Foro ONG Humanitarias - Colombia

Antipersonnel Mines and Other Explosive Devices in Colombia, 2021–2024: A National Overview

1. Introduction

Until 2016, Colombia had the second-highest number of new victims of anti-personnel mines (APMs) and explosive remnants of war[1] worldwide. Following the signing of the Peace Agreement with one of the Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs), the number of victims fell significantly. It was expected that residual contamination would be eliminated by 2025, in line with Colombia's international commitments. However, the State later requested an extension until 2030, citing the continued use of APMs by NSAGs, the high density of contamination, and reduce operational capacity[2].

This report seeks to highlight the serious humanitarian consequences of the continued presence of APMs, unexploded ordnance (UXO), and other improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Colombia. Although the 2016 Peace Agreement initially led a major improvement, today explosive contamination poses a growing threat to many communities, reflecting setbacks in the decontamination process. The report also examines the factors that have reshaped the current landscape of contamination in the country.

Despite Colombia's commitment to the Ottawa Treaty and progress in humanitarian demining, the expansion of NSAG territorial control and armed disputes has fueled the continued use and diversification of explosive devices, with severe consequences for civilians.

The analysis focuses on the period 2021-2024, during which the humanitarian situation worsened considerably. In these years, the number of recorded APMs and UXOs increased tenfold, rising from 1,069 in 2021 to 11,498 in 2024[3]. Over the same period, the number of people at risk grew 2.3 times, with 607,000 people exposed to accidents, displacement, confinement, or restrictions on mobility due to explosive contamination[4].

Prospects point to continued deterioration, driven by escalating hostilities—both among NSAGs and between these groups and state security forces. In the first five months of 2025, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) recorded 524 people injured or killed by explosive devices—an increase of 145 percent compared with the previous year.

Data on victims varies across sources. For instance, in 2024 the ICRC reported 719 victims (457 from controlled detonation and launched devices, and 262 from APMs and explosive remnants of war or UXOs[5]), while AICMA recorded only 104 victims of APMs and UXOs. Such discrepancies highlight the challenges of consolidating accurate information6. For this report, we rely primarily on AICMA data, which has been systematically collected since 1990 and enables detailed analysis.

Nevertheless, fieldwork by humanitarian organizations and contextual studies indicate significant underreporting. Fear of retaliation, lack of access to health facilities, and cross-border medical care are among the reasons incidents may go unreported[7]. For example, in the Telembí Triangle subregion, underreporting is estimated around 25 %, largely due to fear of reporting. Historical evidence also suggests higher levels: in 2008, between 56 % and 80 % of survivors interviewed were not registered in AICMA's records[8].

The report is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines key elements of the Colombian context; Section 3 characterizes victims; Section 4 examines the humanitarian impact, and the final sections present conclusions and recommendations.

2. Context

2.1 Humanitarian demining and mine risk education

Despite notable progress in humanitarian demining, the persistence of armed conflict in several territories has created significant setback. First, it prevents or hinders demining operations. Second, it generates new contamination in areas previously unaffected. Third, it has even recontaminated territories that had already been declared free of mines.

In 2025, the Colombian government submitted its third request for an extension under Article 5 of the Ottawa Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction[9]. Article 5 obliges states to ensure the clearance of all APMs in territory under their control. The government has now set 2030 as the new deadline to achieve this objective. Its current plan projects that the clearance capacity through 2027 will remain at levels similar to 2020-2024 average. However, worsening conflict and reduced funding make the achievement of this plan increasingly uncertain.

Between 2021 and 2024, 7.2 million m² were cleared, an area 13 % larger than that cleared between 2012 and 2019. By December 2024, Colombia still had 3 million m² of known contamination pending clearance across 495 hazardous areas, located in 54 municipalities within 12 departments. In addition, 102 municipalities with suspected or unknown contamination have been identified for future intervention with humanitarian demining operations. Furthermore, 58 municipalities that had previously been declared mine-free reported new contamination, with recontamination intensifying particularly in 2023 and 2024[10].

The currently known contaminated area places Colombia in the low-contamination category at the international level[11]. However, if we also consider municipalities where the level of contamination remains unknown, the country would fall, at minimum, into the medium-contamination category. Using a conservative estimate, based on the average contaminated area per municipality (55,500 m²), the 102 municipalities with suspected contamination would represent at least 5.7 million m². This would bring the total contaminated area to approximately 8.7 million m². This estimate is conservative, as it is highly likely that these 102 municipalities have greater contamination due to the significant presence of NSAGs.

Between 2021 and 2024, operational capacities decreased by 62.4 %. This reduction is explained by two factors: (1) declining financial resources for operations and (2) increasingly complex security conditions12.

International cooperation funding dropped by 15 % between 2022 and 2023, reaching USD 30.8 million in 2023 (Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor). Security conditions worsened with the expansion of NSAG presence, indeed, of the 102 municipalities with unknown levels of contamination, 99 are affected by NSAG activity[13].

Funding shortfalls have likewise weakened quality management across operations. Specifically, the quality-monitoring activities for humanitarian demining previously carried out by the Organization of American States (OAS) were reduced by 70 percent following U.S. funding cuts, and there are plans to transfer these quality-management functions to the government by the end of the year..

The worsening armed conflict has threatened directly humanitarian demining organizations. In June 2023, a NSAG burned a vehicle and stole communication and

protection equipment from the Army's Humanitarian Demining Battalion while it was operating in a rural area of Huila[14]. More recently, in July 2025, a NSAG directly threatened a humanitarian demining organization, demanding its immediate withdrawal from the territory[15].

Plans for 2027 foresee the Army's Humanitarian Demining Brigade conducting operations in municipalities of departments such as Chocó and Guaviare, areas currently experiencing intense fighting between armed groups. Army personnel have warned of the operational challenges, as communities, out of fear of reprisals from NSAGs, often do not allow them to stay in their homes or on their land[16]. This situation illustrates not only the difficulties of carrying out operations, but also the potential risks faced by communities when demining takes place in areas controlled or disputed by the NSAGs.

Mine Risk Education (MRE) activities have achieved broad coverage, reaching 643,000 people between 2021 and 2024. Among this population, 32.9 % belong to ethnic groups and 49 % are men[17]. In general, MRE coverage has been strong in affected municipalities. Exceptions include Potosí (Nariño), where one victim was reported but no MRE activities were conducted during the period, and three municipalities with suspected contamination (Bajo Baudó, Isnos, and Acacías), where MRE activities were also absent.

2.2 Presence of Non-State Armed Groups and Anti-Personnel Mines

Challenges in implementing the Peace Agreement, combined with other factors, have created a scenario in which non-state armed groups continue to expand their presence and control across different territories.

Communities face multiple risks: they may be harmed by explosive devices left behind during periods of intense conflict prior to the peace process, or by new devices recently deployed by NSAGs as part of territorial disputes or ongoing hostilities.

A statistical analysis[18] shows that the probability of a municipality recording a victim between 2021 and 2024 increases by 7.5% if it is a PDET municipality. Furthermore, if two or more armed groups are present in the municipality, the probability increases by an additional 5%. This suggests that while a municipality's history of violence has a significant influence, the presence of competing non-state armed groups and their disputes over territory also strongly explain the phenomenon. By contrast, illicit crops and mining show a low correlation with the probability of new victims.

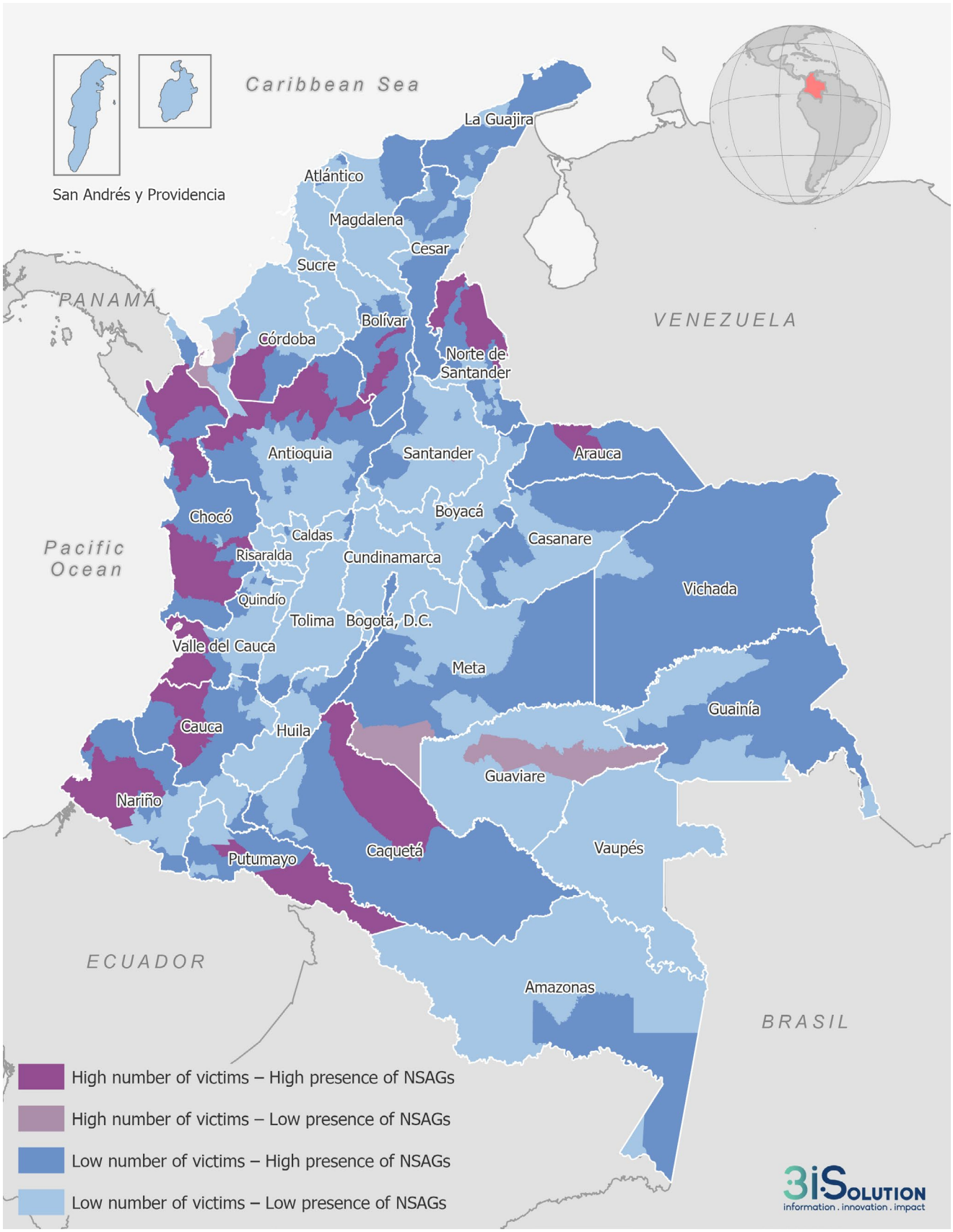

Figure 1. Level of NSAG presence and number of victims at the municipal level, 2021–2024

Source: Prepared internally based on AICMA statistics on victims and PARES information on the presence of NSAGs at the municipal level.

In response to the presence of illicit crops, APMs have historically been used to protect plantations from forced eradication. However, the shift in the government's anti-drug policy may have reduced their use. According to the Ministry of Justice[19], the number of hectares eradicated fell by 86 % between 2022 and 2024. This sharp decline may explain the low correlation observed during this period between mine victims and the presence of illicit crops.

2.3 New Methods of Using Explosive Devices: Drones

The emergence of drones—or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)—as a means of deploying explosive devices represents a concerning evolution in the tactics of non-state armed groups. The first recorded use of drones by a NSAG was in 2018 in the department of Nariño. Since then, their use has increased and spread to other territories, affecting both civilians and military personnel[20]. For example, in 2024 the security forces carried out 86 neutralization actions, while in just the first five months of 2025 this figure had already risen to 110. Drone attacks have been recorded in eight departments: Cauca, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Guaviare, Caquetá, Huila, Tolima, and Caldas[21]. Although no systematic reporting exists on the number of attacks and victims per year, the Ministry of Defence documented 115 drone attacks in 2024[22].

The absence of regulation on the use of drones as instruments of war, combined with the wide availability of low-cost commercial drones, has facilitated their adoption by non-state armed groups[23]. The most common tactic employed by NSAGs is the acquisition of low-cost commercial drones and their modification to carry explosive devices, which are then used against both military targets and civilian populations. To date, only NSAGs have weaponized drones in this way; security forces have limited their use of drones to surveillance purposes.

From the perspective of international humanitarian law (IHL), the principles of distinction and proportionality are of serious concern, given reports of civilian casualties, including minors, resulting from such attacks[24].

A key challenge for the State and humanitarian organizations is to incorporate the threat of drones into Antipersonnel Mine Risk Education (AMRE), expanding it into Explosive Device Risk Education (EDRE) with content specific to this modality. This also requires the establishment of monitoring systems in high-risk areas to systematically document incidents, and the continuous adaptation of protection guidelines and protocols in response to the rapid tactical evolution of this threat. Monitoring efforts should include the identification of recurring territories and tactics.

Monitoring could prove essential. For now, most attacks have targeted fixed locations, although attacks on moving vehicles have also been recorded. These patterns can change quickly. The context in Ukraine, for example, shows how tactics evolve and how they affect civilian life: drones that began as tactical military tools are now used as weapons of terror against civilians, and what started as reconnaissance missions has turned into systematic attacks on people's everyday lives.

Since tactics involving drones can change rapidly, prevention guidelines must remain dynamic and tailored to each territory in order to better protect civilians and humanitarian personnel.

3. Characterization of Victims

The following section presents a characterization of direct victims, based on information from the OCCP's AICMA Group covering January 2021 to February 2025[25]. During this period, 529 victims were recorded. The departments with the highest number of victims were Nariño, Cauca, Chocó, Antioquia, and Norte de Santander. The most affected municipality was Tumaco (Nariño), followed by Argelia and López de Micay (both in Cauca). Notably, 98 % of incidents occurred in rural areas.

As illustrated in the map, the highest concentration of victims is found in border regions and areas with intense armed group activity, as discussed in previous sections.

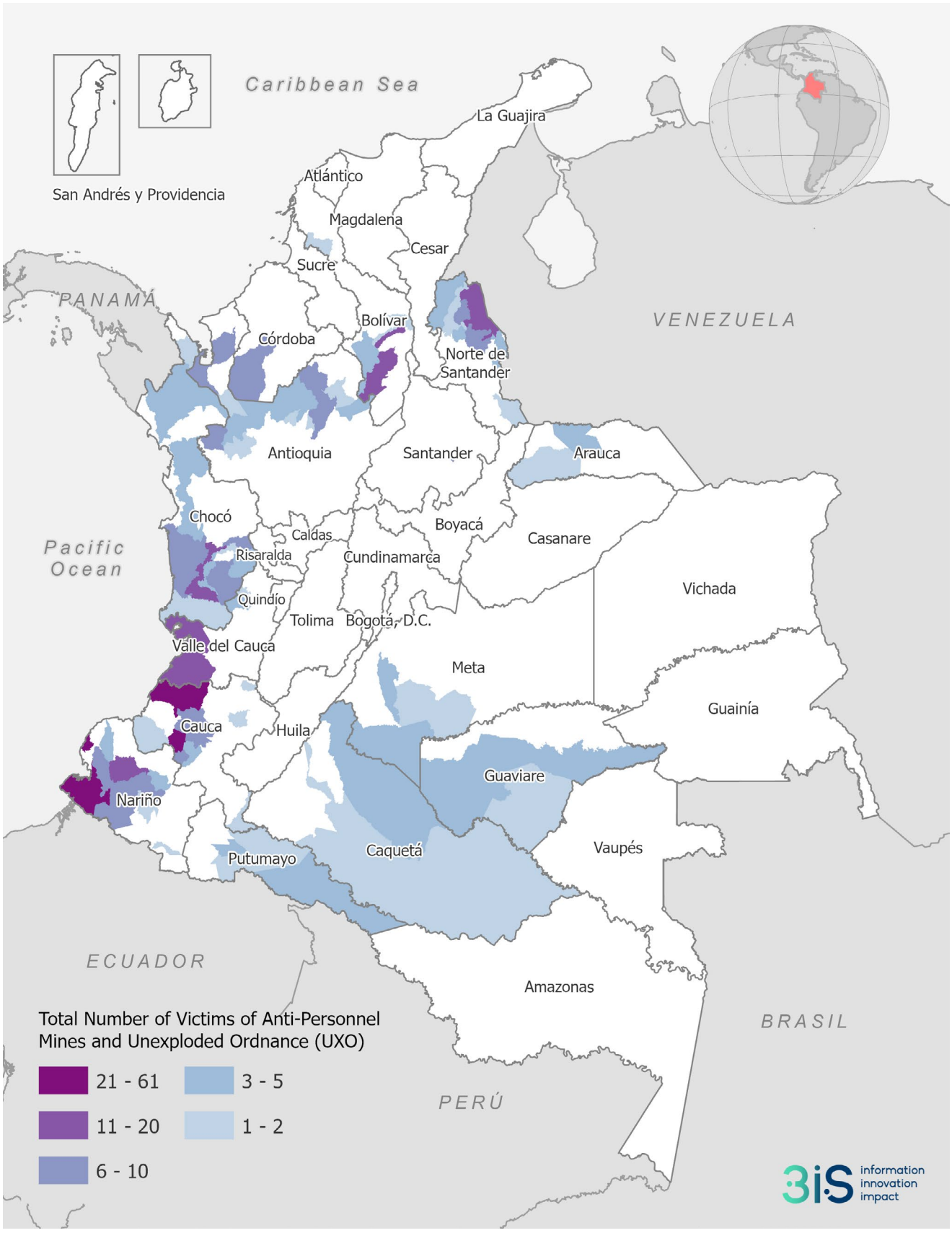

Figure 2. Number of victims at the municipal level, 2021–2024

Source: Prepared internally based on AICMA statistics on victims

For the period analyzed, the victim population is characterized by a higher proportion of civilians, with most accidents and fatalities occurring among adult males. However, demographic dynamics have been shifting over time. For example, since 2021, the number of female victims and victims under the age of 18 has increased compared to previous years.

In terms of ethnicity, as with other serious violations of IHL—such as the recruitment of minors—Afro-descendant and Indigenous populations have been disproportionately affected in recent years. Between 2021 and February 2025, one in four victims of anti-personnel mines belonged to an ethnic minority.

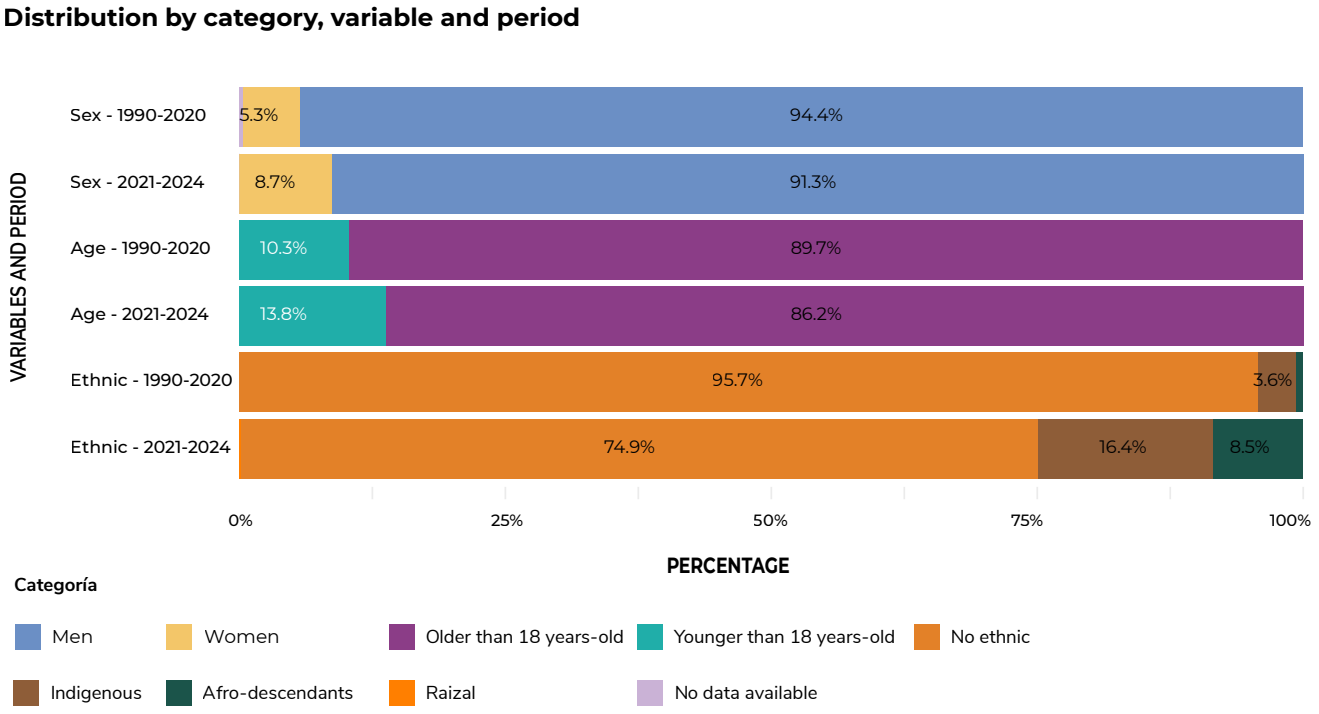

Figure 3. Distribution of victims by sociodemographic variables and periods 1990–2020 and 2021–February 2025

Source: Prepared internally based on AICMA statistics on victims

Prior to 2021, civilians accounted for 39.9% of casualties from anti-personnel mines and unexploded ordnance. Between 2021 and February 2025, this proportion increased to 60.5%. The trend of civilians being increasingly affected began in 2017, following the signing of the Peace Agreement, as clashes between the security forces and NSAGs decreased significantly.

Figuretion of victims by type and period,anduarySource: Prepared internally based on AICMA statistics on victims

Given that civilians are now more frequently affected, it is increasingly common for people to become victims while carrying out productive activities or while seeking access to basic services.

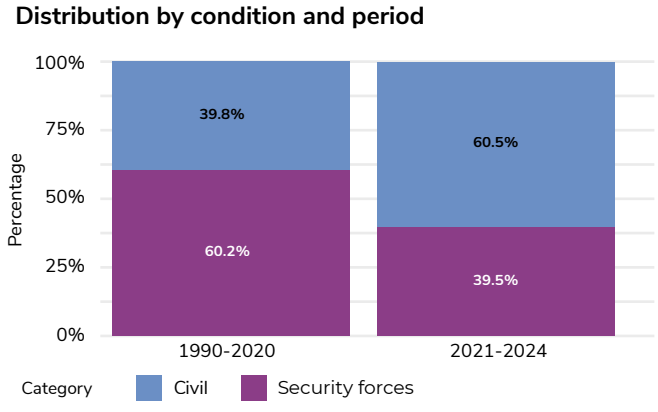

Figure 4. Distribution of victims by type and period, 1990–2020 and 2021–February 2025

Source: Prepared internally based on AICMA statistics on victims

4. Humanitarian Impacts

The humanitarian impacts of explosive devices occur at multiple levels, including loss of life, family disruption, deterioration of physical and mental health, displacement, confinement, and restricted access to productive land and essential services such as health care, education, and food. These impacts also affect life plans and the safe return of displaced populations.

The Mine Action Responsibility Area estimates that 607,910 people across 146 municipalities are at risk of accidents involving APMs, UXO-related devices, or IEDs, or of being displaced or confined due to the presence of these explosive devices. This at-risk population has been rising rapidly since 2021, when approximately 268,000 people were estimated to be at risk[26].

Although fatalities are currently lower than in previous periods, people continue to suffer serious impacts on their health, mobility, and ability to generate income. Moreover, the presence of explosive devices poses a major barrier to state and humanitarian organizations attempting to reach affected territories to provide essential services such as health care, education, livelihoods support, and water and food security.

For example, humanitarian organizations recorded nine incidents in 2023 in which access was impeded by explosive devices[27], rising to 13 incidents in 2024[28]. These figures indicate that, due to the presence of mines and other explosive devices, aid could not be delivered in a timely manner to those in need.

4.1 Impacts on People's Lives and Integrity

Between 2021 and 2024, 6.6% of victims of AMP or UXO accidents died. The fatality rate was higher in the previous period: between 1990 and 2020, 19.3% of victims died.

Survivors, however, face multiple physical and psychological injuries that affect their well-being, overall health, mobility, daily activities, and ability to earn a living. Nearly half of survivors (46%) suffered wounds or lacerations, while other common injuries include shrapnel wounds and hearing loss. Additionally, one in five victims loses a limb or part of their body.

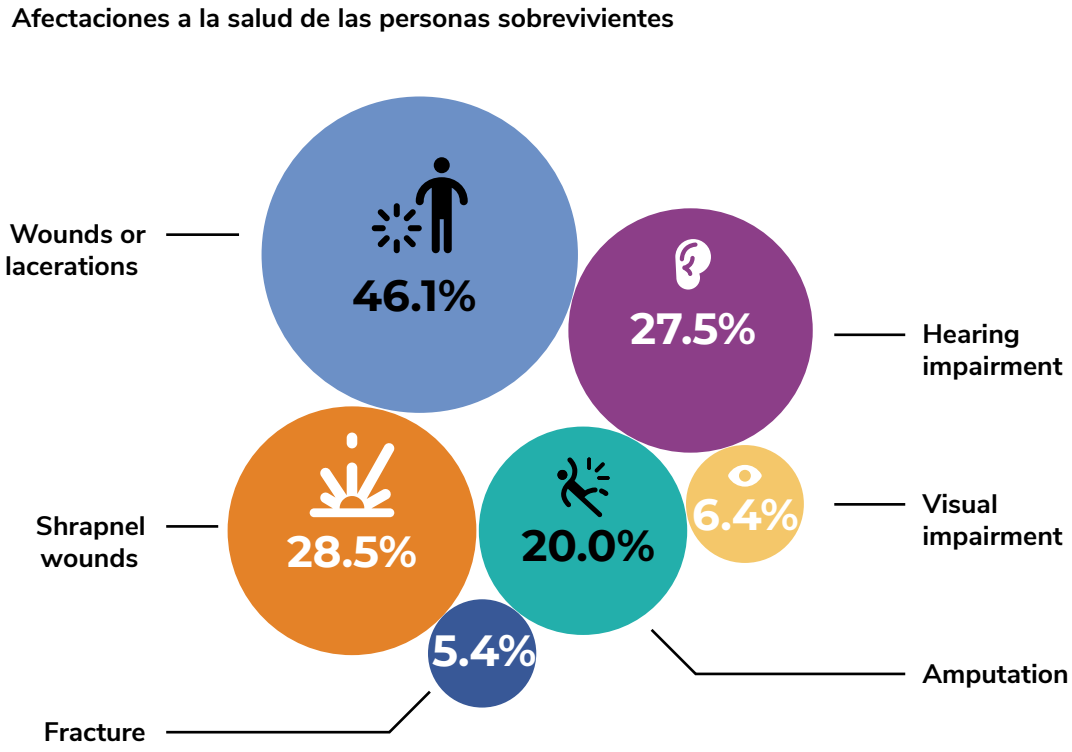

Figure 5. Health effects on survivors

Source: Prepared by the authors based on AICMA statistics on victims. The information was supplemented with medical reports from the same database.

Survivors experience long-term impacts on their well-being, which also affect their families and support networks. Institutional responses remain insufficient in providing specialized care and rehabilitation[29]. Many survivors are unable to access the full pathway or remain in its initial stages; in fact, the vast majority do not complete it and reach stage 5 of socio-economic reintegration.

4.2 Impacts on Access to Services

The presence of explosive devices significantly constrains access to basic services and undermines the livelihoods of people living in contaminated areas. In day-to-day life, this can mean taking much longer routes—or being entirely cut off from education and health services—because traveling along certain roads or paths is too risky. Moreover, contamination creates barriers for public institutions and even humanitarian actors, hindering the effective and timely delivery of assistance.

Education

A monitoring exercise conducted by NRC in 14 departments on attacks against education in Colombia found a 27% increase in recorded events in 2024 compared to 2023. The 120 incidents recorded in 2024 resulted in 242 attacks on educational facilities, 50 of which involved the use of APM and UXO, compared with 41 incidents in 2023[30].

This highlights the vulnerability of educational spaces amid armed conflict and the fact that this vulnerability continues to increase. Another indicator of risk to the educational community—including children and adolescents—is the proximity of accidents to educational infrastructure. Between 2021 and February 2025, the AICMA information system recorded 529 accidents involving victims. Of these, 330 accidents had a precise location, and 44 % occurred within 2 kilometers of an educational institution.

Number of accidents within 2 kilometers of an educational institution and average distance by department, 2021–February 2025

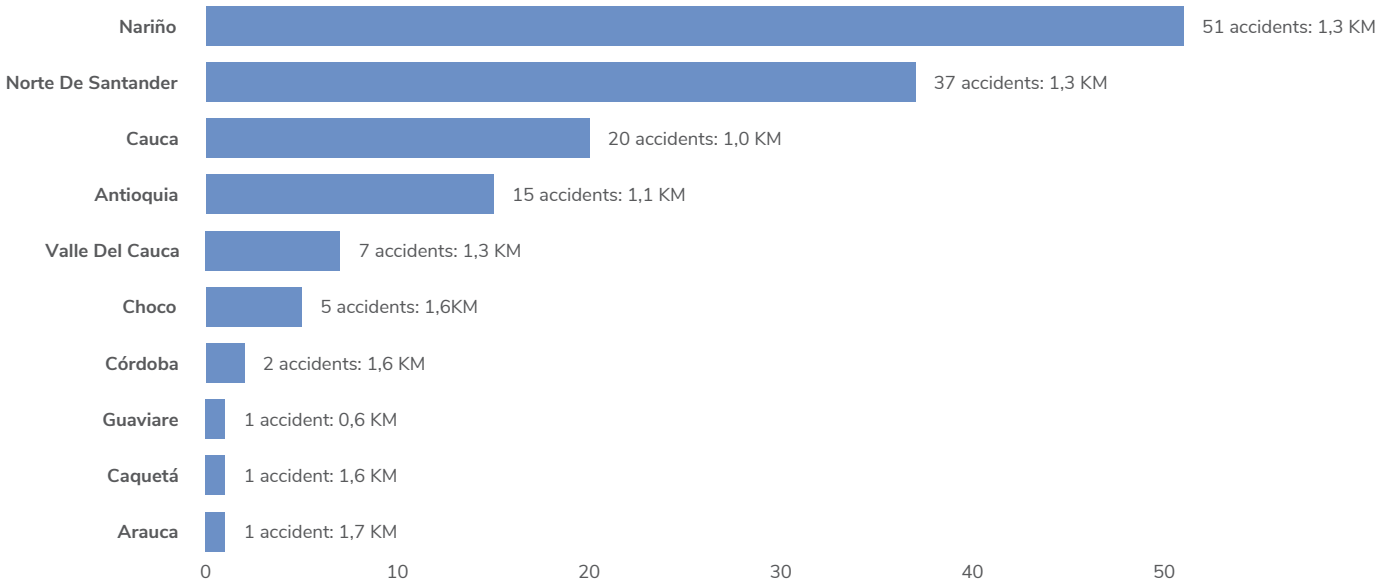

Figure 6. Number of accidents within 2 kilometers of an educational institution and average distance by department, 2021–February 2025

Source: Prepared internally based on AICMA statistics on victims and the Educational Facility Identification System (SISE 2025). The average distance only takes into account events occurring within 2 kilometers.

Ten departments were identified where at least one accident occurred within 2 kilometers of an educational institution. Nariño, which had the highest number of victims during this period, also recorded the highest number of accidents near schools. Notably, Norte de Santander, while ranking fifth in total victims, ranks second in accidents occurring near educational institutions. In Cauca, 20 accidents were recorded near schools, with an average distance of 1 kilometer between the accident and the institution.

Number of suspected APM and UXO events within 2 kilometers of an educational institution and average distance by department, 2021–February 2025

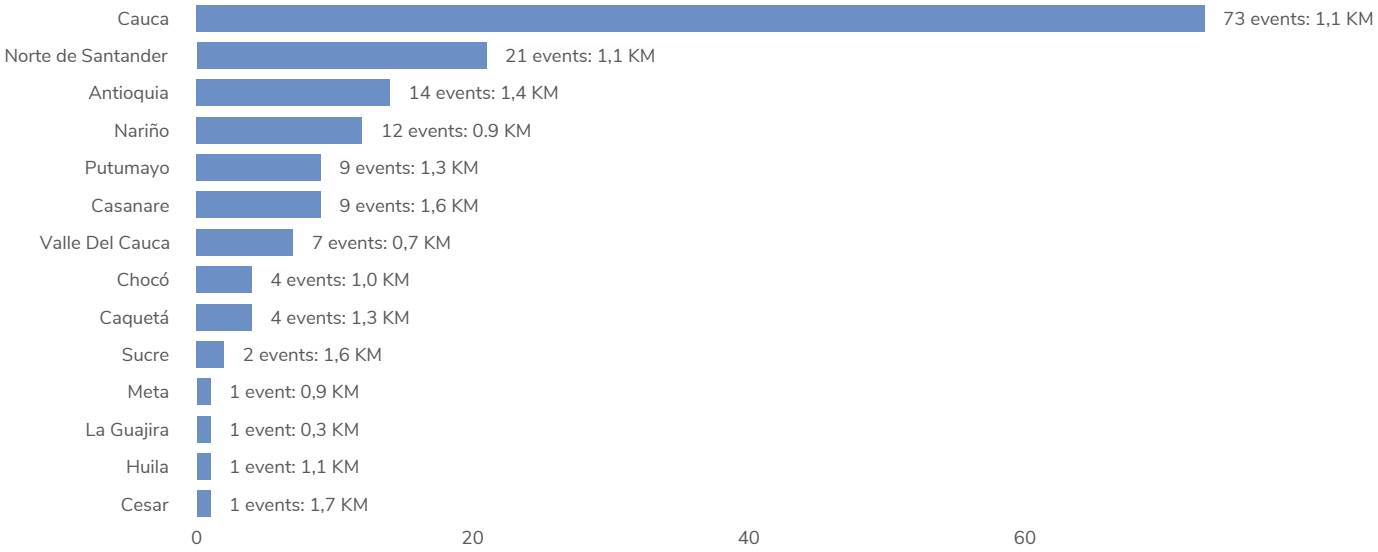

Figure 7. Number of suspected APM and UXO events within 2 kilometers of an educational institution and average distance by department, 2021–February 2025

Source: Prepared internally based on AICMA statistics on victims and the Educational Facility Identification System (SISE 2025). The average distance only takes into account events occurring within 2 kilometers.

The suspected presence of these explosive devices also provides an indication of the risk faced by communities. In this context, Cauca has the highest number of suspected devices located near educational institutions, with an average distance of 1.1 kilometers. It is followed by Norte de Santander, with 21 incidents, and Antioquia and Nariño, with 14 and 12 incidents, respectively.

Health

Health infrastructure faces lower risks compared to educational infrastructure, mainly because 97% of victims were in rural areas, where health facilities are less common. However, five accidents were identified within 2 kilometers of a health center. These occurred in three municipalities: Buenaventura, Bolívar (Valle del Cauca), and Tumaco.

Moreover, the distance of health infrastructure from rural areas creates a barrier to timely care and to ensure that all cases are properly recorded[31]. For example, one medical report in the AICMA database (Barbacoas, 2022) noted: “Community rescued survivor alive, dies while waiting for ambulance.”

Livelihoods and food security

Between 2021 and 2024, 17.6 % of victims were engaged in agriculture, hunting, fishing, or animal husbandry when they were affected by explosive devices.

Humanitarian studies show that UXO and other explosive devices (ED) directly impact food security. Based on information on device locations from 1990 to 2023, 75.3 % were found in areas that can be categorized militarily as camps, transit zones, or strategic resources. Camp areas—such as fields, farms, and hills—accounted for 41.1 % of identified devices. Transit areas (28 %) included roadsides, paths, bridges, and trails. Another 6.2 % were located near strategic resources, such as water sources (streams, canals, rivers) and critical infrastructure for communication or electricity[32].

Even the suspicion of contamination is enough to restrict land use, slow investment, and create insecurity in production, transport, and access to resources. Many accidents occur during activities linked to food security, such as farming, trading, or collecting water and firewood. Mines also cause the loss of animals essential for transport and agriculture, further reinforcing perceptions of contamination. Transit routes are especially dangerous, forcing communities to take longer, more expensive detours to access food and markets[33].

For example, some indigenous communities report that while they previously hunted and fished, fear of explosive devices now prevents them from continuing these practices. This not only undermines livelihoods and food security but also erodes the sociocultural traditions of ethnic groups[34].

Mines also drive confinement and displacement, leading to the long-term loss of livelihoods and preventing people from returning to their territories—along with the emotional toll of forced displacement. According to the Protection Cluster's Analysis of Protection Risk Trends Related to Armed Conflict (2024), at least 185,000 people have seen their livelihoods collapse due to explosive devices that block the use, enjoyment, and mobility of their land.

5. Conclusions

The situation regarding anti-personnel mines and other explosive devices in Colombia between 2021 and 2024 reflects a concerning setback in the progress achieved since the signing of the Peace Agreement. The number of devices has increased tenfold in just three years, and the population at risk now exceeds 600,000 people. Despite the State's efforts to comply with the Ottawa Treaty, deteriorating security conditions, the expansion of non-state armed groups (NSAGs), and reduced operational capacity are seriously undermining decontamination objectives.

Direct victims—most of them civilians—suffer not only loss of life and permanent injuries but also severe restrictions on access to essential services such as health, education, and livelihoods. Between 2021 and 2025, civilians accounted for 65% of all victims, and one in five survivors experienced an amputation. Ethnic populations historically affected by conflict, particularly those living in PDET territories, remain disproportionately impacted.

The impact on education is particularly alarming. Forty-four per cent of incidents with victims between 2021 and 2025 occurred within two kilometers of an educational institution. In departments such as Nariño, Cauca, and Norte de Santander, this proximity poses a significant risk to children and adolescents. Moreover, attacks on education increased by 27% between 2023 and 2024, with at least 50 of the 242 incidents directly linked to anti-personnel mines or unexploded ordnance.

Statistical evidence indicates that the probability of new victims rises significantly in municipalities with the presence of two or more armed groups, as well as in those prioritized under the Territorially Focused Development Programs (PDET). This highlights how armed conflict and historical patterns of violence continue to shape the risk of victimization.

Finally, the emergence of new tactics—such as the deployment of explosives by drones—marks a troubling evolution in the dynamics of violence, with serious implications for international humanitarian law, particularly regarding the principle of distinction between combatants and civilians.

6. Recommendations

To non-state armed groups:

- Refrain from the use, installation, or deployment of anti-personnel mines, unexploded ordnance, improvised explosive devices, or armed drones, in line with international humanitarian law.
- Respect the neutrality of education, health, and community infrastructure by avoiding the placement of explosive devices in their vicinity and by guaranteeing communities' right to safe access to essential services.
- Ensure the safety of humanitarian demining personnel, health workers, teachers, and humanitarian organizations operating in affected territories.

To Colombian state institutions:

- Increase state funding and operational capacity for the humanitarian demining program and the AICMA group.
- Ensure the effective implementation of the National Safe Schools Plan, prioritizing institutions in high-risk areas, particularly in departments such as Nariño, Norte de Santander, Cauca, and Antioquia.
- Strengthening the scope and quality of Mine Risk Education (MRE), expanding it into Explosive Remnants of War Education (ERWE) that incorporates the threat of armed drones and adapts content to territorial and cultural contexts. This process should begin with a comprehensive update of AICMA's public policy.
- Improve the assistance pathway for direct victims—from registration to medical care, rehabilitation, and socio-economic inclusion—by clarifying institutional roles at each stage. This should cover not only anti-personnel mines but also other explosive devices.
- Link AICMA with territorial and national risk management systems to prevent mass casualties and strengthen coordination between competent authorities, such as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health.

Enhance information and monitoring systems, ensuring interoperability between state entities and humanitarian actors, to detect recontaminated areas and prevent incidents in key infrastructure such as schools and health centers.

Recognize and support the complementary role of humanitarian organizations, especially in areas where demining battalions face operational restrictions or pose risks to the civilian population.

Incorporate clear clauses in negotiation processes with armed groups on demining, non-recontamination, and the cessation of explosive device use in civilian areas. These commitments also include respect for goods and services protected under IHL, humanitarian access, and adherence to the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution.

To the international community and donors:

- Increase financial and technical support for humanitarian demining, comprehensive victim assistance, explosive risk education, and advocacy, with priority given to hard-to-access and severely affected regions.
- Support initiatives to monitor emerging threats, such as the use of armed drones, and promote the development of civil protection protocols to mitigate these tactics.

To humanitarian organizations:

- Support the process of updating MRE standards by sharing good practices and lessons learned, and by developing community-based interventions in response to new forms of violence, including the use of explosive drones.
- Prioritize protection, mental health, and rehabilitation initiatives for victims and their families in highly affected areas.
- Promote safe spaces for education and access to basic services, in coordination with local authorities.
- Strengthen coordination with other organizations to reach more communities and avoid duplication of efforts.
- Continue advocacy efforts to raise awareness of the Colombian crisis, which has lost visibility compared to other crises worldwide.

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3 Most of the devices correspond to demining operations. AICMA data as of February 2024. This is an estimate derived from the number of devices destroyed in incidents related to military demining operations.

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6 The difference is also due to the fact that the ICRC has a broader registry, which also includes combatants, unlike the AICMA group, which only includes civilian and military victims. In addition, the AICMA Group only registers people with Unique Victims Registers, which can take months to issue.

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