

# COLOMBIA

## Outlook for September - February

In Colombia, the COVID-19 crisis is occurring in the complex context of humanitarian needs driven by the internal armed conflict and the migration and refugee crisis.

This risk report seeks to inform humanitarian decision-makers and facilitate response planning through an analysis of:

- Possible evolution of the crisis dynamics in Colombia over the next six months in 2020 and into early 2021
- Factors that will likely provoke a change in the situation
- Humanitarian needs which are likely to arise if the risks materialize.

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### Risk 1 Conflict escalation causes increased displacement, confinements, and reduced humanitarian access



The armed conflict has continued despite the COVID-19 crisis, with armed groups increasingly using national government measures to exercise social control over the civilian population in areas where they are present. There is a risk of an escalation of the armed conflict, as armed groups take advantage of containment measures and the overstretching of the state security forces, to consolidate control over disputed areas. This would likely lead to an increase in displacement, confinements, forced recruitments, and threats against social leaders. Fighting is likely to negatively impact humanitarian access in the affected areas.

### Risk 2 Reduced capacities to cover humanitarian needs among Venezuelan refugees and migrants, Colombian IDPs, and people affected by natural disasters



As with most countries affected by humanitarian crises, funding shortfalls are likely in Colombia in 2020 and 2021. The main donors, including the United States and European countries, have been significantly affected by COVID-19. Humanitarian funding to Colombia is likely to reduce, which would lead to reduced capacities for a humanitarian response to people in need.

### Risk 3 COVID-19 crisis leads to increased food insecurity and malnutrition



The national containment measures to reduce the transmission of COVID-19, including lockdowns and movement restrictions, are severely impacting livelihood opportunities, especially in the informal sector. Vulnerable people who have lost income are at risk of increased food insecurity and malnutrition, as household assets are depleted and households' purchasing power is reduced. Price increases and supply chain disruptions are likely to further contribute to decreased access to food and dietary diversity.

### Risk 4 Venezuelan authorities halt regular returns to Venezuela, leaving Venezuelans with return intentions stuck in Colombia, unable to meet their basic needs



The containment measures and COVID-19 outbreaks in countries throughout the region have triggered return movements of Venezuelan refugees and migrants to their home country. Currently the Venezuelan government allows only a small number of Venezuelans to return each week, via the official border crossings in Cúcuta and Arauca. Increased restrictions on border crossings, or even a complete halt to returns, risks overwhelming the capacities of Colombian border departments to meet the needs of those waiting to return, leading to an increase in people crossing irregularly.

### Risk 5 Colombian economy re-opens and conditions in Venezuela worsen, resulting in increased arrivals of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in need of humanitarian assistance



Although return movements from Colombia to Venezuela will likely continue over the coming months, an improvement of the situation in Colombia, particularly related to the economy and the lifting of restrictions on labour, paired with a worsening of the situation in Venezuela, is likely to trigger reverse movements and new arrivals of Venezuelans in Colombia, with those arriving likely being increasingly vulnerable and in need of humanitarian assistance.

## Methodology

Risk analysis is the process of identifying and unpacking potential future events that may negatively impact individuals, assets, and/or the environment. Risk analysis is not a forecast and does not aim to predict the immediate future, but aims at identifying possible futures with significant negative humanitarian consequences.

ACAPS' risk analysis aims at helping humanitarian decision makers understand potential future changes in the context and their humanitarian impact. By exposing probable future developments and understanding their impact, they can be included in response planning and preparedness. The methodological basis for this risk analysis is described in ACAPS Risk Methodology Note ([read more about ACAPS risk methodology](#)). It is based on a secondary data review (SDR) and supplemented by expert interviews.

Risk analysis is not an exact science. An event identified by one analyst as a hazard might be identified by another as a trigger for a different event which the second analyst considers as the hazard. Risk analysis depends on a solid understanding of the context and on investigating the interaction of variables that cause or resist change.

Risk is a function of severity and probability. The risk posed by a potential event increases as either the expected severity of the event increases or the probability that it will occur increases. The probability of a risk does not need to be high for it to be of concern.

Each risk presented in this report is introduced by a **rationale** explaining the risk and its context. The identified **triggers** are a series of factors and events that could contribute to the materialization of the risk. The **impact** section describes the likely humanitarian consequences of each risk.

## Limitations

The COVID-19 crisis is highly dynamic and the situation may change quickly, which may affect the evaluation of probability and impact of the risks presented in this report.

There are information gaps related to informal border crossings between Ecuador and Colombia and between Colombia and Venezuela.

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All analysis in this report is the sole responsibility of ACAPS, and does not necessarily reflect the position of the organisations cited.

## Situation Overview

The first case of COVID-19 in Colombia was reported on 6 March 2020. As of 7 September, 666.500 cases of COVID-19 have been reported. Bogotá, the capital city, is the most affected area, with 226.000 cases.

Since the beginning of the outbreak, the Colombian government has implemented a series of containment measures, including closure of borders and schools and a national lockdown. As of 1 September 2020, many measures have been lifted, with municipalities following varying degrees of restrictions. The government also uses social protection measures to mediate the socioeconomic impact of the lockdown, such as cash transfers to poor households as part of the *"Ingreso Solidario"* programme. Further, the government has been strengthening the capacities of the public health system in the country, for example by importing tests and ventilators ([Government of Colombia 28/05/2020](#); [03/04/2020](#); [07/04/2020](#)).

**The containment measures have had a significant impact on the economy and livelihoods.** Different estimates project that the economy will contract up to 10% during 2020 ([Reuters 31/07/2020](#); [World Bank 06/2020](#); [El País 26/06/2020](#)). The unemployment rate rose to 19.8% in June, up from 12.6% in March ([DANE 06/2020](#)).

Informal workers who work without a contract, such as day labourers and street vendors, have been particularly impacted by loss of livelihoods. These workers account for a large proportion of the labour force, with 48% of the working population in 23 major cities and urban areas in Colombia working informally ([DANE 13/04/2020](#)). Venezuelan refugees and migrants were impacted as up to 71% of them had been working informally ([WFP 19/02/2020](#)). Dependence on a daily income inhibits people's ability to comply with the national quarantine ([France24 07/06/2020](#); [OCHA 07/2020](#)). Over 95,000 Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Colombia and the region have returned to Venezuela after losing their income and accommodation ([Government of Colombia 06/08/2020](#); [El Espectador 04/04/2020](#)). In addition, the lockdown has led to price increases and shortages of basic goods in some areas of Colombia, due to increased demand for certain products and disruption of production and transport lines ([REACH 30/06/2020](#); [FAO 23/04/2020](#)).

**Humanitarian operations have been impacted** as well. Although the national government allows movement of humanitarian actors, many programmes have been suspended or adapted to protect the health and safety of both staff and the affected population. Many in-person programmes have been replaced with virtual or phone assistance, and many in-kind assistance programmes have been replaced with cash transfers ([GIFMM 24/03/2020](#), [02/04/2020](#)). As of July 2020, 10.4 million people, including

vulnerable population groups such as IDPs dependent on aid; refugees, and migrants are estimated to be in need in relation to the COVID-19 crisis in Colombia (OCHA 07/2020).

**The COVID-19 crisis in Colombia is occurring in the context of the internal armed conflict**, which affects different parts of the country with different conflict dynamics and levels of intensity. Since the signing of the peace agreement in 2016 and subsequent demobilisation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), the conflict between different armed groups for control over lucrative and strategic areas – valuable for coca growing, drug production and transport, and exploitation of natural resources – has intensified as these groups strive to control areas previously controlled by of the FARC-EP. Key armed groups involved in the conflict include different FARC-EP dissident groups, National Liberation Army (ELN), the Popular Liberation Army (EPL – also called *Los Pelusos*), the Gaitanist Self-Defence Groups of Colombia (AGC – also called *Clan del Golfo*), and the AGC dissident group *Los Caparros*. The conflict has led to displacement and confinement of communities and human rights violations such as homicides of social leaders. Since the beginning of the national containment measures, armed groups have used the national lockdown to enforce their own quarantine rules in areas where they have a strong presence and control. Furthermore, since July 2020, conflict-affected areas have seen a spate of massacres in the context of armed groups exercising control over the civilian population and expanding or solidifying control over territories, though dynamics vary between regions (Verdad Abierta 17/08/2020).

Colombia hosts the highest number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants who left their home country due to the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. As of 31 May 2020, Colombia hosted some 1.76 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants. This figure represents a 3.3% decrease from February 2020 (before the beginning of the pandemic), given more than 95,000 Venezuelan refugees and migrants have left Colombia (Government of Colombia 06/08/2020). Most Venezuelan refugees and migrants have little access to social security. Although some 763,000 have a regular status, 1 million are irregular refugees and migrants, whose lack of documentation and a regular legal status limits their access to social security, formal labour, and other rights and services. Access to a regular legal status is often hindered by documentation requirements (DeJusticia 04/2019).

## Risk 1

### Conflict escalation causes increased displacement, confinements, and reduced humanitarian access



#### Rationale

Despite a slight reduction in conflict intensity in March and April 2020, available data shows that armed conflict is continuing despite movement restrictions related to COVID-19. There is a risk of armed conflict escalating in the most-affected regions, as armed groups take advantage of containment measures and the overstretched state security forces to consolidate control over disputed areas. This would likely lead to an increase in displacement and an increase in threats and homicides of social leaders. Humanitarian access would likely be impacted, as confinements restrict people's access to aid, and increased insecurity would impact humanitarian organisations' ability to respond to humanitarian needs.

#### Conflict dynamics

Different armed groups are in dispute over territorial control and strategically important routes for illicit economies. This conflict has intensified as they struggle (though not exclusively) over areas formerly controlled by the FARC-EP. Alliances and conflict dynamics vary between affected departments and municipalities. Armed groups fight over lucrative areas for the extraction of natural resources such as gold and coca, drug trafficking, and control over the populations living in those areas. The following regions are identified as areas of concern for conflict escalation:

- The Pacific Coast: In **Chocó** department, lucrative territories and irregular economies are disputed by ELN, AGC, and FARC-EP dissidents. ELN is also expanding into areas under control of other armed groups, such as AGC (InSight Crime 16/01/2020; Crisis Group 08/08/2019). ELN and FARC-EP dissident groups are also fighting over drug trafficking routes in **Cauca** department. In **Nariño** department, the conflict is characterised by confrontations between different armed groups, including different factions of FARC-EP dissidents (FIP 24/05/2020; OCHA 27/08/2020; Verdad Abierta 08/04/2020).
- Some parts of **Antioquia** department and the Bajo Cauca region, with confrontations between ELN, AGC, FARC-EP dissident groups and Los Caparros.

- **Norte de Santander**: In the Catatumbo region, territorial disputes are dominated by ELN, EPL, and FARC-EP dissident groups. Along the border with Venezuela, Los Rastrojos and ELN fight over control over illicit economies and smuggling routes (InSight Crime 30/03/2020; FIP 24/05/2020; Verdad Abierta 27/07/2020, 01/08/2020; HIIK 03/2020).
- **Putumayo** department, at the border with Ecuador: Different FARC-EP dissident groups are fighting over territorial control and lucrative drug trafficking routes (FIP 24/05/2020).
- ELN has also been expanding its areas of influence, for example, in northern **Boyacá** and southern **Bolívar** (Semana 13/05/2020; FIP 24/05/2020). **Arauca** department, where ELN is generally the dominant actor, has seen strengthening of FARC-EP dissident groups (LaFM 21/08/2020).

Data on conflict events generally shows that while conflict intensity decreased during the second half of 2019, conflict levels increased again during 2020. A decrease was observed during March and April, likely related in part to ELN's unilateral ceasefire, but conflict intensity picked up again in May (OCHA 05/08/2020).

The civilian population is significantly affected by conflict, especially conflict related to territorial control between armed groups. Between January and July 2020, more than 18,600 people were displaced in mass displacements<sup>1</sup>, similar to the same period in 2019. 71% were displaced in departments along the Pacific Coast. More than half of the displacements resulted from clashes between armed groups (OCHA 24/08/2020).

The number of assassinations of social leaders, human rights defenders, and their family members, as well as demobilised former FARC-EP combatants has been decreasing since the beginning of 2020, though they remain commonplace: 43 assassinations were recorded in January, and 28 in August (INDEPAZ 08/2020).

2020 has also seen a notable increase of massacres<sup>2</sup>. The massacres were perpetrated in differing regional contexts, with alleged motives including armed groups exercising territorial control or control over the civilian population (El Espectador 22/08/2020; Verdad Abierta 17/08/2020). Colombian think tank CODHES counts 42 massacres, with a total of 182 victims between 1 January and 24 August, with Antioquia and the departments of the Pacific Coast most affected (CODHES 24/08/2020).

<sup>1</sup> Mass displacement is defined as the displacement of at least 10 households or 50 persons during a single event (Unidad de Víctimas). Individual displacements of less than 50 people or 10 households are registered separately and not included in this figure.

<sup>2</sup> Different sources use varying definitions of "massacre", leading to differing figures. (DW 24/08/2020).

## Armed groups and COVID-19

Since the introduction of national COVID-19 containment measures, armed groups have been using the crisis to solidify influence and social control over the population in areas where they have a strong presence (UNVMC 26/06/2020). Armed groups have been enforcing curfews and quarantines; civilians who do not follow these rules risk being targeted as an opponent. Pamphlets from various armed groups have circulated in departments such as Nariño, Cauca, and Valle del Cauca, threatening those who do not comply with lockdown rules (Semana 13/05/2020; HRW 15/07/2020). Some establish additional rules, such as regulating prices and businesses, or imposing additional restrictions on movement such as not permitting people to leave their homes during curfew, even in a medical emergency or other serious necessity (Semana 13/05/2020; HRW 15/07/2020). Some retaliations and attacks on civilians in relation to the quarantine have been registered. Nine such assassinations were documented by Human Rights Watch as of mid-July, while University de los Andes registered 30 homicides related to the quarantine as of mid-August (HRW 15/07/2020; Uni Andes 20/08/2020). Death threats directed at people with COVID-19 have circulated in Putumayo department, which is a further expression of armed groups' intent to exercise social control (OCHA 17/06/2020). Armed groups have also targeted humanitarian actors: at least 17 attacks against medical missions have been registered since mid-March (OCHA 05/08/2020).

The capacity of state security forces to respond to increased conflict is likely reduced by the COVID-19 crisis. As security forces are deployed to enforce the national quarantine and increase controls at the borders, their resources to respond to an escalation of armed conflict are likely reduced. (FIP 2020)

## Triggers

- Extension of lockdowns and other containment measures imposed by the government such as mobility restrictions, and prolonged state of emergency in parts of Colombia due to the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Already fragile government institutional presence in conflict-affected regions is further weakened by continued containment measures, including movement restrictions, as (the currently low level) of service provided is further eroded.
- Reduced financial capacity to implement the Peace Agreement components related to the reduction of violence and inequality.
- Expansion of support to ELN by actors in Venezuela, thus strengthening ELN along the border between Colombia and Venezuela.

## Impact

- Increased internal displacement due to increases in armed actions, between armed groups and/or targeted against civilians, and human rights violations.
- In conflict-affected areas, armed groups target social leaders, human rights defenders, and their family members, as well as demobilised former FARC-EP combatants as opponents, and to solidify social control, especially in areas disputed by different armed groups. Threats against social and community leaders are likely to increase with the escalation of armed conflict. COVID-19 movement restrictions and lockdowns means social leaders would likely be targeted in their homes (FIP 2020). Massacres would likely increase.
- Indigenous groups and Afro-Colombian communities would likely be heavily affected, given their locations in areas impacted by armed conflict.
- An increase in forced recruitment is likely as armed groups are strengthened, access to protection support is limited due to movement restrictions, and economic hardship due to the COVID-19 crisis may increase households' vulnerability. The first months of 2020 already saw an increase in reported cases of child recruitment (InSight Crime 22/06/2020). Forced recruitment of children is likely to increase if schools remain closed (InSight Crime 28/08/2020; El Espectador 17/05/2020).
- Venezuelan refugees and migrants are vulnerable to forced recruitment (FLM 17/07/2020), given their socioeconomic vulnerability. Many Venezuelan refugees and migrants lack knowledge about the dynamics of armed conflict in Colombia, making them easier targets for recruitment.
- Detrimental effect on humanitarian access. Confinement of affected communities is likely, restricting their access to humanitarian assistance as fighting between armed groups impedes their movement. Violence and insecurity will likely decrease humanitarian access to affected communities, adding to the restrictions already faced by humanitarian operations under national COVID-19 guidelines. Access restrictions are likely to affect food supply chains and livelihood activities, contributing to increased food insecurity.

## Risk 2

### Reduced capacities to cover humanitarian needs among Venezuelan refugees and migrants, Colombian IDPs, and people affected by natural disasters



#### Rationale

There is a risk that funding shortfalls lead to a reduction of the capacity of humanitarian actors to respond to humanitarian needs of crisis-affected people in Colombia, and an increase in unmet needs.

Funding shortfalls are likely in 2020, given the main donor countries, including the United States (US), have been significantly affected by COVID-19 outbreaks. The US is the main donor for Colombia, responsible for 61% of all officially recorded funding to Colombia in 2019, followed by the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department (ECHO) with 7%. Bilateral assistance from 13 European countries and Canada together amounted to 18% of total funding to Colombia (OCHA FTS). The current contraction of many donor countries' economies means humanitarian funding is expected to reduce. Low funding levels of current response plans for Colombia already indicate that many planned activities will not receive financing. (OCHA FTS).

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the Colombian economy is contracting, with estimates indicating up to a 10% reduction of GDP in 2020 (Reuters 31/07/2020). This is likely to reduce the ability of the government to fund humanitarian assistance, particularly impacting support to people affected by the armed conflict and natural disasters. In June 2020, the Colombian government assured that funding for the implementation of the FARC peace agreement and support to the victims of the conflict would not be cut (Reuters 19/06/2020).

#### Triggers

- Economic recession in donor countries
- Traditional donor countries impacted by second waves of COVID-19 outbreaks
- Reduction of donor countries' government spending on overseas humanitarian and development assistance
- Economic recession in Colombia, reduction of GDP

#### Impact

- Significant reduction in capacities of humanitarian organizations to respond to humanitarian needs in the country. This would lead to a reduction of humanitarian assistance for Venezuelan refugees and migrants across sectors and a significant reduction in humanitarian assistance for people affected by natural disasters and internal armed conflict, including IDPs.
- Reduced government capacities due to the economic impact of COVID-19 are likely to affect government spending on humanitarian issues.
- Increase in unmet humanitarian needs due to lack of funding.
- Available funding for crises in Colombia will likely heavily focus on COVID-19-related programmes. Other humanitarian needs and emergencies, including internal displacement due to armed conflict, will receive less financing.
- As funding is reduced, needs are most likely to rise in the sectors that currently see the lowest level of funding, Education, WASH, Early Recovery, and Shelter, according to FTS.
- Reduction of humanitarian response capacities will likely lead to people in need being more dependent on alternative sources of assistance, such as community support. The most vulnerable households without access to alternative sources of support, which were previously dependent on humanitarian assistance, will likely increasingly resort to negative coping mechanisms.
- Increased competition over resources and services between different population groups will likely lead to increased xenophobia, especially if Venezuelan refugees and migrants are perceived as receiving preferential assistance.

## Risk 3

### COVID-19 crisis leads to increased food insecurity and malnutrition



#### Rationale

The national containment measures aimed at reducing transmission of COVID-19, including lockdowns and movement restrictions, have severely impacted livelihood opportunities, especially in the informal sector. Vulnerable population groups who have lost income opportunities are at high risk of experiencing increased food insecurity and malnutrition over the coming months, as household assets are depleted and households have reduced purchasing power. Price increases and supply chain disruptions are likely to further contribute to decreased access to food and dietary diversity.

The World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that the total number of people in Colombia experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity in 2020 is likely to increase from 3.4 million to 7 million because of the COVID-19 crisis (OCHA 07/2020).<sup>3</sup>

With the “Ingreso Solidario” programme, the Colombian government is providing cash assistance to vulnerable households. However, some population groups do not have access to this programme, for example Venezuelan households with an irregular legal status (Proyecto Migración Venezuela 23/05/2020).

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis and contraction of the Colombian economy, many low-income households are likely to fall into poverty, though estimates vary. Government data from 2019 showed the incidence of multidimensional poverty<sup>4</sup> at the national level was 17.5%, and 34.5% among rural populations (DANE 2019). Analysis since COVID began from the Universidad de los Andes estimates that monetary poverty will increase by 15% (Uni Andes 27/05/2020). The Inter-American Development Bank estimates that poverty will increase by 4% (IADB 06/2020).

<sup>3</sup> Note that these estimates are currently under revision and more significant increases are likely.

<sup>4</sup> The index combines several indicators, including labour activities, access to health, and living conditions.

#### Livelihoods

Limited access to livelihood opportunities reduces access to food. Different data sources indicate a loss of livelihoods. The national unemployment rate, which considers loss of formal employment, increased from 12.2% in February 2020 to 19.8% in June 2020 (DANE 06/2020). Informal labourers, such as daily wage labourers and street vendors, have been deeply affected by containment measures, as lockdowns significantly restricted economic activities. In Colombia, 48% of the working population in 23 major cities and urban areas is employed informally (DANE 13/04/2020).

In a representative REACH assessment in June 2020 of 19 departments, 89% of respondents, all recipients of cash assistance, indicated that their income levels had decreased due to the crisis, mainly due to less income-generating opportunities and having been let go from their previous jobs (REACH 30/06/2020).

Venezuelan refugee and migrant households have seen a significant reduction in income-generating opportunities due to the crisis. In a representative survey of Venezuelan refugee and migrant households in May 2020, 58% reported to currently have a labour opportunity, with 89% stating that they had been working before the beginning of the national quarantine (GIFMM 17/07/2020).

#### Food Security

While the loss of purchasing power is likely to be the main driver behind increased food insecurity and malnutrition, supply chain disruptions and price increases will contribute to reduced access to a variety of foodstuffs, especially in remote areas with sustained transport issues. Additionally, the closure of schools affects the food security of school children dependent on school meals.

Disruption of supply chains has been reported during the national quarantine. Although traders are likely to try to adapt to disruptions, and many restrictions have been lifted as of 1 September 2020, a return to more strict containment measures is likely to lead to new disruptions. In April, lack of availability of products and lack of transport were among the main reasons for product shortages reported by traders in 20 departments (FAO 23/04/2020). Of 73 traders interviewed by REACH in 15 departments in June 2020, 47% reported shortages of stock. The most frequently reported shortages were rice and beans among the food items and cleaning and hygiene items such as alcohol and anti-bacterial gel among the non-food items (REACH 30/06/2020). Longer shipment times, slower inter-municipal transport, and shortages of carriers were the most frequently reported reasons for difficulties in re-stocking products (REACH 30/06/2020).

Price increases linked to COVID-19 are reported. 84% of consumers surveyed reported price increases in the month prior to data collection, especially for basic food items such as potatoes and rice, and for cleaning/hygiene items like bleach and soap (REACH 30/06/2020). Among the 73 traders interviewed by REACH, 45% expect prices to increase throughout the duration of COVID-19 containment measures, while 34% expect no price changes (REACH 30/06/2020). Additional analysis conducted on the data from the 2020 REACH survey indicates that rural traders are more concerned about price increases during the duration of containment measures than traders in urban areas (REACH 30/06/2020, additional analysis). This may be related to a higher dependency of rural traders on inter-municipal supply lines. However, additional analysis on REACH data also shows that shortages of food and non-food items are reported more by urban traders than by rural traders, possibly due to fewer options to source products locally. (REACH 30/06/2020, additional analysis).

Government data shows that prices of many basic products have decreased since an initial spike in the first months of the COVID-19 crisis; although prices for some products, such as meat, increased in July (DANE 07/2020). Renewal or extension of quarantine measures such as movement restrictions are likely to drive price increases over the following months.

School closures due to COVID-19 have affected access to food. According to WFP, school closures have resulted in the loss of school meals for over 4 million children in Colombia (WFP 07/2020).

Some data collected since the beginning of government containment measures indicate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on food security on Venezuelan migrants and refugees. A May 2020 survey of Venezuelan refugee and migrant households found that 26% of households were consuming three meals or more per day, though 69% indicated they had been able to consume three meals per day prior to the crisis. At the same time, 15% of households reported consuming only one meal per day, with only 2% reporting pre-crisis consumption of one meal per day (GIFMM 17/07/2020). Further, a panel survey among Venezuelan migrants and refugees showed a reduction in the diversity of food intake between early April and May (GIFMM 17/07/2020).

Population groups most at risk of experiencing increasing food insecurity and malnutrition over the coming months include:

- Poor and low-income households, especially those who rely on informal labour and those who lost their work due to the crisis
- IDP households and households of Venezuelan refugees and migrants, which are at high risk of using negative coping mechanisms such as skipping meals and using sex for survival.

## Triggers

- Continuation of strict containment measures, including restrictions on socioeconomic activity, likely to impact informal labourers in particular
- Unemployment above pre-crisis levels
- Continued lack of access to government social protection programmes and/or humanitarian assistance for certain population groups
- Sustained disruption of food supply chains
- Inflation and price increases of food items
- Continued closure of schools as part of COVID-19 containment measures, if children do not receive alternative food packages
- Reduction in government and humanitarian assistance

## Impact

- Food and nutrition needs will likely increase particularly among the population dependent on informal labour, including many Venezuelan refugees and migrants.
- The number of people who are food insecure will double, reaching 7 million, of whom 2.4 million will be severely food insecure (OCHA 07/2020). (This is to some extent dependent on the availability of government and humanitarian assistance, and on containment measures being extended over the next months, with informal labour continuing to be severely curtailed.)
- Increased malnutrition among vulnerable population groups due to lack of access to a diverse diet. Indigenous Wayuu communities in La Guajira department are particularly at risk of increased malnutrition, due to already high pre-crisis incidence of malnutrition and limited access to WASH, food, and healthcare (HRW 13/08/2020)
- Over 4 million children continue to go without school meals. 46% of them are girls (WFP 07/2020). Children who previously relied on daily school meals for dietary diversity and food intake require alternative access to regular food assistance.

## Risk 4

### Venezuelan authorities halt regular returns to Venezuela, leaving Venezuelans with return intentions stuck in Colombia, unable to meet their basic needs



#### Rationale

Further restrictions on border crossings, or even a complete halt to returns, risks overwhelming the capacities of Colombian border departments to meet the needs of those waiting to return. Thousands of Venezuelans with the intention to return are likely to congregate at the border and main cities along the return route, in need of humanitarian assistance including food, WASH, health, and shelter.

National lockdowns and their impact on livelihood activities have resulted in many Venezuelan refugees and migrants losing their sources of income and their accommodation throughout South America. This has triggered return movements to Venezuela, with most returnees returning from Colombia, and some from Ecuador, Peru, and Chile.

Between mid-March and early August, over 95,000 Venezuelan refugees and migrants returned to Venezuela via the land border with Colombia (Government of Colombia 06/08/2020). The main route to return to Venezuela from Ecuador and Peru is via Colombia. The main official border crossing points used by returning Venezuelans are Simón Bolívar International Bridge in Cúcuta, Norte de Santander department, and José Antonio Páez International International Bridge in Arauca, Arauca department. The border crossing at Paraguachón, La Guajira department, is less frequented by returnees.

Although the Colombian-Venezuelan border is officially closed to help contain the spread of the coronavirus, returnees are permitted to cross at specific border crossing points. At first, Venezuelan authorities successively reduced the number of returnees allowed to cross each week. In early June, 300 people were allowed to cross on three days per week in Cúcuta, and 100 in Arauca (Government of Colombia 06/06/2020). This led to congestion on the Colombian side of the border. On 14 June, the government of Norte de Santander and humanitarian agencies opened a reception centre near the border, with the capacity to provide basic assistance for up to 600 Venezuelan refugees and

migrants for a maximum of two days while waiting to be permitted to cross the border (Government of Norte de Santander 30/06/2020, 15/06/2020; La Opinión 16/06/2020). Since 21 August, the Simón Bolívar bridge in Cúcuta has been closed for returnees (Government of Colombia 20/08/2020). As of mid-August, some 2,000 Venezuelan refugees and migrants have been at the border in Cúcuta, awaiting permission to return to Venezuela (VoA 21/08/2020).

#### Conditions in Venezuela

Reception capacities in Venezuelan border states are highly limited. Returning refugees and migrants need to go into quarantine upon arrival in Venezuela, but their access to humanitarian assistance is limited, with reported needs including adequate and dignified temporary accommodation and food (Efecto Cocuyo 26/06/2020; UN OCHA 10/04/2020; TNH 12/05/2020). As the number of returnees increase, reception facilities will likely be overwhelmed. Further, returnees have been stigmatised by the government, accused of bringing COVID-19 into the country, which implies protection concerns especially for returnees with COVID-19 (NYT 19/08/2020; Efecto Cocuyo 26/05/2020).

Venezuela is affected by a humanitarian crisis, which is exacerbated by a COVID-19 outbreak that is straining government response capacities and overwhelming the country's health system. Further worsening of the COVID-19 outbreak in Venezuela will likely divert government and humanitarian resources, potentially leading to a halt to returns.

#### Overview of situation in Ecuador, Peru, and Chile

Ecuador, Peru, and Chile each host sizeable numbers of Venezuelan refugees and migrants. All three countries have been severely impacted by COVID-19 outbreaks. As of 7 September 2020, Peru registered 690,000 cases, Chile had 422,000 cases (JHU 07/09/2020), and in Ecuador, 109,000 cases have been registered so far (JHU 07/09/2020). The economies of all three countries have been affected significantly by the crisis. GDP reductions in 2020 are estimated at 12 % (Peru), 4.3% (Chile), and 7.4% (Ecuador) (World Bank 06/2020).

Although the border between Ecuador and Colombia is officially closed, Venezuelan refugees and migrants have been using informal crossing points to enter Colombia and proceed on their route to Venezuela (GTRM 08/07/2020). Some sources estimate that between 30 to 50 people cross every day, arriving from Ecuador, Peru, and Chile (GTRM 03/07/2020). No confirmed figure is available.

COVID-19-related restrictions have led to job losses in the formal and informal sector, severely impacting Venezuelan refugees and migrants across the region (OAS/Coalición por Venezuela 07/2020). This is unlikely to change significantly over the next months. A rapid needs assessment in Ecuador in April 2020 found that 65% of interviewed Venezuelan households stated they could not work because of the government measures, and an additional 5% had been laid off (R4V 25/05/2020).

## Data on return intentions

Assessment results on return intentions indicate that the majority of refugees and migrants are likely to remain in their host countries. Nevertheless, thousands of Venezuelans will likely attempt to return, putting pressure on Colombian border departments.

In a survey<sup>5</sup> of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Colombia conducted in May 2020, 16% of respondents stated that at least one family member intended to return to Venezuela in the following month; the main reasons being loss of income and the wish to reunite with family in Venezuela (GIFMM 17/07/2020).

In another, non-representative survey of 705 Venezuelan refugees and migrants, interviewed in Colombia between April and July, 14% reported an intention to return to Venezuela (MMC 07/2020). Analysis of the dataset found that Venezuelan refugees and migrants who have been receiving assistance since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis are less likely to have an intention to return, which indicates that the provision of humanitarian assistance can act as a deterrent for returns to Venezuela.

## Triggers

- Continuation of containment measures in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Chile which impact employment and informal labour, and coupled with insufficient humanitarian assistance for Venezuelan refugees and migrants in those countries, prompting more Venezuelans to attempt to return to Venezuela.
- Reception capacities in Venezuelan border states become overwhelmed, prompting Venezuelan authorities to further restrict the number of permitted returns.

<sup>5</sup> Although representative for Venezuelans registered in the databases used for the survey sample, the results cannot be considered representative for the entirety of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Colombia. Further limitations to the survey include the phone-based data collection.

- Worsening of the COVID-19 outbreak inside Venezuela, diverting government and humanitarian resources.
- The Venezuelan government increasingly blames returnees for increase of COVID-19 cases in Venezuela, providing a rationale for closing “humanitarian corridors” (DW 05/08/2020).

## Impact

- Not all Venezuelan refugees and migrants with an intention to return are likely to start the journey back to Venezuela. As a rough estimate, 7.5% of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Colombia are likely to return to Venezuela over the following months (half of Venezuelans with a return intention, based on GIFMM and MMC survey results). This would amount to some 130,000 returnees, excluding returnees from other countries passing through Colombia. According to the Colombian government, as of early August, some 42,000 Venezuelans have requested to return.
- Thousands of Venezuelan refugees and migrants with the intention to return to Venezuela are likely to congregate in Cúcuta and Arauca and key cities along their route, to await permission to cross the border. They will need accommodation which complies with social distancing protocols, food and water, access to hygiene items and sanitation, and essential non-food items. Women, children, and LGBTI persons face protection risks in particular. As more Venezuelan refugees and migrants who are returning from Ecuador, Peru, and Chile arrive in Colombia, they are likely to congregate at the border between Ecuador and Colombia, and in main cities along the route to the Venezuelan border, including Pasto (Nariño), Cali (Valle del Cauca), and Bucaramanga (Santander).
- Returnees have significant humanitarian needs as they likely travel with only their basic belongings. Shutdown of economic activity in Colombia (lockdown) means their access to food, water, and shelter is limited.
- Risk of increased transmission of the coronavirus due to the population movement and the congregation of large numbers of people at the border.
- High media visibility of returns is likely to stoke xenophobia in Colombia, particularly in areas where returnees congregate.
- The closure of the two main crossing points in Cúcuta and Arauca would likely lead to a gradual shift to other official crossing points (such as Paraguachón in La Guajira), which may be closed as well.

- Irregular border crossings, using so-called “trochas”, are likely to increase, which comes with an accompanying set of risks. As the trochas are controlled by armed groups, returnees are exposed to protection risks, including abuse and exploitation. Furthermore, people crossing the border irregularly do not pass through health controls nor do they necessarily comply with a 14-day quarantine upon arrival in Venezuela, which implies the potential for uncontrolled transmission of COVID-19. The Venezuelan government has instated prison sentences for those who are caught crossing irregularly into Venezuela (InSight Crime 24/07/2020).
- Venezuelan refugees and migrants traversing Colombia on foot, so-called “caminantes”, face a series of protection risks and, in the context of COVID-19 restrictions, have less access to assistance and basic services (FLM 17/07/2020). Many shelters have been closed due to COVID-19 restrictions, further inhibiting access to safe shelter for “caminantes”.

## Risk 5

### Colombian economy re-opens and conditions in Venezuela worsen, resulting in increased arrivals of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in need of humanitarian assistance



#### Rationale

While return movements from Colombia to Venezuela will likely continue over the next months, an improvement of the situation in Colombia, particularly economic improvement, and/or a worsening of the situation in Venezuela, is likely to spark reverse movements.

The border between Colombia and Venezuela has been officially closed since 14 March, with few exceptions made for people to cross from Venezuela into Colombia. As of August 2020, migration trends run in the opposite direction, with more Venezuelans leaving Colombia than entering. The overall number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants present in Colombia has slightly decreased from 1.82 million to 1.76 million since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis (Government of Colombia 06/08/2020).

This trend is likely to change over the coming months. Venezuelan refugees and migrants returning to Venezuela over the past months have largely done so as a result of losing livelihood opportunities and means to sustain their households due to the national lockdown, and some as a result of being evicted from their accommodation in Colombia.

Humanitarian and socioeconomic conditions in Venezuela, however, remain dire. According to WFP estimates, in 2019, 2.3 million people in Venezuela were severely food insecure and 7 million were moderately food insecure (WFP 23/02/2020). Provision of basic services, such as water, electricity, and fuel, is routinely disrupted. Venezuela is also affected by a COVID-19 outbreak, with tight restrictions on economic activities and mobility, and a weak health system that is becoming overwhelmed by the epidemic. The reasons which led to many Venezuelans leaving their country – the living conditions,

lack of access to food and livelihoods, and lack of basic services – are unlikely to have changed, and the COVID-19 outbreak is likely to have worsened the situation.

It is therefore likely that many Venezuelan refugees and migrants who returned to their country due to the COVID-19 crisis will face significant difficulties and will eventually decide to leave Venezuela again. The Colombian government estimates that 80% of those who left Colombia since the beginning of the pandemic will come back over the coming months, bringing one additional person with them (El Tiempo 01/07/2020, 06/07/2020). A worsening of the situation in Venezuela is likely to spark additional migration from Venezuela to Colombia.

#### Triggers

- Re-opening of the Colombian economy and increased informal labour opportunities, loosening of COVID-19-related restrictions
- Re-opening of the Colombian-Venezuelan border
- Continued lockdown (national quarantine) in Venezuela with restrictions on socioeconomic activities
- Worsening of the COVID-19 outbreak in Venezuela, leading to increased unmet health needs
- Worsening of the humanitarian situation in Venezuela – increased food insecurity, lack of access to basic services
- New US sanctions on diesel imports, leading to further shortages of fuel in Venezuela
- Increased political instability in Venezuela in relation to the December 2020 parliamentary elections

#### Impact

- Increased arrivals of Venezuelans at main border crossing points. Around 100,000 have returned to Venezuela so far – based on the government estimate of 80% of them returning and bringing one family member with them, some 144,000 Venezuelans are likely to return to Colombia (either to stay or to transit to other countries). Additional migration of Venezuelans, who had not left the country previously, is likely.

- The arrival of Venezuelan refugees and migrants would likely put pressure on border departments in terms of reception capacities, the capacity of the local labour market to absorb Venezuelans, and humanitarian assistance.
- If the border remains officially closed, many are likely to use irregular border crossing points via land (“trochas”) and rivers, exposing them to protection risks such as exploitation and violence as these crossings are controlled by armed groups. Venezuelan refugees and migrants who arrive in Colombia in this way are not immediately registered with Colombian authorities, and thus lack access to a legal status within Colombia, which has implications for their access to legal protection, social security, and health services. They also will not pass through a health check at the border.
- “Caminantes”, who pass through Colombia on foot to reach their destination, are likely to face protection and safety risks, especially if they are unfamiliar with the route and the terrain, and will need shelter, food, WASH, and basic services. In the context of COVID-19 restrictions, many shelters have been closed, which makes it more difficult for “caminantes” to access safe shelter.
- Venezuelans in the process of regularising their status in Colombia, who leave to go back to Venezuela, may be at risk of losing the progress made in the regularisation process, or be denied regularisation if they return to Colombia.
- Considering migration and refugee trends prior to COVID-19, new arrivals are likely to be increasingly vulnerable and in need of humanitarian assistance (Washington Post 08/08/2019).

## Compounding factors

**Compounding factors are issues and events that could aggravate the risks analysed in this report, and lead to further intensification of humanitarian needs.**

### COVID-19

COVID-19 has been severely impacting Colombia, with the outbreak likely to continue to place a heavy burden on the country’s health system and economy over the coming months. The outbreak is likely to divert attention from other crises, divert resources, and reduce the capacity of the government and humanitarian organisations to respond to humanitarian needs.

Colombia has increased hospital and testing capacities, but pre-crisis numbers of hospital beds and intensive-care unit (ICU) beds are low in comparison to other countries. Especially in more remote areas, hospital capacities are very limited. Of additional concern is the infection of medical personnel, which further reduces the capacity of the health system.

People in some low-income areas – for example low-income areas of Bogotá – have not complied with movement restrictions because they have few household assets, have lost their income, and must generate an income. As lockdown measures are extended, poverty increases and there will likely be an increased number of pockets of non-adherence to the quarantine (likely in poor urban areas). The risk of transmission in such areas is high.

Access to healthcare for some population groups is limited, which enhances their vulnerability to COVID-19. Most Venezuelans are not registered with social security and only have access to emergency health services (OAS/Coalición por Venezuela 07/2020). They are unlikely to approach health services, even when presenting symptoms, due to fear of repercussions.

### Humanitarian access

Humanitarian access in Colombia is hampered by difficult terrain, armed conflict, and movement restrictions due to COVID-19. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, threats and attacks against humanitarian organisations and medical missions are posing an additional access challenge, as armed groups use the crisis to exert territorial and social control (OCHA 12/08/2020).

Access of affected populations to aid is often hindered by situations of confinement, which is exacerbated due to COVID-19 related movement restrictions. Venezuelan refugees and migrant without regular legal status face barriers to accessing basic services.

Due to COVID-19, access to communities to conduct data collection exercises is limited, with most surveys conducted via telephone. This poses challenges and limitations for representativeness of collected data.

### **COVID-19 outbreak in neighbouring countries**

Health capacities in Venezuela are extremely low, the crisis is politicized, and there is little official communication and coordination between Venezuela and Colombia. If a major outbreak occurs in Venezuela, Colombia would likely be impacted as Venezuelans would cross the border to access healthcare in Colombia. Irregular border crossings particularly increase the risk of transmission within Colombia as there are no health screenings.

As of 7 September 2020, Venezuela registers some 53,200 confirmed cases of COVID-19 (OCHA). This figure is likely much lower than the actual caseload due to Venezuela's limited testing capacities. Daily new cases have increased from around 600 at the end of July to over 1,000 as of mid-August.

Another risk factor is the border with Brazil. Amazonas department has already seen a significant outbreak. As the border is jungle, and fluid, with people moving around on rivers, the border difficult to patrol and control.

### **Social protests**

Social protests have the potential to divert attention away from the response to COVID-19 and other crises, disrupt supply lines, reduce humanitarian access, and potentially lead to an increase in cases of COVID-19.

Containment measures have already been repeatedly extended in various parts of the country and have only been loosened in municipalities with no registered cases of COVID-19. If cases continue to increase, lockdowns are likely to be extended and only gradually loosened. Considering the economic impact, protests against government measures become more likely as measures are extended. Discontent with the government measures have already led to some small-scale localized protests.

In an unrelated dynamic, in November 2019, large-scale protests drew hundreds of thousands of people into the streets of major cities, to protest against the government,

with demands including better support to the implementation of the FARC-EP peace agreement. Frustration over the government's response to the armed conflict and the implementation of the peace deal, as well as indignation over the recent increase in massacres, could potentially spark large-scale protests, especially in urban areas.

### **Xenophobia**

Xenophobia targeted against Venezuelan refugees and migrants has been increasing. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, it is likely to be fuelled by an increase in poverty and unemployment, a perception that Venezuelans receive preferential assistance, and a perception that Venezuelans are spreading the coronavirus.

Opinion poll data is showing that rejection of Venezuelans increased among the Colombian population since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. In an April 2020 Gallup poll in Colombia, 87% of respondents stated that they would like the Colombian-Venezuelan border to remain closed after the end of containment measures, to prevent more Venezuelans from entering. The percentage of respondents stating that they had an unfavourable opinion of Venezuelans who came to Colombia to stay increased from 67% in February to 81% in April (Gallup 04/2020). According to a May GIFMM assessment, 46% of interviewed Venezuelan migrant and refugee households reported experiences of discrimination during 2020. The survey also found that experiences of discrimination decreased since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis (GIFMM 27/07/2020). In contrast, in April, 22% of respondents of a non-representative survey of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Colombia and Peru stated that they experienced more xenophobia and racism due to COVID-19 (MMC 04/2020).

### **Rainy season and natural disasters**

Colombia is prone to natural disasters including earthquakes, with several volcanoes active in different locations. Rainy seasons regularly lead to floods in different parts of the country, often with a considerable humanitarian impact including damage to crops, homes, and critical infrastructure (OCHA 03/2020)

# COLOMBIA

**Risk 2** Reduced capacities to cover needs of Venezuelan refugees & migrants, Colombian IDPs, & people affected by disasters.

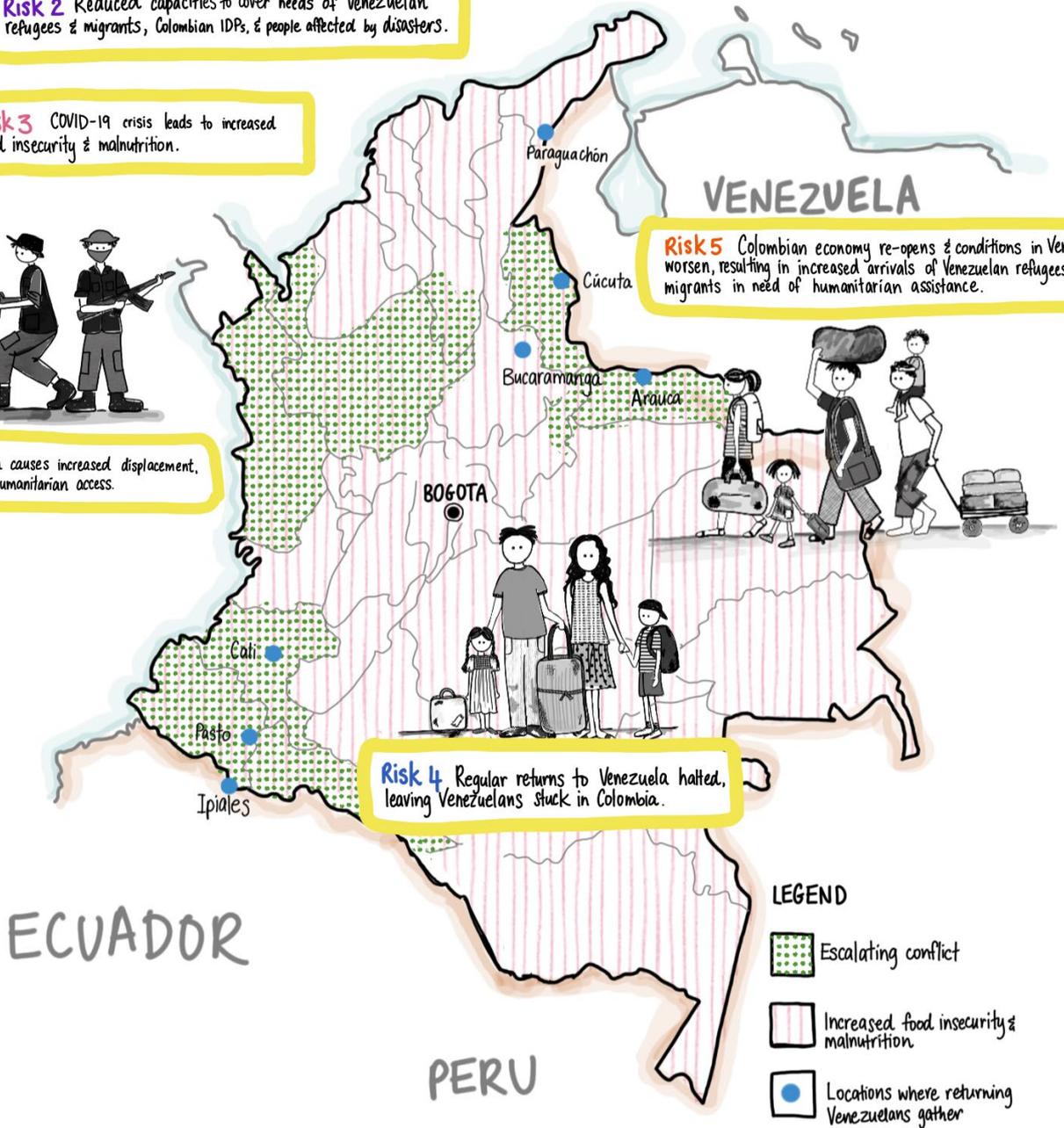
**Risk 3** COVID-19 crisis leads to increased food insecurity & malnutrition.



**Risk 1** Conflict escalation causes increased displacement, confinements, and reduced humanitarian access.

**Risk 5** Colombian economy re-opens & conditions in Venezuela worsen, resulting in increased arrivals of Venezuelan refugees & migrants in need of humanitarian assistance.

**Risk 4** Regular returns to Venezuela halted, leaving Venezuelans stuck in Colombia.



## LEGEND

-  Escalating conflict
-  Increased food insecurity & malnutrition
-  Locations where returning Venezuelans gather

Illustration by Sandie Walton-Ellery