



COLOMBIA

Protection Analysis | NORTE DE SANTANDER

Analysis of trends in protection risks related to the internal armed conflicts

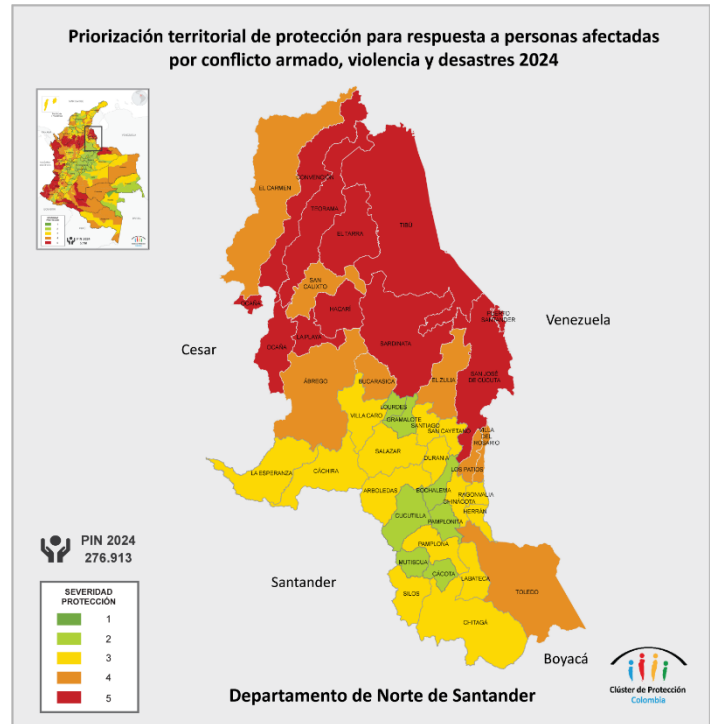
DECEMBER 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Norte de Santander is a department located in a border region with Venezuela, where the dispute between non-state armed groups (NSAGs), mainly in the Catatumbo subregion, continues to pose protection risks for communities due to the persistence of the internal armed conflict. Currently, these situations challenge the state's ability to ensure the protection of the population's rights, a situation exacerbated by numerous restrictions on humanitarian access faced by local and international organizations implementing protection activities in the territory.

The protection risks requiring immediate attention in the period covered by this analysis are:

1. Selective homicides, kidnappings, threats, and attacks.
2. Forced displacement and confinement.
3. Presence of Anti-Personnel Mines (APM), Unexploded Ordnance (UXO), and Improvised Explosive Devices (IED).
4. Gender-based Violence (GBV) including sexual violence and exploitation.
5. Forced recruitment and association of children and adolescents.



URGENT ACTIONS NEEDED

- Prioritize community interventions to transform environments with a presence in communities that goes beyond emergency actions and promotes effective community participation.
- Carry out interventions based on geographical areas without discrimination based on nationality.
- Strengthen institutional response capacity within the framework of public policy for victim assistance.
- Promote institutional actions aimed at investigating, prosecuting, and sanctioning crimes occurring in the territory.

UPDATE ON PROTECTION RISKS SEVERITY | SEVERITY 2023 - 2024

STRESS	SEVERE	EXTREME	CATASTROPHIC
- Bochalema, Cácuta, Cucutilla, Gramalote, Lourdes, Mutiscua, Pamplonita	Arboledas, Cáchira, Chinácota, Chitagá, Durania, Herrán, La Esperanza, Labateca, Pamplona, Ragonvalia, Salazar, San Cayetano, Santiago, Silos, Villa Caro	Ábrego, Bucarasica, El Carmen, El Zulia, Los Patios, San Calixto, Toledo, Villa del Rosario	Convención, El Tarra, Hacarí, La Playa, Ocaña, Puerto Santander, San José de Cúcuta, Sardinata, Teorama, Tibú
SEVERITY VARIATIONS COMPARED TO PREVIOUS ANALYSIS			
INCREASE	25%	Convención, Hacarí, La Playa, Labateca, Los Patios, Ocaña, Puerto Santander, Sardinata, Silos, Villa Caro	
STABLE	58%	Ábrego, Arboledas, Bucarasica, Cáchira, Chinácota, Chitagá, Durania, El Carmen, El Tarra, El Zulia, Herrán, La Esperanza, Mutiscua, Pamplona, Salazar, San Calixto, San Cayetano, San José de Cúcuta, Santiago, Teorama, Tibú, Toledo, Villa del Rosario	
REDUCTION	17%	Bochalema, Cácuta, Curcutilla, Gramalote, Lourdes, Pamplonita, Ragonvalia	



CONTEXT

Displacement victims (2022 – 2023 October) ⁱ		Homicides (2022 – 2023 October) ⁱⁱ		Disappeared persons (2022 – 2023 October) ⁱⁱⁱ		Individual victims of massacres (2022 – 2023 October) ^{iv}		Asasinated human rights defenders (2022 – 2023 October) ^v	
>32.900		389		33		38		12	
Women	0 – 17 years of age	Men	0 – 17 years of age	Women	0 – 17 years of age			Men	
52%	23%	56%	13%	52%	27%	-	-	75%	-

Norte de Santander continues to be one of the country’s departments most affected by the internal armed conflict. Its civilian population, with particular concern for those in the Catatumbo and border region, report that their human rights and international humanitarian law continue to be violated amid confrontations between the NSAGs and state security forces.

The level of risk in the context of the armed conflict has been exacerbated due to situations related to individual and collective threats, individual displacement, confinement, restrictions on mobility, physical and psychological integrity, gender-based violence (GBV), forced recruitment and association of children and adolescents, presence of anti-personnel mines (MAP), unexploded ordnance (UXO) and improvised explosive devices (IED), among others, derived from the territorial control by the NSAGs. The disproportionate impact in terms of protection on women, children and adolescents, Venezuelan refugees^{vi}, migrants and migrants in transit in the territory^{vii}, and indigenous peoples^{viii} has been highlighted.

ILLICIT CROPS

According to the most recent report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Catatumbo subregion is home to the enclave with the largest area of coca cultivation in the country, which is important to highlight as the cultivation and processing of coca leaf has been one of the principle causes of confrontation between NSAGs in the department. Approximately 28,000 hectares of coca are registered, representing 30% of the total enclaves and 12% of the total cultivation nationwide. According to Colombia's drug observatory^{ix}, the municipalities of Tibú (52% of the department), El Tarra (14%), and Sardinata (12%) have the highest presence of coca hectares. During 2022 and 2023, a shift in dynamics has been observed, particularly in the lack of buyers of coca base paste, leading to drastic changes in income derived from the activity and its direct impact on the food security of families.

Additionally, the widespread economic crisis due to the lack of purchase of coca base has led armed groups to diversify their sources of irregular income, such as the indiscriminate exploitation of coal and monocultures of oil palm. These activities are carried out without the necessary environmental licenses, in the informal sector, controlled by NSAGs, creating scenarios that increase the risk of sexual and labor exploitation in communities. The districts of Las Mercedes and Luis Vero in the municipality of Sardinata, the district of Pacelli, and the villages of Puerto Las Palmas, Miramontes, and Betrania, as well as the populated center of Versalles in the municipality of Tibú and the district of Orú in the municipality of El Tarra, stand out for a strong presence of indiscriminate exploitation.

NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS (NSAGs)

The presence of NSGAs in the region is multiple, complex, and historical, manifesting in various forms of territorial control and illicit activities. These issues are exacerbated by the border dynamics between Colombia and Venezuela. Among the seven existing non-international armed conflicts in Colombia identified by the ICRC, six of them occur in the department of Norte de Santander^x. Between 2022 and 2023, there has been an increase in incidents affecting humanitarian access to the



department^{xi}, due to the conflict's expansion in Arauca, the peace dialogue processes between NSAGs and the Colombian government^{xii}, and the NSAG's pursuit of hegemonic control. This has resulted in restrictions of humanitarian access to the department, including the presence of illegal checkpoints, interference in humanitarian activities, theft of vehicles, intimidation of humanitarian personnel, imposition of conduct rules on the population, threats, kidnappings, extortions, among other impacts. Between 2022 and July 2023^{xiii}, at least 59 incidents of humanitarian access issues have been identified in Norte de Santander, with the Catatumbo region being the most affected nationwide.

Among the causes generating difficulties for humanitarian access, the following stand out: the lack of knowledge by NSAGs of International Humanitarian Law, distrust in external actors within the context of confrontation, the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (AE), Anti-Personnel Mines (MAP), and Unexploded Ordnance (MSE), as well as the electoral context of the year 2023.

PROTECTION RISKS

RISK 1 Selective homicides, kidnappings, threats, and attacks

Between 2022 and October 2023, at least 12 massacres have been recorded, resulting in 38 victims in the municipalities of Cúcuta (9 events), Los Patios (1 event), Ocaña (1 event), and Villa del Rosario (1 event)^{xiv}. Additionally, during the same period, 14 homicides of human rights defenders and signatories of the peace agreement were registered in the municipalities of Tibú, Cúcuta, Convención, Teorama, San Cayetano, and Ábrego^{xv}.

According to records from the Unit for Comprehensive Care and Reparation for Victims (UARIV) between 2022 and October 2023^{xvi}: (i) **6,506 threats** were recorded in 34 municipalities of the department, with 49% of the victims being women; (ii) **389 homicides** in 22 municipalities of the department, with nearly 44% of the victims being women; (iii) **68 kidnappings** were reported in 11 municipalities of the department; (iv) **33 forced disappearances** occurred in 5 municipalities of the department, with 27% of the missing persons being between 0 to 17 years old; (v) **7 events of torture** were documented in 6 municipalities of the department.

In general, these incidents have occurred in areas where the Ombudsman's Office has warned of possible violations of International Humanitarian Law and harmful behaviors due to the presence and social control of NSAGs. Such impacts create a profound fracture in the social and community fabric, limiting the autonomy and effective participation of victims in protection and reparation processes.

RISK 2 Forced displacement and confinement

Displacement

In the department, forced displacement persists as a victimizing event with profound effects on the community. Individual displacements are the most recurrent in the territory, accounting for 85% of the total events, given restrictions on mass displacement. In general, between 2022 and October 2023, more than 32,900 displacement victims have been recorded in 37 of the 40 municipalities that make up the department. Tibú (21%), San Calixto (13%), El Tarra (12%), and Teorama (11%) are the most affected municipalities, belonging to the Catatumbo area. Concerning the population affected by mass displacements, it is noteworthy that 23% of the victims are between 0 and 17 years old, and 51.5% of the victims are women^{xvii}.

Among the causes of forced displacement are land dispossession, families avoiding the recruitment and association of their children by NSAGs, threats, and confrontations between legal and illegal armed actors. There is a challenge in compiling accurate official figures on forced displacements since individuals and families often do not make declarations due to well-founded fears. Consequently, underreporting leads to invisibility and difficulties in understanding the phenomenon.

Confinement

Due to territorial control and restrictions imposed by NSGAs, armed strikes declared by the ELN, and territorial controls exercised by these NSAGs, situations of confinement or mobility restrictions have occurred. These situations have led to limitations in accessing fundamental rights and community autonomy. However, officially, only two cases of confinement in the Catatumbo area have been recognized, specifically in rural areas of San Calixto and El Tarra, although they have not been officially registered as such. Difficulty in reporting these events persists due to the fear and threats faced by the affected individuals. In this regard, OCHA has registered 28 events of mobility restriction or obstruction of access to services and assistance for populations between 2022 and October 2023^{xviii}. Additionally, the Ombudsman's Office has issued 6 Early Warnings related to the imposition of conduct rules, confinement, regulations on mobility, and imposition of schedules^{xix}.

RISK 3

Presence of Anti-Personnel Mines (APM), Unexploded Ordnance (UXO), and Improvised Explosive Devices (IED)

During the year 2022 and up to October 2023, the presence of APM, UXO, and IED persists in the department, with at least 97 incidents related to explosive devices and 18 people injured. According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace (OHCP), these incidents took place in 15 of the 40 municipalities, with Sardinata (22), Tibú (17), Teorama (11), El Tarra (10), Hacarí (9), and Convención (6) being the municipalities with the highest number of events^{xx}. Additionally, the Ombudsman's Office considers contamination by APM, UXO, IED as behaviour causing vulnerabilities in all 40 municipalities of the department^{xxi}. This indicates the level of confrontation taking place in the territory.

These explosive devices have been used for various purposes, such as hindering the advance of security forces, confining communities, and generating mobility restrictions, among others. They are also used to exert territorial control, launch offensives against other NSAGs, and protect illicit crops. This situation poses a risk that endangers the lives of individuals collaborating with humanitarian organizations in the region and has an impact on humanitarian access.

RISK 4

Gender-based Violence (GBV) including sexual violence and exploitation

Since 2022, there has been an increase in cases of GBV in Norte de Santander, despite existing underreporting of GBV towards girls, adolescents, women, and the Colombian LGBTIQ+ population, including refugees and migrants in the department. According to the National Public Health Surveillance System (SIVIGILA), between 2022 and October 2023, more than 6,300 cases of gender and intrafamily violence were recorded^{xxii}. Similarly, the Gender Subgroup of Norte de Santander of the GIFMM/ELC^{xxiii} identifies an increase in intrafamily violence cases occurring on Colombian territory, primarily reported by Venezuelan women affected by various forms of violence (psychological, physical, economic, and sexual) perpetrated mainly by their sentimental partners or ex-partners, with at least 80% of cases not reported to the competent authorities.

With regard to Norte de Santander, the report on the human rights situation of LGBTIQ+ people in Colombia, for the year 2022 reports 168 LGBTIQ+ people victims of violence, where at least 140 were victims of threats, 17 of discrimination and harassment and 8 of police violence^{xxiv}. With regard to femicides, the Colombian Observatory of Femicides reports more than 36 cases for the period 2022 and October 2023^{xxv}; in addition, this same observatory places this department in sixth place with the highest rate of femicides per 100,000 women in 2023.

Additionally, the armed conflict in the department increases the risk of GBV among girls, adolescents, women and the LGBTIQ+ population. According to the UARIV, between 2022 and October 2023, at least 150 crimes against freedom and sexual integrity were registered in the development of the armed conflict in 15 municipalities of the department, where 90% of the survivors are women^{xxvi}. All this taking into account the enormous underreporting of GBV due to the stigma surrounding these cases.

The situation of GBV in the department of Norte de Santander is alarming, as it is linked to other protection risks and the level of vulnerability is accentuated by the condition of gender, sexual orientation or gender identity. It should also be mentioned

that in places with multiple affectations (armed conflict, disasters and migration), the vulnerability of GBV increases. In addition, the lack of access to quality, safe and confidential health, protection and justice services further perpetuates the risks associated with GBV in the department.

RISK 5 Forced recruitment and association of children and adolescents

A high risk of recruitment and association of children and adolescents of different ages by NSAGs is identified in the department. According to UARIV records, between 2022 and October 2023, there were more than 10 cases in the municipalities of Ábrego, Convención, Cúcuta, El Carmen, Hacarí, La Playa and Tibú, highlighting that 80% of the cases involved children and adolescents between 12 and 17 years of age^{xxvii}. In addition, the Ombudsman's Office warns of the high risk of recruitment and association through six early warnings in 29 municipalities in the department given the disputes of the NSAGs to exercise social and territorial control, especially in Catatumbo. There is evidence of a high under-reporting of recruitment victims in the department due to threats and the fear of families to activate protection mechanisms with the competent civilian institutional actors.

In the department, threats to teachers and the military use of educational institutions by NSAGs have been reported, hindering the right to education and putting children and adolescents at risk. Family and community fragmentation, the limited presence of civil institutions, and domestic violence, among others, generate a lack of protection for children and adolescents and increase the risk of recruitment and association by NSAGs.

For its part, the GIFMM identified more than 4,025 unaccompanied and/or separated refugee and migrant children and adolescents in transit between 2022 and November 2023, of whom 18 entered the protection system for processes to restore their rights, which shows a low institutional capacity to provide comprehensive care to unaccompanied and/or separated children. Refugee and migrant children and adolescents face multiple protection risks due to GBV, trafficking and smuggling for commercial and sexual exploitation, and recruitment and association by NSAGs

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this analysis, urgent action is needed to stop exposure to the various risks that have been recorded. The Protection Cluster, the Areas of Responsibility and its partners consider that the actions listed here are necessary to avoid affecting the communities and, in particular, to avoid the continuous deterioration of their quality of life.

RISK 1 Selective homicides, kidnappings, threats, and attacks

- Investigate and punish the events that have occurred as a means of increasing prevention in the fight against impunity.
- Favour collective protection schemes for human rights defenders in the event of threats that do not force them to leave the territory.
- Update the routes of prevention, protection and guarantees of non-repetition in the face of risks to life and liberty.
- Participate and influence public policy scenarios for comprehensive attention to victims, specifically Prevention and Protection Subcommittees to document human rights violations generated in the context of the conflict and promote complementary responses to the competent authorities to ensure spaces of trust that promote prevention, attention to risks and/or human rights violations and guarantees of non-repetition.

RISK 2 Forced displacement and confinement

- Permanent updating of contingency plans, with real resource allocation and without the possibility of transferring resources to other items.
- Have updated plans for prevention, protection and guarantees of non-repetition and with resources given the arrival of new local authorities in January 2024.
- Identify and promote compliance with the routes of comprehensive attention to forced internal displacement, in order to be able to access in situations of risk or protection violations.
- Promote the restoration of the rights of victims of displacement and confinement in the territory.
- Favour processes of solutions, including return, relocation and local integration in compliance with principles.
- Promote safe and inclusive information dissemination mechanisms to promote protection, including through communication campaigns.
- Transform our short-term, emergency-based presences into longer-term, proactive presences that allow for effective accompaniment of communities to promote prevention, effective participation and a transformation of the surrounding environment.
- Training local authorities in public policy to promote territorial systems of care for victims.
- Fortifying community infrastructure for protection in order to sustain humanitarian spaces.

RISK 3 Presence of Anti-Personnel Mines (APM), Unexploded Ordnance (UXO), and Improvised Explosive Devices (IED)

- Advance with humanitarian demining processes in the territory. Educate about the meaning of humanitarian demining vs. military demining.
- Promote processes of education on the risk of mines.
- Generate comprehensive care processes for victims, guaranteeing care and rehabilitation, without neglecting issues related to livelihoods.
- Reinforce awareness-raising and prevention activities on the risks of explosive ordnance through Mine Risk Education and continue to provide complementary response to survivors of APM/UXO/IED accidents and indirect victims.
- Integrate awareness-raising messages on the threats posed by explosive ordnance into other sectoral or multi-sectoral activities so that vulnerable populations can have a better understanding of the risks associated with the presence of APM/UXO/IED.
- Prioritise advocacy and emergency funding for mine action response.
- Raise awareness among humanitarian actors of the risks associated with the presence of APM/UXO/IED in order to reduce the impact of the threat of explosive ordnance during the conduct of humanitarian activities.

RISK 4 Gender-based Violence (GBV) including sexual violence and exploitation

- Propose the establishment of safe spaces for women and girls to strengthen community ties, provide life-saving information (GBV risks and access to available services) and psychosocial support to women and girls survivors and at risk of GBV.
- Strengthening health, protection and justice pathways to promote safe, confidential and quality access to GBV survivors.
- Ensure access to information and increase civilian self-protection capacities of leaders. They have the capacities and contextual knowledge to replicate knowledge of protection. Especially in relation to providing key and timely information on available GBV services.
- Promote and include a gendered approach in protection actions, especially in the response offered by the international cooperation, which implies identifying the differentiated needs of women, adolescents and girls in the context of humanitarian emergencies, especially those who are more vulnerable. These include pregnant and lactating women and adolescent girls, women and adolescent girls with disabilities, older women, indigenous women and adolescent girls affected by the armed conflict, and unaccompanied children. As well as analysing the risks of GBV and developing strategies to prevent and respond to GBV.

RISK 5 Forced recruitment and association of children and adolescents

- Implement intersectoral actions for the prevention of recruitment and association of children and adolescents in order to strengthen protective community and family environments, as well as articulate with cultural, sporting and educational initiatives to support the strengthening of skills and the construction of life projects for children and adolescents according to their needs.
- Strengthen community self-protection mechanisms through actions for the prevention of violence with strategies adapted to the physical and emotional development of children and adolescents.
- Prioritise the department to implement actions within the framework of the Safe Schools Declaration to prevent attacks and the use of educational institutions by armed actors and strengthen schools as protective environments with prevention, peacebuilding and conflict resolution components.
- Build territorial plans, according to departmental and municipal capacities, for the prevention of recruitment and association, and support the operation of the Immediate Action Teams to strengthen prevention and protection routes.
- Promote comprehensive care for the restoration of the rights of the child and adolescent victims of recruitment and association, including refugee and migrant populations affected by the armed conflict.
- Generate complementarity between actions to prevent the recruitment and association of ethnic and peasant communities, with the protection routes established within the framework of the public policy for the prevention of recruitment and association.



Methodology

The methodology for this update of protection analysis has combined periodic monitoring of the GTP Norte de Santander, as well as qualitative inputs from meetings and consultations with local partners, key informants, and the affected population. The analysis process has followed the severity methodology and estimates of People in Need (PIN) and the Protection Analytical Framework (PAF).

Limitations

The present analysis has followed a logic of qualitative and quantitative analysis derived from official data for subsequent interpretation by experts. On the other hand, to avoid potential risks that could arise for the communities, encounters with them were limited.

Therefore, information gathering exercises and analysis of the humanitarian situation focused on secondary data and interviews with key informants in the territory, including thematic discussion groups (Focus Group Discussions).



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Notes

ⁱ Victim's Unit (UARIV), [Victims of the armed conflict](#), 31 October 2023.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} INDEPAZ, [Massacres in Colombia during 2020, 2021, 2022 y 2023](#), 31 October 2023.

^v INDEPAZ, [Social leaders, defenders of human rights, and signatories of the peace agreement assassinated in 2022 - 2023](#), 31 October 2023.

^{vi} According to figures from Migration Colombia, there is a record of more than 270,000 people from Venezuela with the intention of staying who [have pre-registered for the Temporary Protection Status \(PPT\)](#) as of 30 June 2023.

^{vii} More than 37,000 people in transit have been identified in the department through the GIFMM Norte de Santander Protection Route 2022-2023.

^{viii} For more information: [MIRA report – Communities of Suerera, Shubacbarina \(Teorama\) y Karikachaboquita \(Tibú\) – Norte de Santander, Colombia](#), 20 September 2022 and Early Warnings [050-20](#), [004-21](#) and [025-21](#) Obudsman.

^{ix} Ministry of Justice, [Drugs Observatory of Colombia](#).

^x ICRC, [Colombia: Humanitarian Challenges 2023](#), 22 March 2023.

^{xi} OCHA, [Colombia: Humanitarian Access Balance Sheet 2022 \(January - December\) - 2023 \(January - July\)](#).

^{xii} Dialogue process initially with the ELN and EMC with the Colombian state.

^{xiii} OCHA, [Colombia: Humanitarian Access Balance sheet 2022 \(January - December\) - 2023 \(January - July\)](#).

^{xiv} INDEPAZ, [Massacres in Colombia during 2020, 2021, 2022 y 2023](#), 31 October 2023.

^{xv} INDEPAZ, [11 men and 3 women social leaders, human rights defenders and signatories of the peace agreement assassinated in 2022 - 2023](#), 31 October 2023.

^{xvi} Victim's Unit (UARIV), [Victims of the armed conflict](#), 31 October 2023.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*

^{xviii} OCHA, [Monitor: Colombia Humanitarian Situation](#), 31 October 2023.

^{xix} Obudsman, [Table of Early Warnings](#), 30 June 2023.

^{xx} Office of the High Commissioner for Peace, [Information registry on MAP and UXO effects and intervention](#), 31 October 2023.

^{xxi} Obudsman, [Table of Early Warnings](#), 30 June 2023.

^{xxii} National Public Health Surveillance System (SIVIGILA), [Epidemiological Bulletins](#), 31 October 2023.

^{xxiii} GIFMM (Interagency Group for Mixed Migration Flows), ELC (Local Coordination Team).

^{xxiv} Caribe Afirmativo, [Report on the human rights situation of LGBTQ+ persons in Colombia 2022](#), March 2023.

^{xxv} Colombian Observatory of Femicides, [Dinamic Report Femicides Colombia](#), 31 October 2023.

^{xxvi} Victim's Unit (UARIV), [Victims of the armed conflict](#), 31 October 2023.

^{xxvii} *Ibid.*