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## **In the shoes of refugees: providing protection and solutions for displaced Colombians in Ecuador**

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## **Introduction**

The continuing and changing conflict in Colombia has generated millions of internally displaced people and hundreds of thousands have sought safety in other countries in the region. It is calculated that there are 500,000 Colombian refugees in surrounding countries, only a portion of these are registered as refugees and receive services and legal protection. The largest population of Colombian refugees is in Ecuador, but they are also in Venezuela, Panama and Costa Rica.

The number of Colombian refugees fleeing the conflict has not declined and the number of those crossing an international border has increased. Currently, in Ecuador there are between 130,000 to 200,000 Colombians in need of international protection. Ecuador reformed its Constitution in 2008 and as a consequence changed its approach to immigration and refugee issues. As a result, over the last two years the Ecuadorian government has provided refugee status, documentation and access to rights to thousands of Colombian refugees.

I visited Ecuador in December 2009 and recently travelled there again as part of a delegation of the Refugee Council USA. As part of these visits I met with government officials, representatives of UNHCR, NGOs and refugees. Between my two visits I was able to see the deterioration of the situation of Colombian refugees, particularly in the border region and the progress made by the Ecuadorian government in their registration efforts. This paper is based on observations and information obtained on both trips and on secondary sources.

Ecuador has been praised by the international community in relation to its willingness to provide protection to refugees and comply with the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, to which Ecuador is a signatory. The challenges that refugees currently face in Ecuador are numerous. Many do not have access to protection, and for others there are currently no durable solutions.

At the same time, international praise has not necessarily translated into strong support for Ecuador or UNHCR to ensure initial efforts translate into effective protection and access to durable solutions. Burden sharing or responsibility sharing has been a central issue on refugee protection; the challenge remains to make it a reality in most refugee situations. Ecuador is the perfect example; there have been initial commitments to support refugee determination procedures, small scale livelihood programs and resettlement.

This support remains small and not coordinated; the success of initial good steps is at stake and burden sharing and international support are central to this success. Since my last visit the government of Ecuador has instituted changes to their Refugee Status Determination procedures that raises some concerns and questions over how the international community can support and encourage countries to engage in a long lasting commitment to the protection of refugees.

## Current situation of Colombian refugees in Ecuador

In 2008 UNHCR estimated in their Global Needs Assessment in Ecuador that there were between 130,000 to 140,000 Colombians in need of international protection in Ecuador. As of December 2010 the government of Ecuador had recognized 53,342 refugees, a long way from the 390 recognized at the end of 2000.

**Table 1: UNHCR's population of concern in Ecuador, end 2009**

Refugees	People in refugee-like situations	Total refugees and people in refugee-like situations	Assisted by UNHCR	Asylum seekers (pending)	Total population of concern
45,192	71,365	116,557	45,192	50,632	167,189

**Table 2: Breakdown of UNHCR's population of concern in Ecuador, end 2009<sup>1</sup>**

Type of population	Origin	Total	Assisted by UNHCR	Per cent females	Per cent under 18
Refugees	Colombia	44,400	33,400	48	28
	Various	800	800	34	9
People in a refugee-like situation	Colombia	71,400	10,900		
Asylum seekers	Colombia	42,500	42,500	44	22
	Peru	5,200	5,200	23	6
	Cuba	1,500	1,500	29	
	Haiti	370	370	25	4
	Various	1,200	1,200	23	8
<b>Total</b>		<b>167,370</b>	<b>95,870</b>		

Ecuador's border provinces are home to a large number of Colombian refugees and populations in need of protection. This region includes five provinces (Esmeralda, Carchi, Imbabuta, Sucumbios y Orellana). A majority of the refugees (60%) settled in urban areas, 30% of them in Quito. UNHCR has been operational in Ecuador since 2000. Currently, UNHCR has a central office in Quito and two field offices in the northern border region: in Lago Agrio and Ibarra, as well as a field presence in

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR 2009 Global Trends, UNHCR, June 2010.

Cuenca, Santo Domingo and Esmeraldas. UNHCR estimates that there are 1,000 new refugee arrivals every month.<sup>2</sup>

By the end of 2009 UNHCR reported a total of 167,370 persons of concern in Ecuador. Tens of thousands of people of concern for UNHCR are living in Ecuador but have not officially approached the authorities, despite being in need of international protection.

The reasons for not seeking asylum include a lack of knowledge about the right to do so, lack of resources to reach points of registration, and fear of approaching State authorities. The majority of persons in need of international protection originated from the southern provinces of Colombia, mainly Nariño, Putumayo, Valle del Cauca and Cauca, where ongoing violence has brought about steady flows of refugees.

The conflict continues to generate new displacement and the spillover effect of the conflict has increased or remained persistent in many bordering regions with Ecuador. According to the Ecuadorian government, in the past few years Ecuador “has suffered a progressive deterioration of security and social and economic conditions on the northern border.”<sup>3</sup>

The spillover of violence creates concern about the safety of refugees that sought protection in Ecuador and a dangerous and difficult environment for UNHCR and other organizations to work in; which further increases the vulnerability of refugees. These organizations have recognized that this context has affected access to some refugee populations.

According to the Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugee and Migration (PRM) the number of Colombian asylum seekers in Ecuador continues to rise. PRM also acknowledges the effect of the spillover over the security of refugees in the countries of first asylum: “some Colombian asylum seekers in Ecuador and Venezuela continue to experience harassment by illegal armed Colombian groups operating in these countries.”<sup>4</sup>

As UNHCR has recognized, the conflict in Colombia “has progressively expanded into Ecuadorian territory, bringing with it weapons smuggling, drugs and human trafficking, money laundering, kidnapping and even summary executions which occur with impunity [...] The security situation in communities near the northern border continues to be a major concern for UNHCR as it affects staff security and project implementation.”<sup>5</sup>

The situation has clearly deteriorated in the border region, where many refugees face physical security concerns. The violence and presence of armed actors inside Ecuador puts in great danger many highly vulnerable populations, particularly women, ethnic minorities and children. The lack of educational opportunities and access to employment create a perfect environment for the recruitment of traffickers and illegal

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<sup>2</sup> *Mission to Ecuador and Colombia. Letter from Assistant Secretary Eric Schwartz, Bureau of Population Refugees and Migration, Department of State, Eric Schwartz, May 2011.*

<sup>3</sup> *UNHCR 2009 Global Trends- UNHCR, June 2010.*

<sup>4</sup> *Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2010 – Report to Congress, Bureau of Population Refugees and Migration, Department of State, page 93.*

<sup>5</sup> *Global Needs Assessment Pilot Report, UNHCR, 2008.*

armed groups. The situation has worsened by the lack of presence of international organizations and NGOs in many areas. While UNHCR is located in the border region, other UN agencies are not present.

### **Enhanced registration**

In September of 2008 the government of Ecuador enacted a new asylum policy, with the objective to strengthen and modernize Ecuadorian asylum policy and reaffirm the commitment of the new government to international human rights. With a reformed constitution and a new asylum policy Ecuador committed itself to strive for the fulfillment of all international and regional instruments relative to refugee protection, including the Cartagena Declaration.

The Ecuadorian General Directorate for Refugees (GDR) is the governmental entity responsible for the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process in Ecuador. The GDR has a main office in Quito and a branch office in Cuenca. GDR Eligibility Officers based in Quito undertake interviewing and notification brigades in order to process the claims of asylum-seekers in the different provinces. The missions to provinces serve to compensate for the lack of permanent GDR presence in these regions.

In March of 2009 the government of Ecuador launched the Enhanced Registration Program (ERP) with the objective of providing RSDs and documentation to large numbers of refugees that lack access to the normal registration channels. The Enhanced Registration Process implemented with UNHCR was created with the intention to provide greater access to asylum application process in regions where refugees are located. Under the ERP the DGR mobile teams are utilized for an expedited process that takes one day and provides status determination and one year renewable visas.

Decisions are taken by an Eligibility Commission and documentation is issued on the same day. A representative of UNHCR participates in all sessions of the Eligibility Commission in an advisory capacity (with a voice but without vote) and submits recommendations on each individual case, based on interviews conducted by GDR eligibility officers. The database incorporates special needs tools that allow UNHCR to find out about specific needs of highly vulnerable refugees. UNHCR uses the Heightened Risk Identification Tool (HRIT) to identify cases of refugees at risk that have specific protection needs and might be in need of resettlement.

According to UNHCR the ERP is important in two ways: “it shortens the waiting period for a government decision on asylum claims from several months to just a few hours; and it takes the asylum process to the field, where many refugees have been unable to access asylum systems in urban areas because they didn't have the resources or because they feared being detained.”<sup>6</sup> During the first two months the DGR issued 5,000 refugee visas.<sup>7</sup> The Enhanced Registration Program in Ecuador led by the

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<sup>6</sup> *Large-scale refugee registration project starts in Ecuador*, UNHCR, Xavier Orellana,, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/NEWS/49cce42b2.html>, March 2009.

<sup>7</sup> *Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2010* – Report to Congress, Department of State, Bureau of Population Refugees and Migration.

Government with UNHCR's support has resulted in the registration and documentation of 27,740 refugees.<sup>8</sup>

The ERP has provided legal recognition to thousands of refugees and provided a flexible program to reach out to refugees that otherwise would not have access to RSD procedures. It is important to recognize the steps taken by Ecuador to comply with international refugee protection standards. The procedure still presents some challenges in relation to the renewal of the documentation, which expires every year and the challenges related to guaranteeing that the access to documentation would provide effective access to rights.

In January of 2011 the Ecuadorian government instituted new changes to their RSD process with the objective of reducing fraudulent applications. The new procedure adds a new initial stage of admissibility to the RSD process. The two staged process (used in other Latin-American countries) raises concerns over the criteria use to exclude applicants from the procedure and an adequate appeals process. The new process does not include an appeal mechanism at the admissibility stage.

### **Discrimination and effective access to rights**

While the government of Ecuador has taken significant steps to provide protection to refugees, Colombian refugees face numerous challenges to effectively access basic rights and, in many cases, they are unable to find security. As recognized by PRM "many Colombians in need of protection who enter these countries irregularly must hide in remote border areas or in shantytowns of larger cities."<sup>9</sup>

Many Colombian refugees are able to integrate into communities in Ecuador though many others are confronted with numerous barriers to their integration or protection, mainly: barriers to access basic rights (employment, education, housing, etc.) and lack of access to physical protection and security.

The security situation has not only worsened for refugees in the border areas, many refugees report threats in Quito and other cities in the south of the country. The lack of safety shelters and mechanisms of expedited resettlement are of great concern. While UNHCR has the possibility of relocating refugees within the country, the lack of safety mechanisms places refugees at great risk.

The main challenges that Colombian refugees have faced (access to employment, housing, education, etc.) are paired with the spread of discrimination and a general context of poor economic and social conditions affecting the Ecuadorian population. In an urban context refugees and Ecuadorians alike are confronted by difficult socio-economic conditions.<sup>10</sup>

The barriers to effectively access some of the most basic rights recognized by the Ecuadorian government are also related to the spread of discrimination against

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<sup>8</sup> *Magnitude of the Refugee Situation 2000-2010*, UNHCR Ecuador

<sup>9</sup> *Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2010* – Report to Congress, Department of State Bureau of Population Refugees and Migration, page 39

<sup>10</sup> *Refugiados Urbanos en Ecuador- Resumen Ejecutivo*, FLACSO/ACNUR, February 2011

Colombians, which particularly affects minorities (Afro-Colombians and indigenous people). The integration process takes place in a context dominated by a profound economic and ethnic segregation.<sup>11</sup>

Colombian refugees stated how discrimination affects them on a daily basis and particularly in their access to employment and housing. In a study conducted by FLACSO/UNHCR on urban refugees, 52% of the refugees surveyed felt discriminated against in Ecuador, specifically in relation to negative perceptions in relation to nationality, gender, sexual orientation, refugee status, ethnicity and socioeconomic situation.<sup>12</sup> In the same survey public spaces were identified as the place where most refugees experienced discrimination, followed by the work place, public institutions and places of residence.

Many Colombian refugees mentioned that when looking for housing or jobs they often hear: “We do not hire Colombians” or “We do not rent to Colombians”. These situations reduce the type of employment available to refugees, increases abuse from employers and for women and minorities this can become a serious barrier to integration.

The discrimination also affects access to housing for refugees, who expressed that they are in many cases severely limited to where they can find a place to live. In recognition of this challenge UNHCR put forward an anti-discrimination campaign titled “Pongamonos en los zapatos de los refugiados y demos el primer paso para entender su situación”, which translates as “let’s put ourselves in the shoes of refugees and let’s take the first step to understanding their situation.”<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, the discrimination has a profound consequence on the self-perception of refugees. Discrimination is also expressed by verbal abuse on the streets and, in some cases, with physical violence. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to these situations. Refugees expressed that the discrimination in Ecuador makes them feel “without dignity” or as “useless or not worthy” (*una porqueria*).

Discrimination and xenophobia worsens when several dimensions are added: racial, gender and nationality (e.g. Colombian afro-Colombian women). There are reports of xenophobic treatment from authorities and the police: “...in the northeastern region of Ecuador, there are frequent reports of xenophobic and discriminatory treatment of Colombians by Ecuadorians, including harassment and arrest by police forces.”<sup>14</sup> Many refugees mentioned that Ecuadorians have two stereotypes for Colombian refugees: men as guerilla members or drug traffickers and women as prostitutes.

Apart from the challenges to access of employment and housing, many Colombians encounter barriers to access education for their children (particularly for teenagers), to the banking system and to health services. While the government of Ecuador guarantees access to healthcare and education, in reality many refugees face many bureaucratic hurdles and requirements that might impede access to schools for many children.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> [www.ensuszapatos.org](http://www.ensuszapatos.org)

<sup>14</sup> *Colombia: Crisis Bubbling Over*, Refugees International, Andrea Lari and Sean Garcia , July 2009.



A particular problem for urban refugees, not only in Ecuador but in many places throughout the world, is their near “invisibility” in their country of asylum. Despite the increase in asylum recognition for Colombian refugees in Ecuador, the phenomenon of invisibility has taken root, with untold numbers of Colombians in need of international protection living in Ecuador without ever having approached authorities. This phenomenon is paired with the visibility challenges that discrimination and xenophobia brings in the social integration for many refugees.

Colombian refugees are also affected, particularly in the border region, by the lack of security and the spillover violence (which in many cases puts them in danger or continuing persecution in the country of first asylum): “Ecuador’s border cities, and other localities that host a large number of refugees, are characterized by high levels of violence and crime, drug trafficking, arms smuggling and a high concentrations of brothels.”<sup>15</sup>

Women and girls among this population are exposed to a high risk of sexual and gender based violence. Women and girls from minority groups are in an even greater vulnerable situation. There is a greater need to provide protection and programs that focus on SGBV, particularly in areas in the border region. The lack of prevention, protection and prosecution of SGBV cases is prevalent.

There is also a great need of livelihood programs that focus on women, particularly women head of households. There are reports of survival sex in the refugee population and we heard stories of trafficking and abuse of minors. The presence of human trafficking networks and legal prostitution creates a difficult context to work in the prevention of SGBV.

### **Durable solutions for Colombian refugees**

For most Colombian refugees local integration is the durable solution currently available, while return to Colombia could be a future solution for some if adequate conditions materialize. For others, resettlement in a third country is the only option to achieve protection. UNHCR in Ecuador works particularly through local integration and resettlement. Currently, UNHCR does not actively promote repatriation of Colombian refugees.

For most refugees local integration is the most viable option in the near future, and the steps taken by the Ecuadorian government to document and recognize the rights for thousands of Colombian refugees is a step forward in this direction. It is important to support the efforts of the government by increasing the support for integration programs.

Access to support programs for refugees remains inadequate and more is needed to ensure that local integration becomes a durable solution for thousands of Colombian refugees. The need for livelihood programs is great, particularly for highly depressed areas and for women head of households. Linking programs targeted to refugees with

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<sup>15</sup> *Ecuador’s Humanitarian Emergency*, International Policy Report, Center for International Policy, Abigail Poe and Adam Isacson, April 2009.

development projects for the local community could be an alternative that would benefit both populations.

As noted earlier, third country resettlement is a critical solution for a number of Colombians in Ecuador. While the Ecuadorian government has taken steps to provide refugee status to many Colombians, there are certain highly vulnerable persons within this population, such as women at risk and urgent security cases, for whom the status granted by Ecuador does not provide a durable solution or physical protection.

The use of resettlement as a protection tool and as an effective durable solution for refugees in Ecuador with special needs has significantly developed over the past years. As PRM recognized in its fiscal year 2010 Report to Congress, third country resettlement has become an important alternative for those who face physical risks and urgent protection needs.<sup>16</sup> Resettlement is also considered a durable solution for refugees who, although not in need of immediate protection, have no prospects for local integration.

Finally, resettlement is employed strategically as a responsibility-sharing mechanism to alleviate pressure exerted upon Ecuador, which is host to the largest refugee population in Latin America. Resettlement cases are submitted by UNHCR to “traditional countries of resettlement”, such as Canada, the United States, Sweden; and also to “emerging” countries, such as Chile, Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, as part of the Mexico Plan of Action.

The Solidarity Resettlement program of the Mexico Plan of Action is of particular importance as a regional solidarity and responsibility-sharing mechanism, although support is still needed to become a durable solution to a larger number of refugees. It benefits a limited number of mostly Colombian refugees who face protection risks in their countries of asylum. Almost 400 people were resettled in Argentina, Brazil and Chile in 2005-2007.<sup>17</sup> In 2007, the program was expanded to include refugees from outside the region.<sup>18</sup>

A total of 900 people were presented to third countries for resettlement in 2009, and some 600 individuals departed during that year. Uruguay and Paraguay have also signed agreements with UNHCR to become resettlement countries. Uruguay was expected to resettle some 15 refugees in 2008. As UNHCR points out, the coming years will be crucial for the establishment of reception capacity and local integration schemes in these countries. Experience gained from resettlement programs elsewhere will be of great importance in making the new programs a success.

The number of refugees resettled from Ecuador has grown since 2003. While the United States’ numbers have declined since 2004, Canada has increased the numbers of resettled Colombians from Ecuador in the same period. The numbers of refugees resettling in the region remain small compared to admissions to traditional resettlement countries.

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<sup>16</sup> *Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2011 – Report to Congress*, Department of State, Bureau of Population Refugees and Migration.

<sup>17</sup> *Global Needs Assessment Pilot Report*, UNHCR, 2008

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

UNHCR established a Resettlement Unit in 2003 and while it has grown since then its capacity is limited in relation to the need. The principal criteria used by UNHCR for the resettlement of Colombian refugees from Ecuador are: Legal and Physical Protection Needs (LPPN), Women at Risk (AWR), Refugees without Local Integration Prospects (RLIP) and Survivors of Violence and Torture (SVT).

While the ERP and the use of the HRIT has provided a greater number of identified cases in need of resettlement, the use of the Cartagena Declaration definition vs. the 1951 Convention represent challenges and additional burden for the resettlement unit when preparing referrals.

The United States began a Priority 1 resettlement program in 2002 to resettle Colombian refugees referred by the US embassy in Colombia, and later expanded the program to interview Colombian refugees referred by UNHCR in Ecuador and Costa Rica. The highest number of Colombian refugees admitted by the US was in fiscal year 2004 (the fiscal year in the US runs from October 1<sup>st</sup> to September 30<sup>th</sup>) with a total of 577 refugees.

From 2004 to 2009 the admission numbers decline with an increase in fiscal year 2010. The admissions numbers in 2011 have been affected by general lower admissions numbers in all regions and the addition of new security screenings by the US government.

**Table 3: Arrivals of Colombian refugees through the USRAP<sup>19</sup>**

<b>Fiscal Year</b>	<b>Arrivals</b>
2011 (as of May)	24
2010	123
2009	57
2008	94
2007	54
2006	115
2005	323
2004	577
2003	149

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<sup>19</sup> *Refugee Processing Center, [www.wrapsnet.org](http://www.wrapsnet.org)*

The admission of refugees from Colombia was first impacted by broad interpretation of legal provisions of material support to terrorist organizations included in the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act).

On April 27 2007, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Michael Chertoff signed a statement authorizing the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to exempt from the "material support" bar those who provided material support under duress to designated terrorist organizations if the individuals are determined to meet certain criteria.

On May 10 2007, a fact sheet issued by the USCIS made clear that the Department of Homeland Security will only begin considering "waivers" for victims of duress at the hands of designated "terrorist organizations" (or what is known as Tier I and II groups) after DHS has "identified" the specific group as one that would be included within the exemption. In May 2007 Secretary Chertoff made this duress exception applicable to specific Tier I and II organizations that DHS had identified. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was the first group to fall under this classification.

Under the exemptions signed by the Secretary of Homeland Security for material support provided under duress to a designated terrorist organization, individuals who provided material support under duress to the FARC (September 6, 2007), National Liberation Army of Colombia (ELN) (December 18, 2007) and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (March 10, 2008) were now eligible for exemptions that would make them admissible to the US.

**Table 4: Arrivals of Colombian refugees through the USRAP by year and month<sup>20</sup>**

<b>FY</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Oct</b>	<b>Nov</b>	<b>Dec</b>	<b>Jan</b>	<b>Feb</b>	<b>Mar</b>	<b>Apr</b>	<b>May</b>	<b>Jun</b>	<b>Jul</b>	<b>Aug</b>	<b>Sept</b>
<b>FY11</b>	<b>24</b>	0	0	3	0	4	1	0	16				
<b>FY10</b>	<b>123</b>	4	22	4	0	8	1	7	20	12	0	6	39
<b>FY09</b>	<b>57</b>	1	1	0	19	11	0	0	0	0	10	12	3
<b>FY08</b>	<b>94</b>	0	40	0	0	3	0	13	5	0	0	2	31
<b>FY07</b>	<b>54</b>	0	6	3	0	28	5	0	4	8	0	0	0
<b>FY06</b>	<b>115</b>	0	2	0	0	6	9	0	24	12	15	0	47
<b>FY05</b>	<b>323</b>	40	26	0	90	14	44	3	41	3	1	0	61
<b>FY04</b>	<b>577</b>	45	44	65	1	68	51	4	75	0	135	25	64

<sup>20</sup> *Refugee Processing Center, [www.wrapsnet.org](http://www.wrapsnet.org)*

Table 3 and 4 show the number of arrivals of Colombian refugees through the resettlement program from 2003 to the present. The number of Colombian refugees (from Ecuador, Costa Rica and Colombia) has declined since 2003 to 2009, with a small increase in 2010. Unfortunately the United States accepted only 56 Colombians for resettlement in fiscal year 2009.

The increase of resettlement of Colombian refugees to the United States continues to be affected by new and ongoing hurdles. The acceptance of cases has been affected by: material support, firm resettlement, and credibility issues. RCUSA has raised numerous concerns to the US government in relation to the lower level of admissions and high denial rates for Colombian refugees particularly for cases referred from Ecuador. Firm resettlement continues to be a challenge in relation to admissions of Colombian refugees.

According to 8 CFR 207.1 (b), an applicant is considered firmly resettled if he/she has been offered resident status citizenship, or some other type of permanent resettlement by a country other than the United States and has traveled to and entered that country as a consequence of his/her flight from persecution.

8 CFR 207.1 (c) states: “Any applicant who claims not to be firmly resettled in a foreign country must establish that the conditions of his/her residence in that country are so restrictive as to deny resettlement. In determining whether or not an applicant is formally resettled in a foreign country, the officer reviewing the matter shall consider the conditions under which other residents of the country live:

1. Whether permanent or temporary housing is available to the refugee in the foreign country;
2. Nature of employment available to the refugee in the foreign country; and
3. Other benefits offered or denied to the refugee by the foreign country which are available to the other residents, such as (i) right to property ownership, (ii) travel documentation, (iii) education, (iv) public welfare, and (v) citizenship.”

Many NGOs have expressed concerns on the increase in denials and the low number of Colombian refugees accepted by the United States, particularly in light of the limited resettlement capacity of countries in the region. While the number of refugees admitted to the United States in FY10 increased from the prior year which seems a positive step forward from the US government, the number of arrivals this year is discouraging.

## **Conclusion**

The Colombian displacement is the largest displacement crisis in this hemisphere and it is important to evaluate the regional and international response. The number of refugees in the region continues to increase and the responses from governments, UNHCR and NGOs remains inadequate. It is important to recognize efforts made by the government of Ecuador to comply with international refugee law.

Concrete policies and programs have been put in place to recognize refugees seeking protection and to provide access to rights in Ecuador. There have also been efforts made by UNHCR and countries in the region to support the government of Ecuador. As expressed by the Assistant Secretary of PRM, Eric Schwartz, “conditions are not perfect, discrimination is a continual challenge and – especially at the national level - a much greater level of effort on refugee registration and assistance is required.”<sup>21</sup>

The following are key areas that need additional resources and attention:

- recognition of refugees: enhancing the registration procedures;
- integration programs: effective access to rights and livelihood programs are central to ensure local integration of refugees;
- resettlement: need to increase resettlement capacity in Ecuador and resettlement spaces in traditional countries of resettlement and solidarity resettlement countries; and,
- women and children: additional efforts need to be made to address SGBV and the vulnerability to trafficking of women and children.

Colombian refugees continue to face numerous challenges and many are still in need of international protection. It is important, not only in this context but also internationally; to provide support to countries that decide to take concrete steps to comply with their international obligations. The support provided will determine the success of the initial efforts made by the Ecuadorian government and will determine the possibility of finding durable solutions for refugees.

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<sup>21</sup> *Mission to Ecuador and Colombia. Letter from Assistant Secretary Eric Schwartz, Bureau of Population Refugees and Migration, Department of State, Eric Schwartz, May 2011.*

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