What is happening in Catatumbo?

HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY

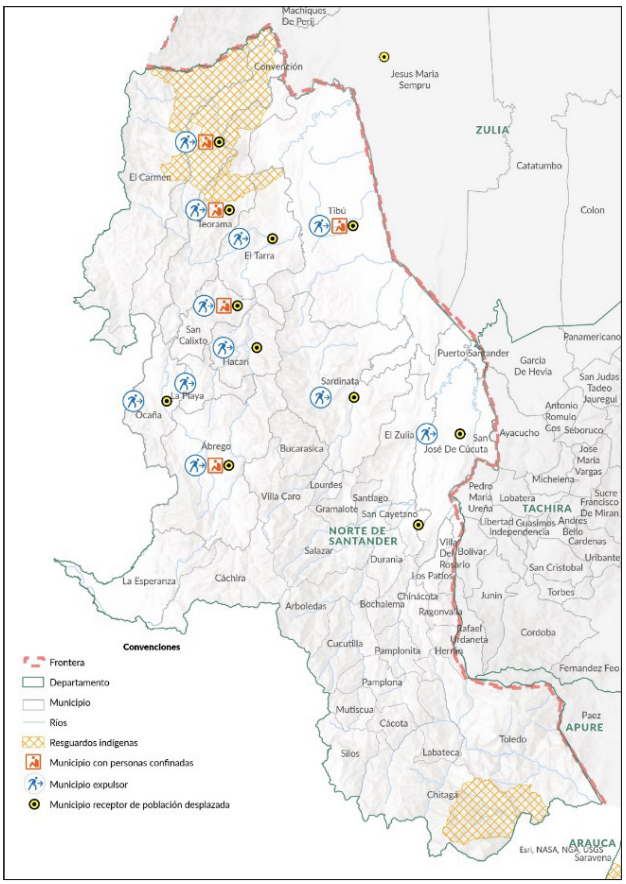
January 27, 2025 – UNHCR Colombia

The Catatumbo region, located Norte de Santander, is currently experiencing one of the most severe humanitarian crises of recent years due to escalating violence from clashes between the *National Liberation Army* (ELN in Spanish) and the dissident faction of the *FARC*, known as the *General Staff of Blocks and Front* (EMBF in Spanish). The situation in the field is alarming. Official data reveals that these confrontations have resulted in 41[1] fatalities and the displacement of more than 48,004[2] persons.

According to the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), at least 25,011[3] individuals are currently confined due to territorial control exerted by non-state armed groups. This confinement severely restricts their access to essential goods, critical services, and humanitarian aid. The situation disproportionately affects women, children, and indigenous communities, including the Barí and Yukpa people, who find themselves in a particularly vulnerable position. Furthermore, human rights defenders, social leaders, and former combatant agreement are facing persistent threats, targeted attacks, and assassinations.

How is UNHCR responding to the emergency?

In light of this crisis, UNHCR has implemented a comprehensive response to address the urgent humanitarian needs in Catatumbo. In close coordination with national and local authorities, UNHCR has worked to strengthen institutional capacities, particularly within the framework of the Victims and Land Restitution Law. This collaboration includes providing technical support to key entities such as the National Victims Unit (UARIV), the Land Restitution Unit, the Ombudsman's Office, municipal ombudspersons, and the Attorney General's Office.



Source: UNHCR. 2025
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Key data

48,004	displaced persons
25,011	confined persons
46,000	children affected
4	former combatants murdered

Source: Report prepared by the Unified Command (PMU in Spanish), Gobierno de Santander. Enero 26 de 2025

[1] According to forensic medicine, 41 bodies have been reported; however, this figure could rise to over 80 in the coming days

[2] According to the report prepared by the Unified command (PMU in Spanish) on Catatumbo 26th January 2025, Government of Norte de Santander.

[3] According to the report prepared by the Unified command (PMU in Spanish) on Catatumbo 26th January 2025, Government of Norte de Santander.

In the field, UNHCR has deployed humanitarian assistance to critical locations such as Cúcuta, Ocaña, and Tibú. Plans are underway to distribute 20,700 hygiene kits and 22,000 habitat items, including mattresses and blankets. In parallel, a comprehensive assessment of immediate needs and protection risks is being conducted, with a specific emphasis on children and measures to prevent and address violence against women and girls. Additionally, UNHCR is supporting the implementation of population censuses to ensure that the humanitarian response is both effective and timely.

What are the most pressing needs of those affected by the crisis in Catatumbo?

- Protection
- Food security
- Shelter
- Water, sanitation and hygene
- Health
- Humanitarian access

Despite ongoing efforts, the scale of the crisis in Catatumbo demands urgent and sustained attention from the international community. The most critical needs include access to food, shelter, and the establishment of secure humanitarian corridors to reach affected populations. Immediate measures are also required to provide access to potable water, hygiene kits, and basic habitat supplies. Furthermore, there is an urgent need to assess educational gaps and implement protection mechanisms for children, as more than 46,900 children are currently deprived of access to education. The lack of security remains a significant obstacle, hindering the delivery of aid and exacerbating the already precarious situation of thousands of displaced individuals.

UNHCR calls on the international community to join efforts to ensure the protection and assistance of the most vulnerable people in Catatumbo. Your support is essential to saving lives and contributing to the rebuilding of communities that are currently facing an unprecedented crisis.