



**COLOMBIA**  
IN THE FACE OF THE  
PANDEMIC:  
**INEQUALITY AND**  
MIGRATION



**BY  
MARCH 8,  
2021**

BRAZIL AND COLOMBIA  
WERE THE COUNTRIES  
WITH THE HIGHEST  
NUMBER OF CONFIRMED  
CASES OF COVID-19  
IN LATIN AMERICA AND  
THE CARIBBEAN.



*©Colombia in the face of the pandemic:  
inequality and migration*

**Care**

Argus. International Observatory  
of Migration and Human Rights

**Cover design and layout**

© Argos

**Cover photo:** Relatives for peace

**Author:** Rural Press Agency

| 2016 [Flickr].

Our views seek to investigate the social, economic, political and cultural phenomena surrounding human migration in different areas of the planet, in order to defend and promote the universality of human rights.

We observe the migratory processes taking care of their structural causes, the vulnerable populations, the various actors involved and the possible strategies of alarm, complaint, follow-up and resolution of cases.

The evocation of the myth of ARGOS –that of multiple eyes– inspires us to observe, with a plurality of perspectives, the migratory phenomena and the possible recommendations that guarantee free human mobility under conditions of equality and non-discrimination.

We focus on action research with the aim of accompanying and defending migrant populations whose human rights may be being violated. Our purpose is to generate inputs for the concretion of defense actions, as well as tools that can be useful to social, academic, civil and multilateral organizations.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has pointed out that the outbreak of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the region aggravated the already high levels of inequality, labor informality, lack of social protection and vulnerability present in Latin American and Caribbean countries, characterized by weak and fragmented social protection systems and the presence of marginalized urban settlements with limited access to public services.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, the region also has the second highest number of deaths from the virus after Europe, with 601,256 deaths. By March 8, 2021, Brazil and Colombia were the countries with the highest number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean. Brazil leads with 11,019,344 infections, followed by Colombia with 2,276,656 cases<sup>2</sup>. Of this figure, 2,180,777 were recovered; 6,598 people died; and around 30,000 cases remain active, according to data from the Colombian Ministry of Health.

In the face of the unprecedented crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of Iván Duque has implemented a series of restrictive measures aimed at halting the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, such as confinement, quarantine, preventive isolation and mobility restrictions. However, international organizations and academic studies have warned that such measures have led to a considerable increase in poverty and inequality globally, with people working in the informal economy who depend on the income they generate on a daily basis being the main victims.

On March 12, 2020, six days after the confirmation of the first case of COVID-19 in Colombian territory, government

1 <https://www.cepal.org/es/comunicados/pandemia-provoca-aumento-niveles-pobreza-sin-precedentes-ultimas-decadas-impacta>

2 <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/1105121/numero-casos-covid-19-america-latina-caribe-pais/>

authorities declared a state of sanitary emergency to contain the virus, and subsequently, on March 24, a mandatory national quarantine for 19 days, a measure that by that date had only been adopted in the region by the governments of Venezuela and Argentina. In the Colombian case, the quarantine was requested by various health sector organizations, which urged the government, in a public letter, to apply “more drastic measures than those taken to date, to avoid the disastrous changes in epidemiological indicators that have been a constant feature of this crisis”.<sup>3</sup>

Decree 457 provided for the restriction of the free movement of persons and vehicles within the national territory, the suspension of domestic air transportation and the imposition of criminal sanctions (such as fines and imprisonment) on those who violated the regulations. As was to be expected, these measures had negative effects on economic activity and, consequently, generated the loss of jobs and income for a large sector of Colombian society, historically marked by inequality, discrimination and social exclusion.

While people in the middle and upper strata of the population have the socioeconomic conditions to cope with the isolation and confinement measures, those in the lower and lower-middle strata have seen their incomes particularly affected by the decline in informal employment and mobility restrictions, in addition to being exposed to a much greater risk of contracting the virus.<sup>4</sup>

This was the context that prompted a significant number of migrants of Venezuelan origin in Colombia to return to

3 <https://www.eltiempo.com/uploads/files/2020/03/17/20.03.16%20-%20GREMIOS%20MEDICOS%20-%20Carta%20al%20Presidente%20Duque.pdf>

4 <https://www.france24.com/es/20200406-colombia-tela-roja-ayuda-coronavirus-pobreza-cuarentena>

their country, precisely because this population survived mainly in the informal economy. However, as a consequence of the border closure measures, returnees were forced to use irregular crossing points, with all the risks that this entails.

Due to the return of Venezuelans in several countries in the region, people from Peru, Ecuador and Chile transited through Colombia and were forced to seek alternatives to the closed border crossings in order to reach Venezuela. It is estimated that more than 200 thousand people passed through the Colombia-Venezuela border between March and December 2020, many of them in very impoverished conditions.<sup>5</sup>

A study conducted by the Universidad de los Andes on the socioeconomic pattern in the city of Bogota showed that the most vulnerable socioeconomic groups are exposed to a higher incidence of COVID-19. For example, as of July 2020, in stratum 1 there were 93 infections and 3.1 deaths per 10,000 households; in stratum 2 there were 56.4 infections and 2 deaths; while in stratum 6 there were only 8 infections and 0.6 deaths. In other words, “more than 10 times the difference in infections between those at the top and those at the bottom”. Given the way in which the Venezuelan population was integrated into the Colombian economy, it can be assumed that this population responded to the characteristics of the lower strata, as well as their greater risk of coronavirus infection. This fact is confirmed by the information gathered by the Venezuelan health authorities through the devices installed at the border crossings since March 2020, where it was evident that as the months passed, the number of infected people coming from Colombia was increasing.<sup>6</sup>

---

5 <https://sures.org.ve/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/VISION-PANORAMICA-SOBRE-EL-COVID-19-Y-LA-MIGRACION-VENEZOLANA.pdf>

6 *Ibidem*

On the other hand, the flow of migrants to the United States of America, passing through the Darien Gap between Colombia and Panama, was slowed as a result of the pandemic. However, it was recorded that between January and October 2020, Panamanian authorities intercepted 287 African migrants coming from Colombia, which is one of the transit countries. In 2019, this figure was around 5 thousand people. It should be taken into account that migrants from African and Asian countries usually travel by plane to a country bordering Colombia with tourist visas, and then enter Colombian territory and continue their journey to the north, paying coyotes at each border. The suspension of flights implied a drop in this flow.<sup>7</sup>

In this sense, the migratory dynamics in Colombia during the pandemic crisis have been clearly altered. On the one hand, there has been a return migration of Venezuelans, both from Colombia itself and from other countries in the region, and on the other hand, migration to Panama from Africa and Asia has been suspended, except for those who were already in the American continent at the time the suspension of intercontinental air traffic began.

---

7 <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/internacional/pese-a-peligros-en-rutas-africanos-eligien-america-para-escapar-de-crisis-y-pobreza-en-sus-paises-nota/>

## REFERENCES:

AFP (2021). “Latin America and Caribbean top 600,000 Covid-19 deaths”. February 3. Available at: <https://ticotimes.net/2021/02/03/latin-america-and-caribbean-top-600000-covid-19-deaths>

Cepal (2021). “Pandemia provoca aumento en los niveles de pobreza sin precedentes en las últimas décadas e impacta fuertemente en la desigualdad y el empleo”. March 4. Available at: <https://www.cepal.org/es/comunicados/pandemia-provo-ca-aumento-niveles-pobreza-sin-precedentes-ultimas-decadas-impacta>

DANE Colombia (2020). Índice de Pobreza Multidimensional y Pobreza Subjetiva. July 16. Available at: [https://twitter.com/DANE\\_Colombia/status/1283937733816266753](https://twitter.com/DANE_Colombia/status/1283937733816266753)

El Tiempo (202). Carta del gremio médico, Colombia. March 16. Available at: <https://www.eltiempo.com/uploads/files/2020/03/17/20.03.16%20-%20GREMIOS%20MEDICOS%20-%20Carta%20al%20Presidente%20Duque.pdf>

El Tiempo (2021). “ONU reporta preocupante aumento de masacres en el país”. February 23. Available at: <https://www.eltiempo.com/politica/gobierno/onu-presenta-informe-sobre-violencia-en-el-pais-2020-y-2021-masacres-en-colombia-568886>

El Universo (2021). “Pese a peligros en rutas, africanos eligen América para escapar de crisis y pobreza en sus países”. February 22. Available at: <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/>



internacional/pese-a-peligros-en-rutas-africanos-eligen-america-para-escapar-de-crisis-y-pobreza-en-sus-paises-nota/

France 24 (2020). “Con una tela roja, habitantes de una ciudad colombiana claman por ayuda durante la cuarentena”. April 7. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/es/20200406-colombia-tela-roja-ayuda-coronavirus-pobreza-cuarentena>

France 24 (2021). “El pueblo Nasa planta cara al abandono del Gobierno colombiano”. January 28. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/es/la-selecci%C3%B3n-de-arte-en-espa%C3%B1ol/20210128-colombia-pandemia-indigenas-asesinatos-protestas>

Portafolio (2020). “COVID 19, desigualdad y pobreza”. 23 de agosto. Disponible: <https://www.portafolio.co/opinion/mauricio-cabrera-galvis/covid-19-desigualdad-y-pobreza-543914>

RIDH (2020). “La pandemia y la indiferencia gubernamental en Colombia: de los asesinatos selectivos a una masacre nacional”. 27 de julio. Disponible en: <https://ridh.org/news/la-pandemia-y-la-indiferencia-gubernamental-en-colombia-desde-los-asesinatos-selectivos-hacia-una-masacre-nacional/>

Statista (2021). “Número de casos confirmados de coronavirus (COVID-19) en América Latina y el Caribe al 8 de marzo de 2021, por país”. March 8. Available at: <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/1105121/numero-casos-covid-19-america-latina-caribe-pais/>

Sures (2020). “Visión panorámica sobre el COVID-19 y la migración venezolana. Análisis de la situación entre mayo y julio

de 2020”. <https://sures.org.ve/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/VISION-PANORAMICA-SOBRE-EL-COVID-19-Y-LA-MIGRACION-VENEZOLANA.pdf>

Telesur (2021). “Organizaciones de Colombia anuncian carcerolazo por la vida”. February 9. Available at: <https://www.telesurtv.net/news/organizaciones-colombia-anuncian-cacerolazo-vida-20210209-0028.html>

