing geo-coordinates that validate

an investigation, can simultaneously expose the person who filmed the relevant footage to retaliation.⁶⁴

The deployment of OSINV in conflict settings also generates significant legal and ethical risks that existing frameworks have struggled to address. Millett identifies a critical regulatory gap: civilian non-state actors conducting OSINV are largely unbound by IHL unless their activity has a direct nexus to the conflict, while the patchwork of IHRL standards and self-regulatory protocols that does apply offers only partial coverage of the harms their activities can cause.⁶⁵ Raymond has illustrated how non-state armed groups can piece together the locations of sensitive sites, such as protection centres for demobilised child soldiers, through the aggregation of publicly available reporting by humanitarian agencies, a phenomenon he terms the 'Mosaic Effect.'⁶⁶ These examples underscore the need for a more sophisticated theory of harm that accounts for the ways in which well-intentioned OSINV activity can itself become a vector of risk in conflict environments. Zwijnenburg et al. note that the same tools that can document environmental harm during conflict, including satellite imagery and remote sensing, must be deployed with equivalent care for the potential consequences of their publication.⁶⁷

In response to these challenges, a collaborative ecosystem of OSINV actors has emerged that is unprecedented in its scale and ambition. In Ukraine, civil society organisations have played a substantial role in collecting evidence and engaging with the ICC and national prosecutors since 2014, and since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 these efforts have intensified dramatically, with dozens of organisations forming coalitions to archive footage and document atrocities in near real time.⁶⁸ Koenig notes that collaboration has become the cornerstone of contemporary OSINV practice, with organisations increasingly outsourcing resource-intensive verification and analysis to university laboratories that can bring specialist expertise to the investigative process.⁶⁹

Taken together, the evidence suggests that OSINV has become an indispensable, if imperfect, instrument in the documentation of armed conflict. Its capacity to operate remotely and to render visible both acute and diffuse forms of harm give it a distinctive role within contemporary accountability frameworks. At the same time, its evidentiary limitations in formal legal proceedings are well documented, its regulatory landscape remains fragmented, and its potential to cause harm to the populations it seeks to protect is insufficiently understood. These tensions point to the need for continued development of both the standards governing OSINV practice and the legal frameworks that should, but do not yet fully, govern its deployment in contexts of armed conflict.

Part III: The Case Study: Catatumbo

1. Forced Displacement in Colombia: An Overview

For more than 60 years, the Colombian armed conflict has been marked by forced displacement, making it one of the countries with the highest number of internally displaced persons in the world.⁷⁰ According to the Victims' Unit Registry, as of March 2026, more than 9 million victims of forced displacement have been recorded in Colombia, corresponding to events that occurred between 1985 and 2026, and this figure continues to increase.⁷¹ Individuals, families and communities have been forced to abandon their homes, land, possessions, customs, and livelihoods in order to escape massacres, killings, threats, persecution, dispossession, gender-based violence, drug trafficking, and to seek safety amid systematic violence and territorial disputes between armed groups (whether they be security forces, paramilitary groups, guerrilla groups or other armed groups involved in illicit economies).⁷²

The challenge of forced displacement in Colombia lies in its prolonged and often unresolved impacts. In most cases, these effects persist over time due to the lack of guarantees for victims to return to their places of origin, as well as the inadequate restitution of their rights and limited provision of humanitarian assistance.⁷³ As the Colombian Truth Commission itself noted, 'the social costs of displacement are immense, as millions of people are condemned to survive in a state of constant uncertainty, caught between poverty and violence. Given the country's social conditions, the underlying causes of displacement are not overcome; on the contrary, they are reproduced from one generation to the next'.⁷⁴

In 2025 alone, forced displacement remained one of the principal structural issues of the armed violence in Colombia. Between 1 January and 30 November 2025, at least 101,474 people were forcibly displaced as a direct result of the armed conflict, according to the Ombudsman's Office.⁷⁵ During this period, 116 displacement events were recorded, disproportionately affecting women, children, adolescents, migrants, refugees, social leaders, indigenous communities and Afro-descendants.⁷⁶ The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that 2025 is the year with the highest number of forced displacement cases in Colombia in the last 18 years.⁷⁷ More than 88,100 people were victims of group displacement and 103,150 people were victims of individual displacement, bringing the national estimate to more than 190,000 displaced persons during the year.⁷⁸ Between January and August alone, the Victims Unit received 139,701 reports of forced displacement.⁷⁹

Geographically, displacement concentrated in the departments of Norte de Santander, Cauca, Nariño, Bolívar, Chocó, and Antioquia.⁸⁰ According to the civil society organisation CODHES, municipalities within the Territorially Focused Development Programmes (PDET)⁸¹ continued to be the epicentre of the crisis, accounting for 60.24% of reported incidents and 89.16% of victims.⁸² Within these areas, the Catatumbo subregion (Norte de Santander) stood out as the most severely affected.⁸³ Displacement continued to follow a predominantly rural-to-urban pattern, with rural populations moving toward municipal capitals and intermediate cities.⁸⁴

Alongside internal displacement, Colombia experienced complex migratory dynamics. More than 141,000 people transited irregularly through the country, mainly from Venezuela.⁸⁵ In addition, reverse migration flows were recorded: 19,134 migrants entered Colombia via the

La Miel (Panamá) route to the town of Capurganá, in Acandí (Chocó).⁸⁶ Venezuela accounted for the largest share of this reverse flow, with 18,787 cases.⁸⁷ A key driver of return migration to Venezuela has been the deterioration of security conditions in Colombia, particularly in border areas such as Catatumbo.⁸⁸ The scale of these cross-border movements has exceeded the State's ordinary institutional and budgetary capacities.⁸⁹ Bearing this in mind, we will now turn to the issue of the recent humanitarian crisis and forced displacement in the Catatumbo region, resulting from the escalation of armed violence in the area.

2. Crisis in Catatumbo (2025)

The Catatumbo region,⁹⁰ located in the north-eastern department of Norte de Santander, has historically been one of the areas most affected by armed conflict and forced displacement in Colombia.⁹¹ Initial waves of forced displacement in Catatumbo can be traced to the bipartisan violence of the 1940s and 1950s.⁹² From the 1970s onwards, the internal armed conflict further entrenched violence and forced displacement in the region, with the presence of guerrilla groups such as ELN, the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), and later the FARC. The State responded by deploying armed forces and militarising the territory through counterinsurgency operations, while paramilitary groups emerged in the 1990s. Catatumbo thus became a zone of continuous military, social and political dispute.⁹³

Catatumbo's strategic importance is linked not only to its border location with Venezuela—which facilitates the clandestine mobility of illegal armed groups, the illicit assembly of drones and explosives, and drug trafficking routes—but also to its natural resource wealth, including oil reserves and other extractive industries.⁹⁴ Extortion of oil companies became a significant source of revenue for guerrilla groups, particularly the ELN.⁹⁵ The expansion of coca cultivation in the late 1980s further consolidated the region's relevance to illicit economies.⁹⁶ These dynamics intersected with an agro-industrial and extractive development model characterised by monocultures of oil palm, oil exploitation and coal mining. In many cases, these industrial projects have overlapped with the ancestral territories of the Barí and Yukpa Indigenous people and peasant communities. This overlap has led to major changes in rural land use that frequently exclude these communities from secure and dignified livelihoods, thereby functioning as structural drivers of forced displacement.⁹⁷

Despite the signing of the 2016 Peace Agreement, armed violence and forced displacement remain in Catatumbo. Territorial disputes between illegal armed groups over control of trafficking routes, the border between Colombia and Venezuela, and local territorial authority have sparked a renewed wave of violence.⁹⁸ Between 2020 and 2024, the Office of the Ombudsman had already issued several early warnings regarding armed violence in the region, which was severely affecting the civilian population.⁹⁹ However, 15 January 2025 marked a turning point in the escalation of violence. The triggering event was the murder, in the municipality of Tibú, of Miguel Ángel López Rojas (a local mortician), his wife Zulay Durán Pacheco, and their nine-month-old child. The ELN interpreted this massacre as an act attributable to the FARC dissident group, 33rd Front.¹⁰⁰

In response, from 16 January 2025, the ELN launched a coordinated armed offensive against units of the 33rd Front, concentrated in municipalities Tibú, Teorama, Convención, and San Calixto.¹⁰¹ This offensive directly affected the life, integrity and security of the civilian population, particularly former FARC members who had demobilised and signed the Peace Agreement, as well as social leaders of the Catatumbo region.¹⁰²



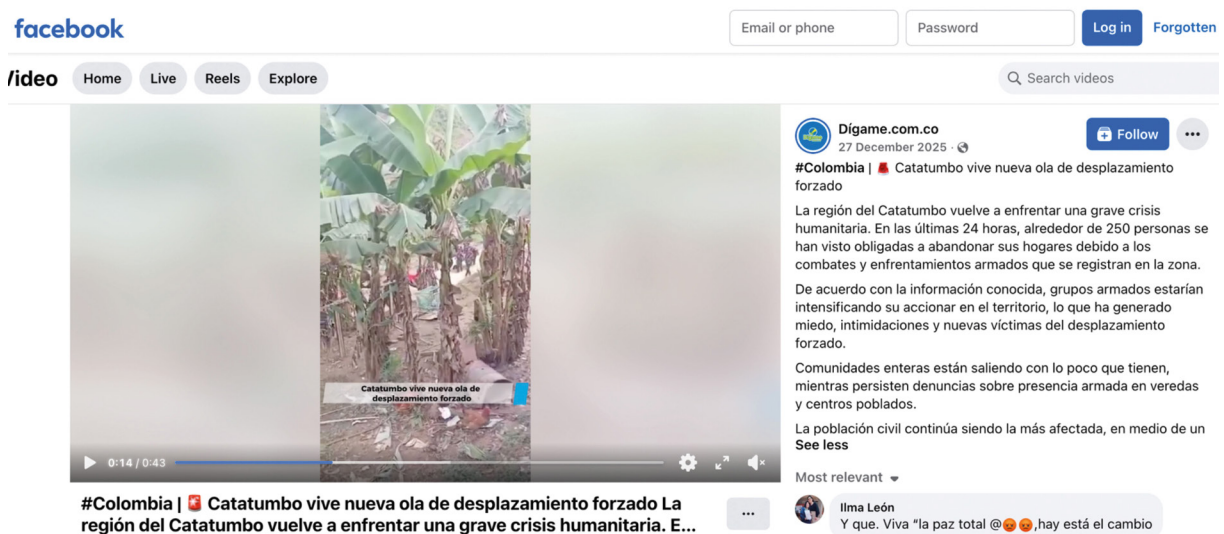
The mass exodus of teachers from different municipalities in Catatumbo continues. The educators are leaving in caravans, with white flags and signs that read "teacher - families"

the Colombian security forces.¹⁰⁴ The crisis in Catatumbo is not exempt from new technologies of warfare. In areas such as Filo Gringo, in El Tarra, attacks involving explosive-laden drones led to the displacement of nearly 70% of the population. Between 2024 and 2025, 394 drone attacks were recorded, resulting in civilian casualties, including children.¹⁰⁵

The escalation of violence between the ELN and the 33rd Front has resulted in the mass displacement of thousands of Catatumbo people and the confinement of entire communities. The following section presents incidents identified through OSINV analysis, illustrating some of the factors that contributed to and exacerbated the Catatumbo crisis in 2025.

a. Threats and Attacks

Between 16 January and 7 December 2025, 105,203 people were affected by the escalation of armed violence in Catatumbo, including 101,587 who were forcibly displaced, 7,777 who were threatened and 3,772 who were confined.¹⁰³ The most intense point of this crisis of armed violence occurred in mid-January 2025, as fighting intensified between the ELN, the 33rd Front of FARC and



Video shows ELN troops marching along a country lane as they enter a village in the Catatumbo region.



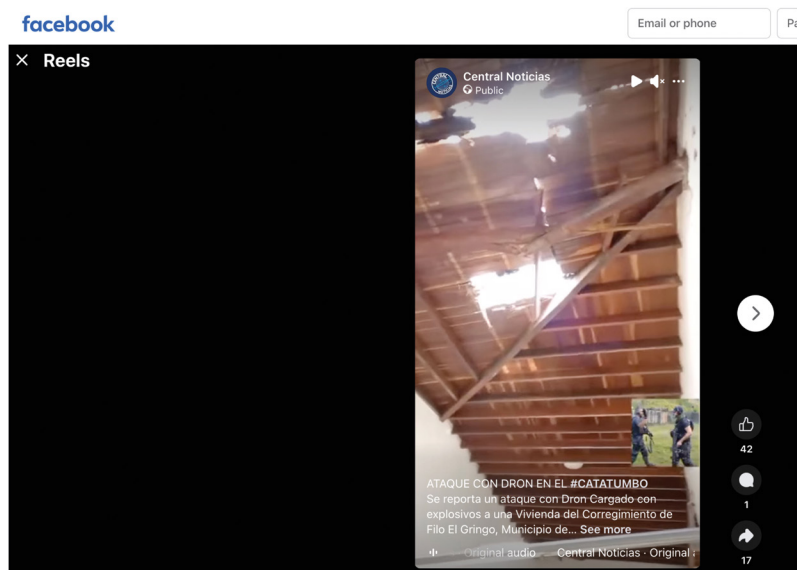
catatumbo.aldia · 2025-12-16

#NorteDeSantander | Ejército neutraliza artefactos explosivos instalados por el ELN... more

Post reports that troops from the General Hermógenes Maza 5th Medium Cavalry Group, part of the National Army's 30th Brigade, successfully neutralized several explosive devices planted by the ELN armed group on the road from Cúcuta to Ocaña. Perpetrator was captured in El Zulia.

The OSINV analysis corroborates this complex situation in Catatumbo. Across the various videos and photographs examined, recordings from rural areas, including Filo Gringo, Tibú, El Tarra, the rural area of Ocaña, and Teorama, document armed confrontations between members of armed groups. Footage also shows attacks, or their aftermath, in residential and commercial areas, as well as on critical infrastructure such as electrical towers in locations including Filo Gringo, La Gabarra, and 20 de Julio. Some of these attacks were allegedly carried out by the ELN and 33rd Front using commercially available drones modified to carry and deploy explosives.

The OSINV analysis also revealed the placement of gas cylinders intended for



Video shows a house destroyed by an attack with a drone loaded with explosives in Filo Gringo, Municipality of El Tarra (Catatumbo).

use as explosives or roadblocks in public roads, such as in the San Isidro and Carmen de Tochalá sectors, by members of illegal armed groups. Other posts documented explosives that had been planted by the ELN along the Cúcuta–Ocaña road but were later neutralised by the 30th Brigade of the Colombian Army. Social media posts evidenced the burning of trucks by members of illegal groups to block main roads, including an incident on the main road connecting Convención with Ocaña, one of the main and busiest roads in the Catatumbo region.



Video showing alleged members of FARC dissidents arriving at a camp in Catatumbo that had apparently been occupied by the ELN. The video shows abandoned items, such as a pot still on the stove and military equipment, indicating the hasty departure of armed group members from the camp.

Social media posts also record military incursions and village takeovers by the ELN and the 33rd Front in different towns and municipalities of Catatumbo. In Pacheli and Puerto Palmas, video footage shows members of the 33rd Front entering the towns and patrolling them. Videos also show alleged ELN members entering the abandoned homes of displaced villagers in rural areas of Catatumbo, occupying them overnight and using the residents' belongings. They also show members of the 33rd Front raiding ELN encampments in rural areas of Catatumbo.



X post by @jhonjacome: '#BREAKING President @petrogustavo, I know you're busy with other matters, but I want to tell you that at this hour there are reports of gunfire in several points in Tibú, a municipality that's supposed to be completely militarized, and also that another person has just been murdered in the vicinity of the Market Square, where two more people were killed this morning. Please, Mr. President, set aside the fight with Trump for another time and take charge of regaining control of Catatumbo, which has long been out of your hands.'

The activities of the Colombian armed forces are also visible in open-source data. Social media posts evidence Armed Forces helicopters flying over La Bogotana, in El Carmen, following clashes between the ELN and the Army. They also show the deployment of high-impact weapons and explosives by the Armed Forces in places like La Gabarra. Additional footage shows the militarisation of strategic areas in Catatumbo, such as Tibú, with Army and Air Force personnel boarding helicopters, patrolling rural roads in armoured vehicles, and employing missile launchers and anti-drone systems.

Social media posts also document systematic assassinations, attacks and threats against social leaders by armed groups. Posts from civil society organizations like Catatumbo Social

Integration Committee (CISCA), Madres del Catatumbo, Indepaz, and FEVCOL detail incidents in locations such as Cúcuta, Filo Quemado in Villa Miramontes, and Abrego, including an attack on Fabian Cáceres member of the Association for Displaced People. Kidnappings of civilians by the ELN and other unidentified armed groups were also reported in Pacheli, Tibú, and Campo Dos.

These dynamics are amplified by the strategic use of social media to fuel violence and exert social control by non-state armed groups. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok were systematically used to issue direct threats against social leaders, campesinos, community organisations, and local authorities.¹⁰⁶ Photomontages and stigmatising messages circulated widely, linking community leaders to armed groups and pressuring residents to choose between confinement and displacement.¹⁰⁷ Social media was also used to announce guerrilla incursions and imminent clashes, as on 16 January 2025, when WhatsApp messages warned of an armed confrontation,¹⁰⁸ demonstrating the centrality of digital platforms in shaping the conflict dynamics in Catatumbo.

b. Forced Recruitment

The escalation of violence in Catatumbo has also had a severe impact on the wellbeing of children. As a result of armed confrontations between armed actors in January 2025, classes in schools across the region were suspended, 500 teachers were displaced, and the education of approximately 47,000 children and adolescents was disrupted.¹⁰⁹ This is consistent with OSINV analysis, which includes videos showing caravans of vehicles in areas such as Tibú, where schoolteachers and their families are seen fleeing. Another social media post reports the kidnapping and killing of the husband of a schoolteacher from La Gabarra. These incidents show that violence directly affects educators, who are forced to choose between remaining in their communities or fleeing to protect their own safety and that of their families. Their displacement, in turn, leaves educational provision interrupted or at risk for children who remain in the region.

The lack of access to education increases the risk of forced recruitment of minors by illegal armed groups, either through coercion or grooming. Local media reported that the Minister of Defence, Pedro Sánchez, stated in a public address in Cúcuta in December 2025 that the escalation of violence in Catatumbo had led to a 60% increase in the recruitment of minors in the region, describing it as a rapidly growing phenomenon.¹¹⁰ Similarly, in June 2025, the Motilón Barí and Catalaura Indigenous communities in the corregimiento of La Gabarra reported an increase in the forced recruitment of minors from their communities by armed groups. According to their statements, more than 240 children were forcibly recruited between 2016 and 2025.¹¹¹

The Office of the Ombudsman also reported that the escalation of violence and forced recruitment in Catatumbo affected migrants who were compelled to cross back into Venezuela in search of protection or due to the impossibility of remaining in Colombia. According to the Ombudsman, migrants have been particularly affected by illegal checkpoints and territorial control exercised by armed groups in the region, which restrict their freedom of movement and access to basic services.¹¹² In the absence of support networks and institutional protection mechanisms, these populations are exposed to labour and sexual exploitation, as well as forced recruitment by armed actors.¹¹³

Forced recruitment in Catatumbo also involves the use of social media platforms. This practice has been observed more broadly across the country, where illegal armed groups use platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to attract and groom minors into joining their ranks. These platforms are used to circulate narratives centred on material gain and to project stylised representations of armed life.¹¹⁴ OSINV analysis is consistent with this pattern and indicates that, particularly on TikTok, groups such as the ELN and the 33rd Front of the FARC have used such content in ways that may contribute to attracting minors in Catatumbo. None of the videos analysed originate from official accounts of armed groups; rather, they are posted from accounts that appear anonymous or lack clearly identifiable administrators. Several accounts appear to belong to young individuals who present as adolescents, and while exact ages cannot be verified, those featured in the videos appear to range approximately between 13 and 20 years old.

In these videos, young individuals adopt visual styles that highlight elements that may be perceived as appealing by younger social media audiences. They display weapons, military uniforms, horses, vehicles, and bundles of money, and make references to increased attractiveness or desirability, because of belonging to an armed group. Young men often include captions referring to strength, honour, and discipline, for example:

“I chose discipline not as punishment, but as a path. While others look for parties, I look for resilience, courage and victory.”

“A salute to all those warriors who chose the dignity of their land and refuse cowardice.”

“The highest level of humanity that a man can achieve is to be a revolutionary”

“You know that when you enter this life, there’s no birthdays, no Mother’s Day, no Christmas, none of that. You just keep moving forward, that’s it.”

Other content expresses anger towards rival armed actors, as illustrated by a video in which a young man, allegedly a member of the ELN, states: “It hurts to see my people supporting those who harm us, who attack and violate our land, our brothers, our neighbours, our campesinos.”

Where young women appear in the videos, they are often portrayed as physically attractive, well-presented, and wearing military uniforms styled in a manner emphasising femininity. The content presents an image in which women can appear both “feminine” and strong while being part of an armed group. The videos also depict life in rural and jungle settings as socially engaging, including scenes suggesting the formation of friendships and social gatherings.

Many of the videos are accompanied by background music, including techno-guaracha, cumbia, vallenato, and norteña style music. The lyrics often reference armed struggle, military life, sacrifice, strength, and discipline. Examples include:

“We are elite men, with an offensive mindset. Few understand us, but we are the most feared on the battlefield. We toast with the blood of our enemies. We are natural leaders, always seeking combat. We are legend.”

“I am a guerrilla fighter and I carry that flag. I fight for my people and their freedom. It was the government that drove me to the bushes.”

“I have made good friends along the way. Those who know me know what I mean; I don’t mess about; I am a respectable man.”

“I walk barefoot because I am made of steel. In my world, there is no such thing as ‘but’, thanks to the strength of the warrior.”

“I like cockfighting and placing a good bet. I never go without my tequila and my pistol at my waist. If it comes to shooting, I do it without hesitation.”

“The silence was broken. A million bullets shattered the calm and turned it into hell. Dressed like Guacho, dressed in black, bringing down their enemies, they fell to the ground. With so many hits, they faded away. Mortally wounded, they kept pushing on, never surrendering. They went to war.”

“Don’t get nervous when you hear the gunfire. I’m battle-hardened; you just don’t know me yet. If you feel afraid when you see armed men, they’re with me. If the government comes after us, say nothing. Everything is arranged; control is assured. You just enjoy the music and the northern bands; this is a private party.”

“I light a candle carefully, and outside I hear the neighbourhood without knowing who will die. Fate is not written; we write it ourselves. Even if life is hard and the government makes it worse, it is up to us to decide.”

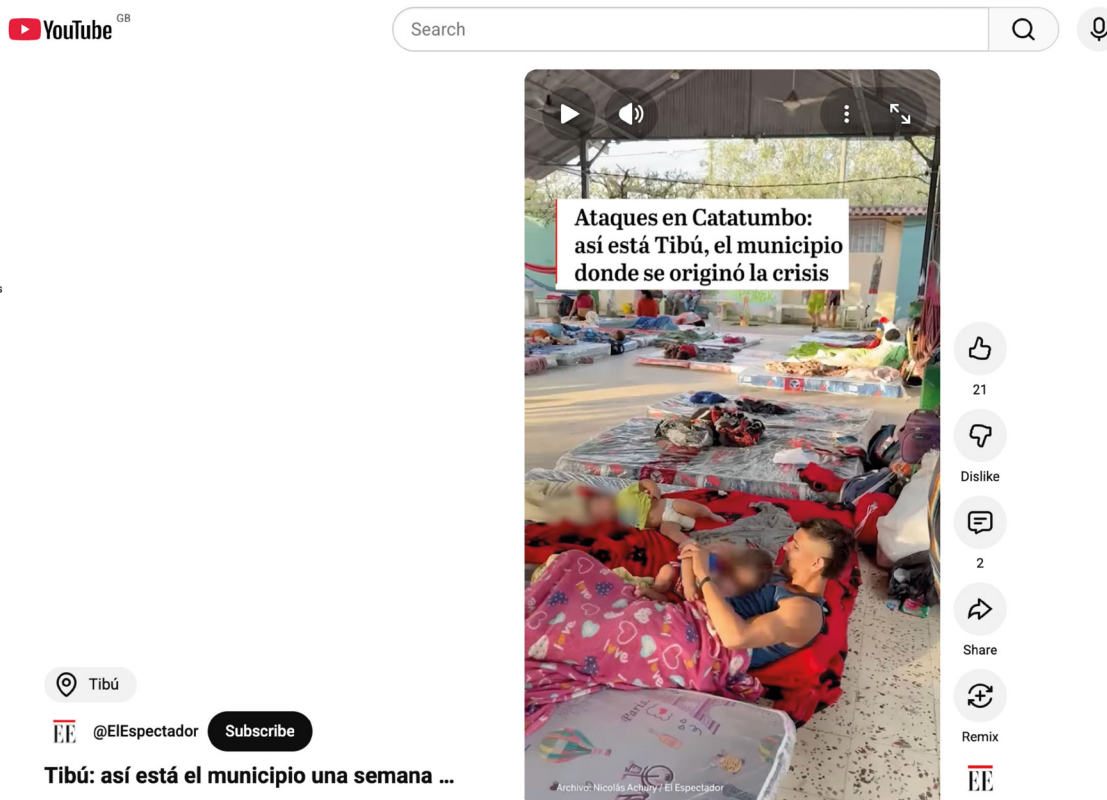
“Make the most of me while I’m alive. If you have eyes, don’t let them see me; if you have hands, don’t let them catch me; if you have feet, don’t let them reach me. Do not let them take me by surprise, do not let my death be violent, do not let my blood be spilled. You who know everything, my sins as well as my faith, do not abandon me.”

What is particularly striking is that the visual aesthetic of these videos closely mirrors mainstream social media trends, especially those on platforms such as TikTok aimed at younger audiences. In this sense, the young individuals featured, who are presumably members of illegal armed groups, present themselves almost as “war influencers”. They adopt a consistent and carefully curated visual style in which belonging to an armed group becomes part of their personal identity or “brand”, framed as something appealing or desirable. More broadly, this “war aesthetic” operates as a recognisable digital identity that shapes how content is perceived and engaged with, particularly by younger audiences in Catatumbo region who may be more vulnerable to being influenced or groomed through such representations.

In addition, several of these posts included comments, either from anonymous profiles or other young users, expressing interest in joining the armed groups or requesting further information. These comments were often met with replies, either from the account itself or from other anonymous profiles, encouraging users to send a direct message to receive more details. It is not possible to determine whether these interactions involve individuals genuinely linked to armed groups or whether they are generated by bots or automated accounts seeking to increase the visibility and engagement of the content. This is particularly relevant given that on platforms such as TikTok, higher levels of interaction, such as comments, likes, and shares, can contribute to greater dissemination of content through algorithmic recommendation systems, including users’ personalised feeds.

c. Forced Displacement

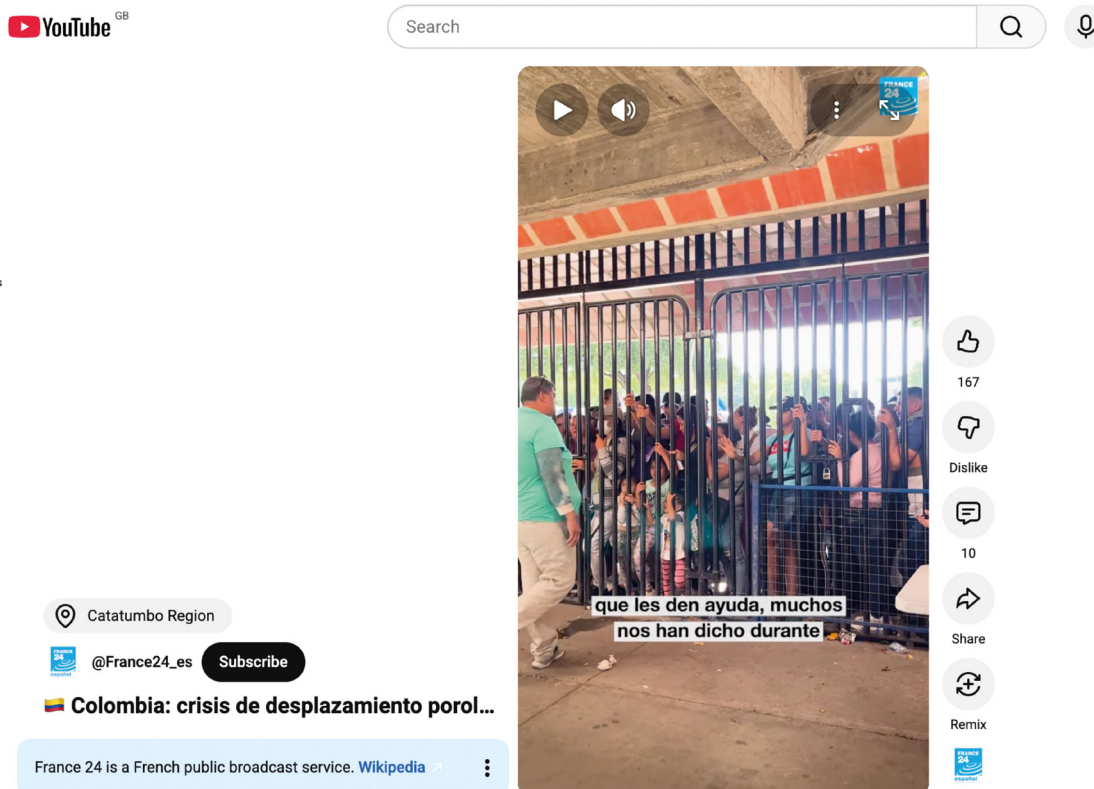
According to CODHES, between January and August 2025, more than 32% of all forced displacement declarations recorded nationwide by the Victims' Unit originated in Catatumbo.¹¹⁵ Rural municipalities such as Tibú, El Tarra and Teorama emerged as the main areas of population outflow, while Cúcuta (urban), Ocaña (urban), Convención (rural) and San Calixto (rural) became the principal destinations.¹¹⁶ Thousands of people sought refuge in stadiums, sports arenas, shelters and government offices in these municipalities, overwhelming local response capacities.¹¹⁷ Other families were displaced within the Catatumbo region itself, temporarily relocating to nearby rural towns.¹¹⁸



"The video shows a school in Tibu that has been converted into a shelter for victims of forced displacement from the Catatumbo region. This shelter has taken in victims from 17 villages, comprising 157 families and 380 people. According to the video, four other shelters like this one have been set up in the municipal capital of Tibu. Given the number of victims (more than 5,000), it is expected that they will be transferred to other shelters with greater capacity."

Displacement did not occur solely on a mass scale. A pattern of individual, "gota a gota" (drip-by-drip) displacement also persisted, characterised by a constant but dispersed flow of families from rural areas of Catatumbo to receiving municipalities such as Cúcuta and Ocaña.¹¹⁹ Between January and December 2024, approximately 3,780 people from Catatumbo (around 915 families) were displaced in this way to the departmental capital, Cúcuta.¹²⁰ Although less visible than mass displacement, "gota a gota" (drip-by-drip) displacement reflected a structural situation of risk and prolonged uprooting. Following the outbreak of hostilities in January 2025, mass displacement intensified; however, individual displacement continued in parallel.¹²¹ Many victims of forcible displacement did not immediately register their cases with State institutions, due to fear or difficulties in travelling to the institutions, resulting in underreporting acknowledged by municipal ombuds offices.¹²²

The OSINV analysis is consistent with this information. It further shows that townships such as Filo Gringo and La Gabarra are among the areas from which large numbers of people were displaced. In the case of La Gabarra, videos shared on social media show individuals fleeing via fluvial routes, using the Catatumbo River as a means of escape. Regarding receiving locations, in addition to Cúcuta and Ocaña, social media data shows that some victims of forced displacement from the Catatumbo also arrived in Bogotá, Boyacá, and Honda (Tolima). Posts also point out individuals crossing into Venezuela, including to Casigua-El Cubo in Zulia State and the Táchira–Zulia border. Movements within the Catatumbo region are also visible. For example, residents from the village of Piedras de Moler in Teorama moved to the township of San Pablo in Teorama, while residents of rural Tibú displaced to urban areas of Tibú.

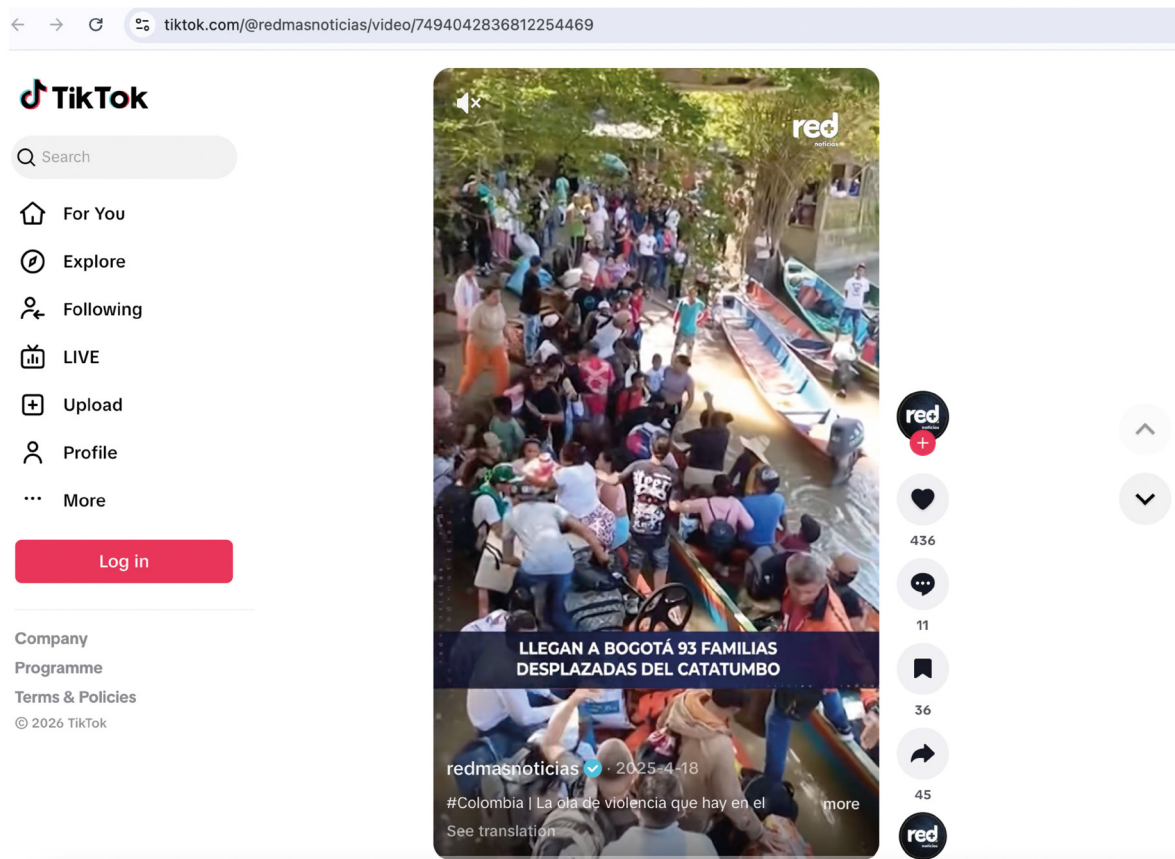


“France 24 interviews victims of forced displacement from Catatumbo who have arrived at the General Santander Stadium in Cúcuta to seek humanitarian aid (food and shelter). The video reports that access to shelters is limited. It is noted that mattresses and hygiene kits have been donated to the victims.

Among those interviewed is a Venezuelan citizen who says he was unable to access humanitarian aid, as he was required to provide proof that he was residing in the Catatumbo area.”

In terms of modes of displacement, social media posts show individuals and families travelling on foot, by boat, in caravans of cars and motorcycles, in trucks carrying groups of people, and in convoys of buses. In Cúcuta, the General Santander football stadium became a central point for the arrival and assistance of displaced persons. Individuals queued to enter, undergo initial assessment, and be registered by the Victims’ Unit as victims of forced displacement, subject to meeting the required criteria and providing documentation demonstrating residence or ties to Catatumbo during the crisis. From the social media posts, it is also possible to identify that another points of arrival in Cúcuta were the city hall and the municipal theatre, where displaced persons sought shelter and support.

Social media posts also show that some displaced families and individuals from Catatumbo used schools as temporary shelters. This includes a school located at kilometre 16 on the road between Tibú and La Gabarra, as well as a school in Tibú where 157 families and 380 individuals from around 17 villages in Catatumbo were received. Social media posts also show that, in April 2025, bus convoys departed from Cúcuta carrying victims of forced displacement returning to Catatumbo. According to these posts, hundreds of returnees arrived in Bertrania, in Tibú, where they received assistance and support at a shelter. However, there is no clear information on whether additional returns from Cúcuta or other receiver cities to Catatumbo took place during the remainder of 2025.



Rednoticias reports that 93 families forcibly displaced from the Catatumbo region have arrived at temporary shelters in Bogotá. These families included 13 former FARC members who signed the Peace Agreement, 39 men, 53 women and 32 children. The families include people with disabilities, pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers. Initially, the victims had been relocated to the village of Las Pavitas in the municipality of Puerto Boyaca (Boyacá), but threats against them led them to flee once again to the city of Bogotá.

d. Humanitarian Efforts

Humanitarian assistance for victims of forced displacement is supported by a relatively robust legal framework in Colombia, particularly under Law 387 of 1997 and Law 1448 of 2011 (Victims' Law). Humanitarian assistance is conceived as a measure to guarantee minimum subsistence¹²³ until victims overcome their situation of vulnerability. Access requires registration in the Victims' Registry (RUV) following a declaration before the Office of the Ombudsman, the Attorney General's Office, or municipal ombuds offices.¹²⁴ This national framework is complemented by assistance provided by international actors, including United Nations agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), international cooperation

funds, and non-governmental organisations. In practice, however, the humanitarian response for victims of forced displacement at the national level faces significant structural and financial constraints. For instance, the time required for humanitarian assistance to reach victims of forced displacement varies across territories, ranging from 4 to 44 days.¹²⁵ This has a serious impact on the victims' well-being and leaves them in a situation of greater vulnerability and at greater risk of re-victimisation and increased precariousness.

In the specific case of Catatumbo, the scale and severity of armed violence and forced displacement in early 2025 led the Government to declare a State of Internal Disturbance.¹²⁶ Within this framework, the Government ordered the urgent establishment of reception and humanitarian assistance points for displaced populations in Tibú, Ocaña, and Cúcuta, and activated municipal contingency plans. It also acknowledged that ordinary resources and institutional capacities were insufficient to meet the needs of the affected population and ensure the provision of essential services. As a result, the Government authorised the use of extraordinary fiscal resources and budgetary adjustments and ordered the deployment of military forces to regain control of areas under the presence of illegal armed groups.

The OSINV analysis further shows that entities such as the Victims' Unit, the Governor's Office of Norte de Santander, Mayor's Offices in different municipalities of Norte de Santander, the Civil Defence, the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF), and the Ministry of Equality were involved in the provision of humanitarian assistance to displaced populations.

For example, the Victims' Unit participated in the coordination, logistics, and delivery of humanitarian assistance to displaced persons arriving at the General Santander football stadium in Cúcuta in January 2025. This assistance included the distribution of mattresses, hygiene kits, clothing, and basic food supplies, as well as support in issuing identity documents to individuals who had lost them during displacement. The Victims' Unit also registered victims of forced displacement from Catatumbo in the RUV, which enables them to access further humanitarian assistance measures and programmes under the Victims' Law. The Mayor's Office of Cúcuta also supported these efforts, assisting approximately 2,000 people per day at the General Santander stadium and encouraging citizens from Cúcuta to donate food and essential items such as clothes. As of 19 January 2025, Mayor's Office of Cúcuta made approximately 408 beds available in hotels to temporarily accommodate victims of forced displacement from Catatumbo.



Video of people being displaced in the countryside. The post says, 'My God, there are already 35,000 displaced persons from Catatumbo. This is terrible. Can anyone do anything?'

In January 2025, the ICBF supported children displaced from Catatumbo through the “Return to Happiness” emergency programme, aimed at providing psychological and emotional support. ICBF mobile teams assisted children in shelters across Norte de Santander and supported food, hygiene, and safety committees to maintain adequate conditions within these spaces. They also provided support to community kitchens to ensure that children and pregnant women received food.

In February 2025, the Ministry of Equality established four community kitchens in Ocaña to provide daily meals to 450 children affected by forced displacement in Catatumbo. It also delivered food supplies directly to two shelters in Abrego and distributed 132 tonnes of food in Teorama and Tibú, benefiting approximately 3,000 families.

In March 2025, the Social Services Agency of the Department of Norte de Santander, in collaboration with the Governor’s Office and with the support of UNICEF, organised a recreational day with psychosocial support for 110 children from the Temporary School for Peace in Cúcuta, established to support children affected by forced displacement from Catatumbo. Also in March 2025, the Municipality of El Zulia, in coordination with the Rural Development Agency, distributed 250 food hampers to victims of forced displacement from Catatumbo.

In April 2025, the Mayor’s Office of Bogotá established temporary shelters to receive victims of forced displacement from Catatumbo. These victims included 13 demobilised former FARC members who had signed the Peace Agreement, as well as 39 men, 53 women, and 32 children. The families also included persons with disabilities, pregnant women, and breastfeeding mothers. Prior to their arrival in Bogotá, these individuals had been relocated to the village of Las Pavitas, in the municipality of Puerto Boyacá (Boyacá). However, following threats against them, they were forced to flee once again, this time to the city of Bogotá.

In December 2025, the Governor’s Office of Norte de Santander sent trucks carrying food supplies to assist 160 families affected by forced displacement in Tibú and El Tarra, as well as individuals experiencing confinement in Pacheli.

The screenshot shows a Facebook video player with a video titled "Catatumbo vive nueva ola de desplazamiento forzado". The video content shows a field of banana plants. Below the video, the text reads: "#Colombia | 🇨🇴 Catatumbo vive nueva ola de desplazamiento forzado La región del Catatumbo vuelve a enfrentar una grave crisis humanitaria. E...". To the right of the video, the post is from "DÍgame.com.co" dated "27 December 2025". The post text includes: "#Colombia | 🇨🇴 Catatumbo vive nueva ola de desplazamiento forzado La región del Catatumbo vuelve a enfrentar una grave crisis humanitaria. En las últimas 24 horas, alrededor de 250 personas se han visto obligadas a abandonar sus hogares debido a los combates y enfrentamientos armados que se registran en la zona. De acuerdo con la información conocida, grupos armados estarían intensificando su accionar en el territorio, lo que ha generado miedo, intimidaciones y nuevas víctimas del desplazamiento forzado. Comunidades enteras están saliendo con lo poco que tienen, mientras persisten denuncias sobre presencia armada en veredas y centros poblados. La población civil continúa siendo la más afectada, en medio de un See less". Below the post, there is a comment from "Ilma León" that says: "Y que. Viva "la paz total @🇨🇴🇨🇴🇨🇴, hay está el cambio".

Despite these efforts, communities and local leaders in Catatumbo reported concerns regarding the adequacy of the State's response following the declaration of the State of Internal Disturbance, including the limited visibility of the announced financial investments for humanitarian and social aid.¹²⁷ They have also raised questions about state military intervention, which they believe puts the civilian population at greater risk of being stigmatised, attacked and/or persecuted.¹²⁸

Regarding international humanitarian assistance, OCHA secured USD 3.8 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and, together with more than 22 humanitarian organisations, aided victims of forced displacement from Catatumbo, providing shelter, food, water, education, and hygiene support.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, ongoing insecurity and budgetary constraints continued to undermine the reach and sustainability of OCHA's response.¹³⁰ OSINV analysis also identified the presence of organisations such as the ICRC, Médecins Sans Frontières, and Mobile Information and Advice Points (PAO) operated by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which provided humanitarian assistance, information, and medical care to victims of forced displacement in Catatumbo.

Parallel to the escalation of the crisis in Catatumbo, the international cooperation and humanitarian assistance landscape began to shift. On one hand, the return of Donald Trump to the United States presidency in 2025 marked a turning point. In January 2025, Colombia was identified as the most vulnerable country in Latin America to a potential shutdown of USAID.¹³¹ The US government froze international cooperation and aid funding pending a review of its alignment with US foreign policy priorities,¹³² and in June 2025 the offices of USAID and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in Bogotá were closed. Hundreds of humanitarian and development programmes were halted, affecting assistance to victims of the conflict, including victims of forced displacement.¹³³ Although USAID's financial contribution was small compared to that of the Colombian state, its impact was structural. Its funding was more strategically targeted, reached social and community organisations directly without political intermediaries, and sustained projects in peripheral regions deeply affected by violence.¹³⁴ Territorial organisations warned that the immediate effect of the withdrawal of foreign aid by the US would be heightened vulnerability for communities in conflict-affected areas of Colombia, as a resurgence of violence coincided with the failure of the "Total Peace" policy of Gustavo Petro.¹³⁵

UNHCR also announced severe funding cuts in April 2025, suspending key programmes in Colombia, including humanitarian kit distribution, child protection and stabilisation programmes.¹³⁶ Catatumbo was one of the most impacted by this decision. There, UNHCR was forced to halt the distribution of mattresses, blankets, hygiene kits, solar lamps and mosquito nets, and to suspend its support for the legalisation of informal settlements that had enabled more than 105,000 people to access basic services in Catatumbo.¹³⁷ In July 2025, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia closed three offices and dismissed 46 staff, scaling back monitoring, prevention and assistance activities amid escalating violence.¹³⁸ At the same time, the Resident Coordinator of the UN System in Colombia confirmed that of the 130 million dollars allocated by the United States for cooperation in 2025, 66.9% had been frozen, affecting more than 100 organisations and placing 1.7 million people at risk of losing assistance.¹³⁹ These cuts were compounded by reductions from European donors, under pressure from global crises, domestic policy decisions, and the prioritisation of funds for the wars in Ukraine and Gaza.¹⁴⁰

Amid budget cuts, in late 2025, OCHA and the ICRC reorganised operations, closing or relocating regional offices.¹⁴¹ The reduction in their operational capacity will have an impact on victims of forced displacement, including those from Catatumbo, and may affect the reach of their actions. Nevertheless, as part of efforts to continue operating under budget constraints, OCHA, for example, has stepped up its work to attract new donors, including the private sector and international banking institutions.¹⁴² All these operational and funding shortenings of international aid and cooperation coincide with Colombia's domestic fiscal crisis. In September 2025, the draft 2026 budget reduced funding for the Ombudsman's Office, weakening early warning systems and victim support and humanitarian aid infrastructure.¹⁴³ This raises renewed concerns regarding the welfare of those forcibly displaced in the Catatumbo region, who remain affected by political and financial shifts at both national and international levels, with a risk that their situation may further deteriorate and receive diminished attention and aid to address immediate needs.

3. Accountability Mechanisms

Despite the scale of forced displacement associated with the armed conflict in Colombia, there have been relatively few processes of accountability and prosecution in this area. As noted by the National Centre for Historical Memory, there is a very high level of impunity in relation to the crime of forced displacement, and judicial institutions have lacked a clear line of action to establish responsibility through serious, independent, and impartial investigations.¹⁴⁴ Although legal and policy frameworks —such as the Victims' Law— have established measures for reparation and humanitarian assistance, and judicial protection measures, including Constitutional Court Order 008 of 2009, have required the State to clarify the scale and modalities of forced displacement, limited progress has been made by state institutions in advancing accountability. State responses have therefore largely prioritised assistance and humanitarian measures, rather than accountability and truth-seeking processes.¹⁴⁵

The National Centre for Historical Memory has also identified that the high level of impunity is linked not only to state inaction, delays, and negligence, but also to the low number of formal complaints.¹⁴⁶ The absence of complaints does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest on the part of victims in pursuing justice; rather, it may be associated with structural barriers such as limited access to legal assistance, fear of reprisals against themselves or their families, and a lack of trust in state authorities and the judicial system.¹⁴⁷ In addition, the Office of the Attorney General has historically closed cases due to the inability to identify alleged perpetrators. The failure to identify those responsible in victim statements, or the reluctance to formally denounce them, may stem from multiple factors, including fear, lack of knowledge of the perpetrators, or, in some cases, the complicity of officials receiving complaints with perpetrators of the crimes.¹⁴⁸

Following the 2016 Peace Agreement, the Comprehensive System for Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition was established, including two key transitional justice bodies: the Truth Commission and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP). These mechanisms were intended to address some of the deficiencies of the ordinary justice system in establishing accountability for conflict-related forced displacement. In its final report, the Truth Commission identified forced displacement as one of the most widespread and structural violations of international humanitarian law within the armed conflict. It also provided a detailed analysis of the social and economic factors underpinning displacement, the armed actors most frequently responsible, and the territories and populations most affected.¹⁴⁹

The JEP, for its part, is investigating the responsibilities of former FARC members and state agents for forced displacement as violations of international humanitarian law, including within territorial cases such as Case 02 (Nariño),¹⁵⁰ Case 04 (Urabá),¹⁵¹ Case 05 (Cauca and Valle del Cauca),¹⁵² and Case 08, which addresses the collusion between state agents and paramilitary groups.¹⁵³ The JEP has adopted an intersectional approach, incorporating ethnic, racial, territorial, environmental, and gender perspectives to understand how forced displacement is rooted in structural violence and produces differentiated impacts.¹⁵⁴

However, the mandates of the Truth Commission and the JEP present limitations in relation to the recent displacement crisis in Catatumbo. The Truth Commission concluded its mandate in 2022. The JEP's temporal and personal jurisdiction is restricted to acts committed before 1 December 2016 by former FARC members and state agents, as established in Legislative Act 001 of 2017. In addition, the stalled "Total Peace" policy of the Government of Gustavo Petro is not clear regarding accountability pathways for emerging or residual illegal armed groups in Colombia. In this context, recent events in Catatumbo fall outside the scope of the Truth Commission and the JEP, and it remains uncertain whether they will be addressed through any mechanism established under the "Total Peace" policy. As a result, such cases are likely to be processed within the ordinary criminal justice system. These proceedings are often protracted, may lack an intersectional perspective, and can limit meaningful participation by victims, thereby increasing the risk of revictimisation and impunity.

These challenges are compounded by evidentiary and reporting constraints that frequently affect the ordinary justice system, which tends to require a high standard of proof regarding facts, identities, and individual responsibility; elements that victims are often unable to provide. As noted previously, the lack of reporting may also be linked to factors such as fear of reprisals, lack of trust in authorities, and the burden of navigating multiple, often ineffective, institutional processes. Within this context, OSINV can contribute by providing supplementary forms of evidence for judicial institutions to support accountability processes. It is important to note that OSINV does not seek to replace the voices of the victims, but rather to complement their accounts and facilitate the process of gathering evidence, which can prove challenging in situations of protracted conflict.

Conclusion: Open-Source Investigation and Open-Source Data: Lessons Learned and Limitations for Forced Displacement in Colombia

This report set out to explore how opensource investigation can contribute to understanding and documenting forced displacement in contexts of ongoing armed conflict, using the 2025 humanitarian crisis in Catatumbo as a case study. The findings confirm that OSINV can play a meaningful role in rendering visible patterns of violence, displacement, and humanitarian response that might otherwise remain fragmented, underreported, or inaccessible—particularly where insecurity, fear of reprisals, or institutional limitations constrain traditional forms of documentation.

In Catatumbo, opensource data enabled the identification and visualisation of displacement routes, receiving locations, and temporal spikes in violence. It provided corroborative evidence of threats, armed confrontations, confinement, and the use of new technologies of warfare, such as explosiveladen drones. It also revealed how digital platforms are embedded in the conflict itself, functioning simultaneously as tools of intimidation, recruitment, and social control by armed actors, and as inadvertent archives of violence and harm.

At the same time, the research highlights important limitations. Opensource data is inherently partial, shaped by who has access to digital tools, who chooses to record events, and which content platforms preserve or remove. Gaps in geolocation, authorship, and contextual detail limit the capacity of OSINV to establish individual criminal responsibility or fully satisfy evidentiary standards in legal proceedings. In documenting forced displacement and recruitment, often those affected do not have access or time to post on social media or be visible to satellite OSINV techniques to document their ongoing suffering, as often they are trying to survive or living in a coercive environment. Moreover, the ethical risks associated with documenting displacement—particularly the potential exposure of victims, displaced communities, and minors—require careful mitigation. Decisions taken in this study, such as excluding the mapping of recruitmentrelated content involving children, underscore the need for harmaware and traumainformed investigative practices.

From a transitional justice perspective, the Catatumbo crisis illustrates a deeper structural challenge: forced displacement in Colombia is not confined to a closed historical period but remains an ongoing and cumulative harm. Existing accountability mechanisms, including the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, face jurisdictional and temporal limits that leave recent victims without clear pathways to truth, justice, or guarantees of nonrepetition. In this context, OSINV should be understood not as a substitute for victim testimony or judicial investigation, but as a complementary tool that can support future accountability, preserve memory, and strengthen evidentiary foundations when formal processes are delayed or absent.

The report therefore concludes that OSINV holds significant promise for documenting forced displacement in Colombia, but only if its use is accompanied by robust ethical standards, interdisciplinary collaboration, and institutional uptake. Strengthening links between opensource practitioners, humanitarian actors, victim organisations, and justice institutions will be essential to ensure that digital documentation contributes to protection and accountability rather than further harm.

Ultimately, the Catatumbo case demonstrates both the urgency and the difficulty of documenting forced displacement in real time. As armed conflict, displacement, and digital mediation continue to intersect, future research must build on exploratory studies such as this one, expanding datasets, refining methodologies, and centring the rights, safety, and agency of displaced populations. Only through such sustained and careful engagement can opensource investigation meaningfully contribute to addressing the enduring injustice of forced displacement in Colombia.

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