



2.1.4. ELN

The ELN is the last remaining insurgent group in Colombia and a dominant armed actor along the Colombia–Venezuela border.⁴⁶² It is estimated to have between 6 000 and 8 000 combatants.⁴⁶³ On the Venezuelan side of the border, however, the ELN is widely viewed as a paramilitary organisation operating with state tolerance and, in some cases, in support of state interests.⁴⁶⁴ The group's strongholds in Venezuela are located in Zulia, Táchira, Apure, and Amazonas states, where it engages in extortion, drug trafficking, and illegal mining.⁴⁶⁵

The Colombia–Venezuela border has long served as the ELN's most important strategic corridor, essential to its financing, its political-military project, and its overall survival.⁴⁶⁶ In 2025, the ELN, acting in collaboration with Venezuelan state security forces, reportedly weakened the presence of FARC dissidents and the FBL along the border, taking control of extortion schemes ⁴⁶⁷ and drug-trafficking routes.⁴⁶⁸ Most ELN commanders and fighters are believed to be sheltering in Venezuelan territory.⁴⁶⁹

Insight Crime provides a map of ELN presence in the Colombia–Venezuela border published in December 2025:

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Map 3: Presence of the ELN in the Colombia–Venezuela border, 2025.⁴⁷⁰

Sources reported that most extortion cases in the border region between Venezuela and Colombia are attributed to the ELN, with victims primarily including business owners, farm operators,⁴⁷¹ cattle ranchers,⁴⁷² and transportation workers.⁴⁷³ A report by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), based on interviews with local actors such as ranchers and farm owners, indicated that, according to the last available extortion statistics from 2021, approximately 75 % of the 8 600 cattle ranchers in Apure were being extorted by the ELN, with monthly payments ranging from 200 to 400 USD.⁴⁷⁴

A 2024 field investigation by Transparencia Venezuela in Táchira state found that ELN operatives reportedly position themselves openly at informal checkpoints, often alongside state security forces.⁴⁷⁵ Extortion payments are made in cash, sex, food,⁴⁷⁶ cattle, or 'logistical support'.⁴⁷⁷ According to Transparencia Venezuela, extortion cases involving the ELN are rarely investigated or sanctioned by authorities.⁴⁷⁸ These payments are commonly referred to as the 'war tax' (*impuesto de guerra*), *matraca*, or 'collaborations' (*colaboraciones*).⁴⁷⁹

The ELN has imposed extreme punishments in several Indigenous communities, including carrying out summary executions for violent offences such as sexual assault.^{[480](#)} In the Yapacana mining area of Amazonas state, individuals who violate the group's rules face coercive ultimatums; some young people have reportedly been told they must either join the guerrilla forces or be killed.^{[481](#)} Child recruitment by guerrilla groups, including of Indigenous children, is described as 'rampant'.^{[482](#)} Children are recruited with gifts, small payments, and promises of affection, and are then sent to work in mines, collect extortion fees, enforce violent punishments, and transport drugs across borders.^{[483](#)} In one reported case, a guerrilla group demanded a 4 000 USD payment to allow a recruited youth to return home.^{[484](#)} Briceño-León added that recruitment is facilitated due to high levels of poverty that force some to join criminal groups. Once inside, however, it is very difficult to leave the group and those who try, flee to Colombia or other countries. There have been cases of deserters who have been killed by armed groups in Venezuela and their bodies later appear on the Colombian side of the border.^{[485](#)}

The ELN uses Venezuelan territory both to evade targeted operations in Colombia and to capture local state infrastructure, enabling it to establish parallel authorities and control illicit economies.^{[486](#)} ABC reported that the group reportedly has around 2 500 combatants in the Venezuela,^{[487](#)} whereas InSight Crime indicated that 20 % of the 6 300 total number of combatants are stationed in Venezuela.^{[488](#)} Transparencia Venezuela indicated that the ELN and FARC dissident groups control local schools in Zulia state to ensure the education of members' children who attend classes in Venezuela.^{[489](#)}

After the US captured Maduro, the ELN publicly vowed to 'resist'.^{[490](#)} However, members of the group reportedly adopted a lower profile and retreated toward the border region as a precautionary response to the new political and security environment.^{[491](#)}

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