# The Story They Tell

## What the Geography of Victimhood by Explosive Ordnance and Remnants of War in Colombia Tells Us About the Complexity of the War between 2006 and 2023?

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"[*In your perception, is humanitarian demining a sustainable practice in your territories in the long run?] It depends. Up until now it has been, but due to the state of the conflict nothing can guarantee us that more mines won't be planted – Circumstances may change and violent confrontations [between Non-State Armed Groups] may arise again. We have to be prepared for anything."* – Community member statement during the Humanitarian Decontamination Impact Assessment led by the Colombian Campaign to Ban Landmines ( CCBL ) at the Vereda El Progreso, Puerto Asís, Putumayo, July 2024.

I sat at the end of a crescent-shaped row of the characteristically familiar faded plastic chairs occupied by El Progreso's community members. We were gathered under a solid, high-ceilinged zinc roof pergola. Surrounding us were an unfinished soccer field, an empty cock-fighting coop to the left, a lively communal kitchen to the right furbished with witty hens and a pompous peacock, and a pinkish structure right across the field, which served as a primary school. As I listened to the community's testimonies about their unfolding reality living in a newly cleared area, I was most intrigued by the contrast between their deep sense of gratitude for the security that humanitarian demining has brought to their territories, and the candor regarding its sustainability. Later on, observations like the one above came around in subsequent interviews with other beneficiaries in Putumayo, among team members, and even by the Puerto Asís Government Secretary.

As we traveled back to Puerto Asís through the San Miguel river, I absorbed the vastness of the Amazonian horizon. My fingertips traced the turbulent, man-made ripples stirred by the motorboat's speed, and I found myself wondering: If explosive ordnances and explosive remnants of war could speak, what stories would they tell?

### Historical Data

Between the 70s and the 90s, incidents involving Explosive Artefacts

(EA) occurred irregularly in Colombia. However, by the late 1990s, various guerrilla groups had expanded their presence to approximately 60% of Colombian municipalities, often resorting to violence and terror as strategic tools (CNMH, 2017, p.46). In response, the Colombian State launched stringent military operations under different administrations between 1998 and 2006 to curb the violence (GICHD, 2023, p.45). During this period of active conflict, guerrilla combatants employed Antipersonnel Mines (APM) to counter military offensives. Nonetheless, following Colombia's ratification of the Ottawa Treaty in 2001 and the completion of demining operations across 35 military bases as part of the international commitment, NSAGs became the primary users of APM in the country (Procuraduría General de la Nación, 2020, p.15). As such, patterns in the intensity, density, and composition of EA events and victimhood in Colombia have become increasingly impactful.

It appears that there is a connection between the geography of Non-State Armed Group (NSAG) activities and the patterns of victimhood by Explosive Ordnance (EO), revealing a broader perspective on Colombia's conflict before and after the 2016 Peace Accord.

Indeed, EA incidents provoked the highest peaks of victimhood in 2006, and between 2008 and 2013 (GICHD, 2023, p.45). In the early 2010s, guerrilla factions saw themselves getting weaker after the death of several strategic commanders and leaders between the late 2000s, which led them to restructure their organization to regain lost ground by creating smaller, decentralized combat units that employed more lethal tactics, such as the widespread use of mines, sniper fire, and increased harassment against government forces (Segura and Mechoulan, 2017, p.9).

Around this timeframe, peace negotiations between President Juan Manuel Santos' government and the FARC began in Cuba, leading to a final peace agreement signed in 2016, which translated into lower victimhood by EA and ERW the same year, with numbers similar to those of the 1990s (CNMH, 2017; p.48). Subsequently, the Peace Accord established a temporary safety 'bubble' by officially demobilizing the FARC, and reinforcing the Ottawa Convention policies on banning, and destroying EA, with a global decontamination deadline set for 2025

(Procuraduría general de la nación, 2020, p.15). This facilitated major humanitarian aid linked to Integral Mine Action (MA) and Humanitarian Demining (HD) in Colombia.

However, despite the demobilization of thousands of FARC combatants, the number of victims has started to rise again. The first peak occurred in 2018, followed by more significant spikes in 2020 and 2021 (GICHD, 2023, p.44-47; Acaps, 2022, p. 7-9). Statistically, there has been a substantial rise in the number of victims per event. The figure climbed from 0.1 victims per event in 2016 to 0.4 in 2021, reaching the highest level recorded in the country since 2008 (ACAPS, 2022, p.9). The same year, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) identified a significant increase in illegal armed groups and criminal bands in 12 regions of Colombia, surpassing international conflict standards. These regions include Southern Bolívar, Southern Córdoba, Northeastern and Western Antioquia (including Urabá), Southern Chocó, Northern and Southern Cauca, Southern Valle del Cauca, Nariño, Lower Putumayo, the Catatumbo in Norte de Santander, and Arauca. This explains some landmine recontamination and higher EA and ERW victimhood in those areas in 2020, 2021, and 2022. Among the major illegal groups, the JEP identified dissidents from the National Liberation Army (ELN), FARC factions, and the Gulf Clan (a criminal band) (JEP, 2022). Thus, after the peace agreement, the widespread national conflict shifted to more localized, regional confrontations, reconfigurating the conflict into targeted, focalized violence (Espitia Cueca et al., 2018, p. 7).

Notably, the primary regions impacted by EA and ERW in Colombia are rural areas, and the affected departments have remained consistent over time. The departments most affected by EA are situated in the Northern areas of the country and in the South Western sectors (CNMH, 2017; p.71-73). Remarkably, from 2006 to 2023, Antioquia has consistently been one of the most affected departments in Colombia. Nevertheless, in 2008, Nariño had the highest number of victims, whereas in 2021, Norte de Santander reported the most victims (CNMH, 2017; p.75; UNMAS, 2022, p.2). These areas also align with the recent expansion of illegal armed groups into bordering zones, such as Venezuela (InSight Crime, 2024).

Ultimately, the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace from the Presidential Office estimates that between January 1990 and July 31, 2024, there have been 12,470 individuals affected by EA and ERW. While historical data since the 1990s indicates that military and public forces have been the main victims (59.5%) of EA incidents, recent trends show a shift. Since 2019, approximately 60% of victims each year are civilians. Among civilians, farmers, Indigenous Peoples and Afro-Colombians are disproportionately affected (ACAPS, 2022, p. 4). It is also concerning that 10.3% of EA victims are children, particularly Afro and Indigenous children (UNMAS, 2023, p. 2). Furthermore, while men represent 94.5% of landmine victims, women face significant consequences as they become the primary breadwinners and caregivers simultaneously, with racialized women handling 92.5% of caregiving work in rural areas (ACAPS, 2022, p. 4). This highlights how the conflict is now impacting civilians more than ever (UNMAS, 2023, p. 2).

**The Trails of Landmines as a System**

Throughout the interviews I assisted, the Puerto Asis community members consistently pointed to coca cultivation and the activities of specific illegal armed groups as the primary risks for contamination or recontamination, emphasizing how these factors interconnect. Indeed, sustaining a prolonged insurgency requires continous financing, which, in Colombia, largely comes from illegal crop cultivation, narcotrafficking, and illegal mining (SAGA, 2022). The drug trafficking economy has significantly shaped the Colombian conflict over time, blurring the lines of economic and political agendas. Perhaps it is true that funding a war is always inherently more complex than fighting a war.

These illegal financial flows have led to a heightened use of anti-personnel mines to protect key assets such as crops, laboratories, smuggling corridors near borders or water sources, and other strategic regions critical for guerrilla expansion (GICHD, 2023, p.45; CNMH, 2017, p.53-55). Interestingly, the primary regions for coca cultivation are in the departments of Bolívar, Antioquia, Nariño, Putumayo, Caquetá, Meta, Guaviare, Vichada, Arauca, and Norte de Santander (CNMH, 2017, p.47; OCHA,

2018, p.1). The primary strategic corridors include one running west to east across northern Colombia, connecting it with Panama and Venezuela, and another extending diagonally from the Ecuadorian border to the southwestern border of Venezuela. These areas align with regions consistently affected by EA and ERWs, as well as the recent rise in EA and ERW incidents along the Colombia-Venezuela border and the Darién route (InSight Crime, 2024; Macias, 2023). Remarkably, the reconfiguration of the conflict after 2016 shifted the role of coca to become the specific interest driving localized violence (Espitia Cueca et al., 2018 p. 7).

Consequently, the most affected communities are the Afro, Indigenous, and farming communities, as they are the main habitants of these remote zones. As such, NSAGs have consistently used EAs on rural communities to take over their lands and\or economic activities (ACAPS, 2021, p. 4; Espitia Cueca et al., 2018 p. 5). Namely, NSAGs have been known to install EAs along roads to ensure that the population only moves through areas under their surveillance, like crops, schools and surrounding areas. These practices have caused direct harm to community members through physical injuries, amputations, and deaths.

On a broader level, the strategic use of landmines have also resulted in the confinement and displacement of hundreds of collectivities. Confinement restricts a population's movement and access to at least three services or goods (food, healthcare, education, economic opportunities, etc) for at least one week, with some confinements extending for months. This practice is compounded by Colombia's challenging geographic conditions, as many areas are only reachable through water sources and rivers, with secondary roads often being nonexistent or poorly maintained (OCHA, 2021, p.1). Notably, “Since the Peace Agreement with the FARC, confinement related to APM and ERW presence has markedly increased. Between 2020–2021, related incidents increased by 296%” (ACAPS, 2021, p. 4). Others are forcefully displaced. Indeed, the departments of Norte de Santander, Antioquia, Nariño, Valle del Cauca, Chocó, and Córdoba account for 78.2% of displacement victims. Together, these departments contain 56.2% of the total coca-growing areas in the country, and they gather the greatest impacts of anti-personnel mines, with 79% of mine

casualties occurring in these regions (OCHA, 2018, p. 1).

This indicates that EAs and ERWs have become increasingly more destructive to community stability. This phenomenon has gravely affected children's lifeplans, family structures and livelihoods, and weakened many communities' cultural fabric, further marginalizing them socially, economically, and politically (ACAPS, 2021, p. 4). This contributes to the continued disenfranchisement of minorities and worsening social issues in the post-conflict era.

To make matters worse, the growing presence of illegal armed groups in Venezuela and the Darién, coupled with an increase in EA and ERW incidents in these border regions, has heightened the dangers faced by irregular migrants. The recent surge in migration through Colombia has increased the risk of encountering EAs along already hazardous migration routes, further endangering these vulnerable populations' lives (Macias, 2023). In short, the impact of landmines and their victims in Colombia highlights how the evolving political, economic, and social agendas of illegal armed groups continue to devastate entire communities, specially ethnic rural communities, and, more recently, migrants. This ongoing turmoil undermines civil society and peace efforts, perpetuating endless waves of violence.

## Integral Mine Action in Colombia and Challenges

Since signing and ratifying the Ottawa Convention, Colombia has deployed State efforts to implement the pillars of Integral Mine Action (IMA), especially Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) and Assistance to Victims (AV) in earlier years, and Humanitarian Demining (HD) in more recent years.

One of the biggest obstacles to IMA operations is the recent reconfiguration of the conflict. The presence of illegal actors and criminal bands pose a threat to humanitarian aid, and restricts their entry into contaminated territories. In 2020, many illegal groups took advantage of the national COVID quarantine to expand their influence and control, leading to increased restrictions on humanitarian actors and disrupting the regularity of their activities in various regions. These restrictions were mainly conveyed through community advice, urging NGO officials to avoid or leave

certain areas due to NSAG hostilities or, in more severe cases, factional confrontations (OCHA, 2021, p.1).

Additionally, the presence of NSAGs and criminal bands has increased the risk of recontamination, as many locals have increasingly reported that areas once deemed relatively safe and navigable are now experiencing more and more accidents due to landmines (SAGA, 2022). This compounded issue explains why Norte de Santander has experienced a rise in NSAG activity and landmine contamination in recent years, surpassing the historically contaminated areas of Nariño and Antioquia. As of 2022, all municipalities in the Catatumbo region remain on the list of areas awaiting HD intervention due to inadequate security guarantees to conduct the work.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, Colombia has challenging geographic conditions that exacerbates access issues, especially during the rainy seasons, complicating humanitarian work (OCHA, 2021, p.1). Consequently, this disrupts communications with the humanitarian apparatus, leading to delays in both assistance and reporting (ACAPS, 2021, p. 4).

Due to these challenges, HD organizations have had to halt their work in various regions, resulting in areas remaining highly contaminated (Procuraduría general de la nación, 2020, p. 67). Hence why it has been so difficult to establish a nationwide baseline survey for EA and ERW contamination in Colombia. Consequently, the current national assessment relies heavily on individual explosive events and reported incidents of victimhood (Mine Action Review, 2023, p. 103).

Lastly, another key issue is the lack of community trust. Due to the nature of the conflict and their status as non-governmental entities, many humanitarian organizations rely entirely on community authorization and cooperation to access certain areas for Mine Action activities, particularly in more hostile regions. Therefore, a significant challenge for HD organizations is securing this consent, as they often lack a sustained presence that would allow them to build relationships and trust. Therefore, it is crucial to support these organizations in developing community connections to ensure the successful execution of their activities (Procuraduría general de la nación, 2020, p. 58).

Although Colombia has made significant strides in Mine Action,

under the 2016 Peace Accord and under the Oslo Action Plan Commitment, which requires increased efforts to meet obligations by 2025, the country has only cleared 1.84 km² of the confirmed 10 km² of mine contamination. The slow pace of progress, coupled with the risk of recontamination, makes it improbable that Colombia will achieve a mine-free status 2025 (Procuraduría general de la nación, 2020, p. 15-18; Mine Action Review, 2023, p. 100). Consequently, the most affected will continue to be vulnerable ethnic populations, which is why Integral Mine Action is crucial—if not fundamental—in peacebuilding efforts in Colombia.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, EAs and ERWs do speak. They illustrate the country's ongoing armed conflict and social unrest, which tends to spiral as various opposing, yet interconnected, regular and irregular groups employ strategies in their pursuit for territorial control and resource protection, perpetuating self-repeating cycles of violence.

From their introduction by revolutionary groups to their extensive use by guerrilla and illegal armed organizations, landmines have become a strategic tool for terror and domination. Thus, the analysis of EA and ERW incidents from 2006 to 2023 reveals the ongoing, yet changing nature of Colombia's conflict as patterns of victimhood fluctuate, reflecting the persistent issue of landmine contamination, despite International Conventions and the 2016 Peace Accord.

Rural regions consistently have high levels of NSAG presence, which coincides with EA and ERW events as well as the geography of coca-growing areas, which include Bolívar, Antioquia, Nariño, Putumayo, Caquetá, Meta, Guaviare, Vichada, Arauca, and Norte de Santander. Recognizing this pattern in these affected regions reveals the connection between coca cultivation, strategic corridors, and landmine placement; highlighting the economic motivations behind these practices.

Additionally, the shift toward localized violence and its consistent spread to border zones after 2016 underscores a change in ideological motivations: what was once a means to achieve broader political goals has now become the end in itself. Consequently, the profile of victims has shifted to increasingly include civilians, especially from Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and

farming communities, along with a troubling number of child victims and newly affected irregular migrants. The recent trends indicate a troubling resurgence in victim numbers since 2016, and underscores the ongoing challenges in achieving lasting peace and effective demining. As such, the social impact is profound, with these vulnerable groups not only enduring severe physical and psychological injuries, or even death, but also grappling with indirect consequences such as intensified poverty, forced displacement or confinement, and weakened community stability.

The persistent presence of landmines serves as a stark reminder of the conflict's legacy, underscoring the urgent need for continued, targeted conflict resolution efforts, thorough landmine clearance, and strong support for affected communities to break the cycle of violence and foster lasting peace in Colombia.

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