



## Militancy/Terrorism

# 31

AUG

14:26 UTC

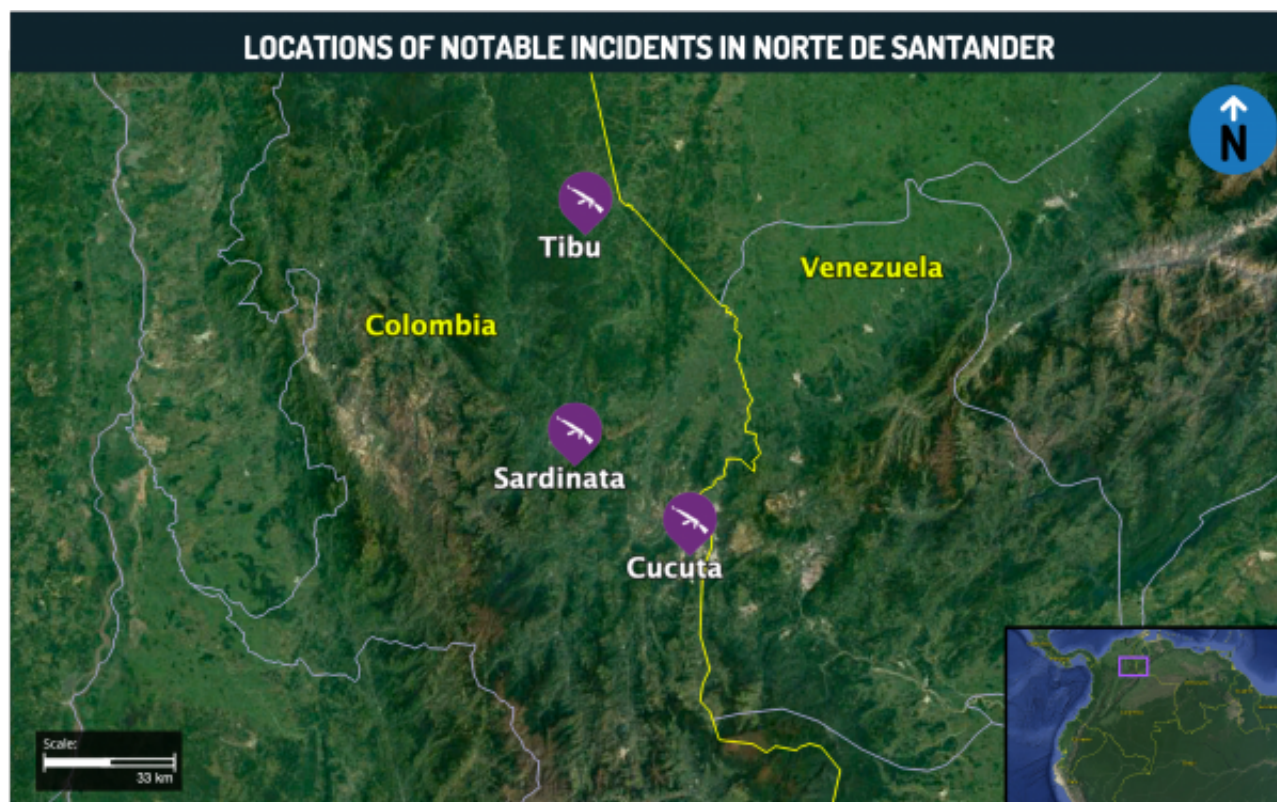
## Colombia Analysis: Explosion injures 14 at police station in Norte de Santander on August 30; insecurity along border to worsen as security forces clash with both ELN, FARC

### Executive Summary

- An IED attack at a police station in Cucuta, Norte de Santander on August 30 follows similar attacks claimed by FARC and ELN in the region in recent months.
- The escalation of violence in Norte de Santander comes amid the government's intensified crackdown on the groups' drug trafficking activities.
- Given the groups' attempts to "wage a war" against President Duque's administration, similar attacks are expected in the vicinity of government buildings, military bases, and police departments.
- The risk of armed violence spreading into larger urban centers remains, with armed groups possibly capitalizing on ongoing anti-government protests to advance their agenda.
- **Those operating or residing in Colombia are advised to avoid all travel to the Norte de Santander region due to increased insecurity.**

### Current situation

- 14 people, including 12 police officers and two passersby, were injured during an explosion at a police station in the Atalaya neighborhood of Cucuta, in Norte de Santander on August 30 at 06:15 (local time), during the change of shifts. The explosion was caused by an improvised explosive device (IED) placed under a chair located in front of the police station. President Ivan Duque announced that, according to preliminary investigations, the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN) clandestine group was behind the attack. However, no group has claimed responsibility for the incident as of writing.
- On August 28, one lieutenant and three soldiers of the Ejercito Nacional de Colombia, the Colombian army, were injured after being attacked with an IED in the municipality of Tibu, Norte de Santander during a security patrol. The incident occurred hours after authorities dismantled a drug laboratory in Tibu belonging to the ELN.
- On July 25, the Bloque Magdalena Medio faction of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) dissident group claimed responsibility for the attack in Sardinata, Norte de Santander targeting President Ivan Duque's helicopter on [June 26](#) and the explosion at a military base in Cucuta that left 44 officers injured on [June 15](#).
- In response, the government announced the deployment of the 'Comando Especifico de Norte de Santander' (CENOR), a special command force consisting of 14,000 soldiers, along the country's northeastern borders with Venezuela.



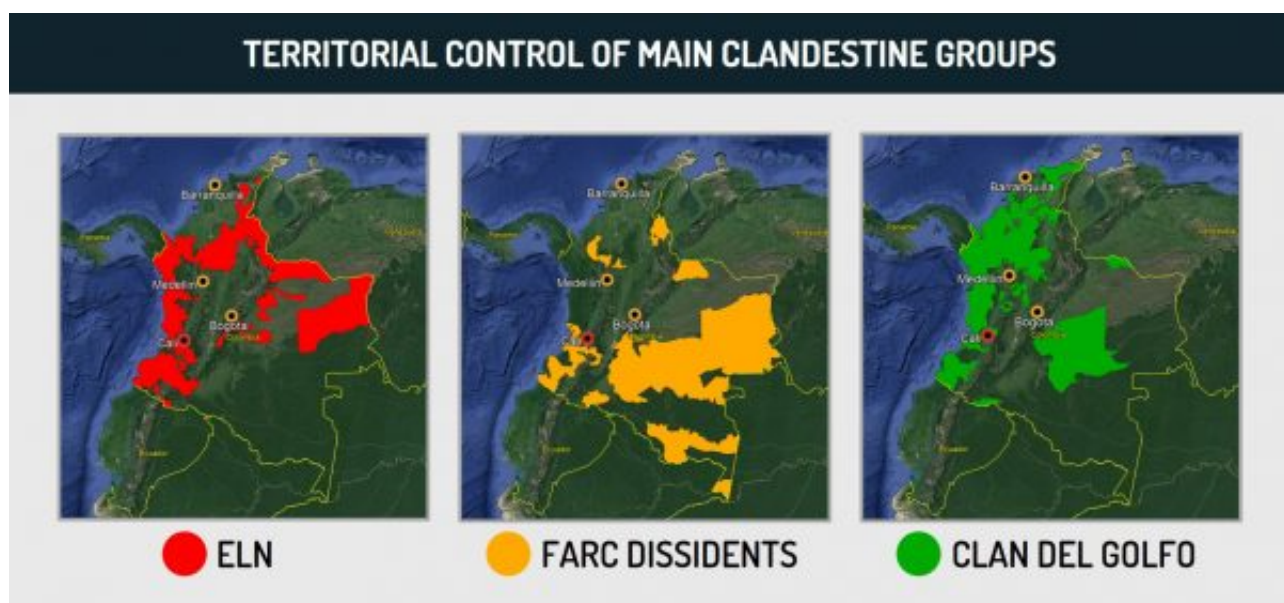
## Assessments

### Insecurity in Norte de Santander and the Venezuelan border to worsen

1. Despite Duque's initial statements accusing the ELN, considering FARC's involvement in the June attacks, the incident on August 30 was liable to have been perpetrated by members of either group, with neither having claimed responsibility as yet. That an IED was used for the attack, a modus operandi regularly utilized by both groups, supports this. One of the groups, however, is likely to make a statement claiming the attack in the coming weeks.
2. The recent spate of attacks reported in Norte de Santander highlights a significant escalation of violence by clandestine groups in the department. The attacks, including the latest, likely come in response to the government's intensified crackdown on the groups' drug trafficking activities along the Colombian-Venezuelan border in recent months. Additionally, based on a video released by FARC in July, the incidents are also part of a wider campaign aimed at "waging a war" against Duque's administration in order to establish an alternative government, allegedly representative of the majority of the Colombian population. This reiterates both groups' continuing messaging of being far-left revolutionary groups, although their political ideologies have long been superseded by their role in the regional drug trade, becoming Colombia's largest drug-trafficking groups.
3. The ELN and FARC's consolidated presence along the border area in recent years has been facilitated by the groups' expansion into Venezuelan territory and alleged protection and support from Venezuelan officials. **FORECAST:** Given the reported collaboration between the Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana (FANB), the Venezuelan armed forces, and the FARC in the June 26 attack, the security situation in the department is liable to remain critical.
4. Furthermore, that attacks have continued through August reflects the limited effectiveness of the CENOR deployment, with criminal groups liable to capitalize on remaining security gaps, the inadequate security patrolling, and the porous nature of the border area to continue engaging in drug trafficking in the region.
5. **FORECAST:** Given the government's intent to continue targeting the armed groups' illicit

activities in Norte de Santander, similar attacks are expected in the department in the coming months, particularly in Cucuta and Tibu. These are liable to occur after notable arrests of major ELN or FARC leaders or following large-scale security operations targeting the groups' drug trafficking operations, as was the case in the Tibu incident on August 28.

6. **FORECAST:** Based on precedent, possible attacks may manifest in the form of bombings, car bombings, ambushes, and mass shootings in the vicinity of government buildings, military bases, and police departments, particularly during the 'change of shift' hours in order to maximize the number of casualties. As evidenced by the latest incident, attacks pose a significant threat to civilian bystanders, due to the modus operandi.
7. **FORECAST:** Considering that the security enforcements in Norte de Santander, particularly in Cucuta and along the border entry points between Colombia and Venezuela are liable to remain bolstered, the potential for armed confrontations between the Colombian army, FANB, and armed groups in the coming months remains high. However, as demonstrated in previous incidents, even if small-scale skirmishes do either cross the border or involve both militaries, it is unlikely to evolve into a wider conflict.



### Violence liable to spread to Bogota and other urban centers

1. While the elevated threat of attacks is liable to remain focused on peripheral and border areas in Colombia where armed groups are known to operate, the latent risk of armed violence spilling into larger urban centers remains. As such, attacks with explosives are possible near government buildings and police stations in Bogota and other large cities. This is supported by the arrest of two members of the Segunda Marquetalia Fuerzas Armadas FARC dissident group in Bogota on August 5 for planning to stage an imminent attack in the capital.
2. **FORECAST:** Additionally, high-impact attacks targeting key state officials including President Duque and Defense Minister Molano are also possible. Potential attacks could take place in major cities, such as Bogota and Medellin, as well as in smaller urban centers in the north-eastern and southern border areas during the leaders' visits to the region. Such visits are likely to increase over the coming year, heading into the 2022 election campaign.
3. **FORECAST:** Based on the ongoing civil unrest associated with the anti-government protest movement, the possibility of ELN and FARC dissident groups increasing their links with armed protesters to advance their agenda and promote further violence in large urban centers is plausible. Therefore, the potential for isolated protesters using explosives and ammunition to attack security forces and government sites remains, as evidenced by the arrests of 12 individuals with explosives and ammunition intended to be used at nationwide protests in July.

## Recommendations

1. Those operating or residing in Colombia are advised to avoid all travel to the Norte de Santander region due to the increase in military operations, raising the potential for attacks across the region.
2. Maintain heightened vigilance in the vicinity of all government, security forces, and law enforcement locations and buildings nationwide due to the heightened risk of attacks.
3. Alert authorities upon witnessing suspicious behavior, items, or vehicles, particularly in the vicinity of such sites.
4. Maintain vigilance in the vicinity of all public gatherings due to the potential for clashes between protesters and security forces.