

3.1.2. Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)

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The ELN is Colombia's last active guerrilla group,[186] and is made up of 8 main fronts and 33 sub-structures that are present throughout the country.[187] ELN's structure functions as a federation where the fronts have some autonomy and independence in their operations and financial management.[188] ELN has a military as well as a political leadership body,[189] the Central Command (Comando Central, COCE), which takes the most important decisions for the organisation, and the National Directorate (Dirección Nacional, DINAL), which is made up of 23 representatives elected by the eight fronts and consist of a commander, a political chief, and a military chief.[190] According to the Ministry of Defense, in 2024 the ELN had between 2 300 and 2 800 combatants[191] and up to approximately 3 000 combatants according to several non-official sources, suggesting that it could be higher.[192] Sources indicated that the ELN has become a 'binational' army, with footing in both Colombia and Venezuela and that, later, the ELN became an 'instrument of power' used by Venezuela to influence on Colombia.[193]

ELN's fronts operate according to the place where they are located, with the front in Catatumbo managing the routes for the transit of drugs and contraband; the front that operates in the border between Antioquia and Bolívar, focusing on the corridor that connects Antioquia and Catatumbo; and along the Pacific coast, ELN seeks to control illegal mining activities,[194] as well as drug trafficking.[195]

Several peace negotiation initiatives have been explored between the government and the ELN in previous years.[196] The recent negotiation formally started in November 2022 and by April 2024, six rounds of negotiations had been completed with a seventh underway.[197] In April 2024, the ELN suspended the negotiations accusing the government of parallel negotiations with Frente Comuneros del Sur (FCS), a splinter group of the ELN.[198] In September 2024, the government suspended peace negotiations after the ELN carried out an attack in Arauca that left two soldiers dead and over 20 injured.[199] As of October 2025, peace negotiations remain suspended even more since fighting involving the ELN in early 2025 in the Catatumbo.[200]

After the demobilisation of the FARC-EP in 2016, the ELN and other illegal armed groups are disputing the territories left by the former guerrilla group.[201] Since 2016, the number of municipalities where the ELN has control and influence has increased progressively, from 99 municipalities in 2017, 167 in 2020, 215 in 2023, to 231 in 2024.[202] Pares indicated, however, that in 2025, ELN's influence was reduced to 149 municipalities, losing ground in Nariño, Vichada, Cauca, and the border between Antioquia and Chocó, but consolidating its strength in

Norte de Santander, Arauca, and Cauca.[203]

The ELN is accused of crimes such as the illegal imposition of curfews; threats against social leaders; extortion; forced recruitment, including of minors; and participation in illegal economies such as illegal mining and drug trafficking.[204]

The ceasefire with the ELN expired on 3 August 2024, and confrontations with the security forces augmented significantly as a result, with fatalities increasing from 4 during the year-long ceasefire to at least 66 in the five-month period between its expiry and late December 2024.[205] Conflict with ELN and security forces mainly occurred in Antioquia, Arauca, Bolívar, and Norte de Santander, especially Catatumbo. In January 2025, the government declared a state of emergency for the Catatumbo area (Norte de Santander) after the ELN launched a combat operation against FARC dissidents, leaving over 80 dead and displacing at least 30 000 people in January 2025 and over 56 000 to 57 000 people in two months, one of the largest mass displacements in Colombia in decades.[206] The government also suspended peace talks with the ELN.[207] Sources characterised the violence by ELN and FARC dissidents that erupted in 2025 in Catatumbo as the worst crisis that the Petro government's 'Total Peace' policy has encountered.[208]

Actions carried out by the ELN during the reference period, as reported by sources, included:

on 15 January 2025, armed individuals killed a couple and their 10-month-old baby on a road that leads to the municipality of Tibú, Norte de Santander. Authorities pointed to the ELN, but that armed group blamed FARC dissidents for the killings;[209]

in January 2025, armed confrontations between the ELN and FARC dissidents in Catatumbo left over 80 people killed, dozens kidnapped, and thousands more displaced.[210]

- 187

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- 188

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- 190

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- 191

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- 192

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- 196

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- 197

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- 198

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- 199

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- 200

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- 201

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- 202

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- 205

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