



A CHARADE OF CONCERN:
The Abandonment of Colombia's
Forcibly Displaced



MISSION STATEMENT

Since its founding in 1989 under the auspices of the International Rescue Committee, the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children has sought to improve the lives of refugee women and children through a vigorous and comprehensive program of public education and advocacy. The Commission is the first organization in the United States dedicated to speaking out solely on behalf of women and children uprooted by civil war, violence, or persecution.

As part of an ongoing project to promote better protection and services for refugee women and children, the Women's Commission dispatches assessment teams to war-affected locations around the world. In visiting Colombia in 1998, the Women's Commission considered whether key United Nations standards of humanitarian aid and human rights protections were being implemented. These standards included the following:

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Guidelines on the Protection and Care of Refugee Children

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement

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This report was written by Holly Myers, Women's Commission advisory council member, and Marc Sommers, PhD, consultant on war affected children. It was edited by Janet Torsney. Additional delegation members and contributors included Mary Diaz, Virginia Hamilton, Pilar Rueda Jimenez, and Hiram Ruiz. Research and other assistance was provided by Judith Sunderland, Liliana Keith, Luz de Jesus, Maha Muna and Marta Bekele.

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the past decade, armed conflict in Colombia has forced more than 1.5 million Colombian citizens to flee their homes and communities. Caught in a nightmare of violent conflict with no prospects for reconstructing their former lives, hundreds of thousands of mostly rural peasants have found no option but to join the ranks of the internally displaced. Despite the extraordinary dimensions of the displacement phenomenon, which now claims 1 in 40 Colombians, the issue has remained largely a silent crisis. This lack of response, both from within Colombia and from the international community, must be remedied if Colombia is to have any chance in achieving its objective of peace.

In 1995, the Colombian Conference of Bishops Report on Violence and Internal Forced Displacement in Colombia placed the number of displaced persons at 600,000, or 2 percent of the population. Since that time, the pace of displacement has accelerated dramatically; in 1998 alone, more than 250,000 people were forced to flee. The vast majority—approximately 80 percent—of the 1.5 million displaced are women and children. More than 58 percent of the displaced are female and 39 percent of displaced households are headed by women. Throughout the nation, these women and children are truly abandoned.

At the end of 1998, only one country had a higher number of conflict-induced internal displacements than Colombia: the Sudan, with 4 million displaced. Colombia's total number of displaced, at approximately 1.5 million, placed it on par with Afghanistan. Angola and Iraq, both with approximately 1.2 million displaced, follow close behind.¹ While the humanitarian catastrophes in these four other countries are widely recognized and have received considerable international attention, the crisis of forced displacement in Colombia remains largely hidden to international view.

WOMEN'S COMMISSION DELEGATION TO COLOMBIA

In response to Colombia's worsening crisis of internal displacement, the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children sent a delegation to Colombia at the close of 1998 (November 29 to December 10) to assess the conditions facing women, children and adolescents uprooted by war and violence. The objectives of the delegation were to:

- Report on the scale of the displacement crisis and understand the political conditions which have led to an acceleration of this phenomenon.
- Determine to what extent the specific needs of women and children were being addressed by the government and international humanitarian relief response, with a focus on protection, shelter, education and health.
- Raise awareness among policy makers, both within and outside Colombia, and among donor agencies of the status, rights and needs of women and children in order to improve programmatic responses to this crisis.

The delegation traveled to major cities—Bogotá, Medellín, Cartagena—and to smaller cities, such as Barrancabermeja and Montería, to learn about the conditions confronting displaced persons in urban “areas of reception.” The delegation also traveled to rural towns such as San Pablo and Turbo, which simultaneously are “areas of expulsion” (areas from which Colombian citizens are fleeing) and “areas of reception.” In Bogotá, delegation members met with government and NGO officials and also visited with members of the city's huge displaced population. The delegation then split into two groups to conduct field assessments in five cities and towns (Cartagena, Montería, Turbo, Medellín, and Barrancabermeja) and two rural areas (Northern Córdoba and Magdalena Medio) that have been among the hardest hit by Colombia's civil conflict.

The Women's Commission delegation traveled to Colombia as part of a joint mission which included staff from the US Committee for Refugees (USCR). Over the past year, the USCR has mounted a concerted “Campaign for Colombia” to bring international attention to the problem of large-scale displacement in that country. In March 1998, the USCR published *Colombia's Silent Crisis* and conducted a US national speaking tour featuring displaced Colombians who discussed their plight directly with US citizens. The USCR continues its advocacy work to focus US government and NGO attention and resources to this tremendous humanitarian crisis.

KEY FINDINGS

In Colombia, the delegation found evidence of a seriously deprived displaced population which receives alarmingly low levels of humanitarian support and only minimal recognition of their plight from national and international agencies and governments. In cities, the displaced are crowded in shantytowns which sprawl along the peripheries of the urban centers. These barrios of cardboard and tin shacks or hovels with plastic sheeting for roofs lack potable water, electricity, roads, schools, health posts or assistance projects. In the few instances where displaced persons fled their communities together and remained in cohesive groups, assistance has been sporadic and inadequate.

The delegation recommends that:

- The US expand the scope of its aid to Colombia beyond the narrow focus of security and military aid, and increase its humanitarian aid to Colombia substantially. Emphasis should be placed on assistance to women and children, including income generation projects, health and education. This assistance might be provided through an umbrella grant arrangement, with a US NGO serving an administrative and monitoring function working in partnership with Colombian NGOs.
- The Colombian government devote substantially greater resources to the displaced and commits itself to providing increased levels of health care, education and income-generation programs throughout the country using women's

organizations and networks as key providers. As the Colombian government works toward its objective of negotiating peace with the guerrilla forces, it must also make a concerted effort to stem the tide of displacement by controlling the violence and human rights abuses of paramilitary forces and other armed groups.

- UN agencies improve coordination and response to the displacement crisis and aggressively use their offices to ameliorate the inadequate response to Colombia's displaced. All UN agencies should educate government agencies and NGOs about and promote adherence to the standards of response found in the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.
- Humanitarian assistance programs receive greater support from the Colombian government and UN agencies. Shelter, water and sanitation assistance should receive high priority in Bogota, Medellín and other major urban "areas of reception" for the displaced.
- Aid take into account the needs of women who, along with children, comprise a majority of the displaced. Women urgently need specific job training and micro-enterprise loan programs that will allow them to establish themselves in their new circumstances.
- The international community and Colombian government support women's NGOs and networks, ensuring their role in providing assistance to displaced women and children. The National Office for Equality of Women, the Rural Women's Office in the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Network of Women's Associations are excellent resources. The Rural Women's office in particular, has expertise in projects to strengthen women and families uprooted by violence.
- Children's needs be made an urgent priority in responding to the displaced. Without access to education or any productive activities, children and adolescents are at high risk of forced recruitment, sexual exploitation and other serious abuses.

II. BACKGROUND

Over the last decade, armed conflict has claimed 35,000 Colombian lives and created a population of more than 1.5 million internally displaced people.² The rate of displacement has increased in the past three years, when an average of nearly a quarter of a million Colombian citizens has been displaced annually by violence, some for a second or third time.

The civilian population of Colombia bears the brunt of ever-escalating violence. As conflict moves into a region or village, residents are forced from their lands and homes because they are caught in the crossfire between the military, guerrillas or paramilitary, or because they are accused of sympathizing with one faction or another. In many cases, the accusation of being a sympathizer or collaborator is used as a pretext for the violent removal of residents from entire rural areas.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Colombia bears the distinction of being one of Latin America's most stable democracies even as fierce, competing armed actors engage in starkly violent civil conflict. This violence, and the displacement it has caused, has lasted for decades. The magnitude and causes of the extraordinary rate of current displacement are well documented by numerous Colombian and international NGOs, as well as by the Colombian government itself.

For almost 50 years, violence in Colombia has been used for political and economic gain by guerrilla, narco-traffic and paramilitary groups, to assert control by police and military forces, and for direct personal gain by criminals. The evolution of competing armed factions over a period of decades within Colombia has produced complicated dynamics of conflict.

The modern era of Colombian violence began in the late 1940's with the rise of Jorge-Eliécer Gaitán, a populist outsider supported by the peasants, workers and poor people in urban areas. His ascendancy threatened the country's political establishment and eventually led to violent attacks on Gaitán's political followers across rural Colombia. Gaitán's assassination in April 1948 sparked the beginning of a 20-year period known as *La Violencia*, during which violent demonstrations across the country ignited heavy repression in rural areas, resulting in "more than 300,000 civilians (mainly poor peasants)... killed and approximately 2 million people [fleeing] to the cities."³

The waves of migration of displaced Colombians to the cities in the aftermath of Gaitán's assassination profoundly altered Colombia. While new players expanded and consolidated their hold over significant portions of rural Colombia, the exodus of displaced helped to transform Colombia from a largely rural to a predominantly urban society. As professors Nora Escobar Segura and Donny Meertens observe: "what is generally referred to as 'The Violence' of the 1950's and 1960's—[is] a period of undeclared civil war that has never been recognized as such. Since then, with very brief periods of peace, violence has continued to take place in all regions of the national territory."⁴ Indeed, many Colombians viewed 1998 as the fiftieth year of *La Violencia*.

In the past 40 years, the absence of the state in large portions of rural and urban Colombia has fueled the expansion of violence and displacement. Obregón and Stavropoulou note that, "in geographically marginalized regions where the presence of the state was almost nonexistent... violence became a form of resolving problems."⁵ Tirado-Mejía notes that in areas of relatively recent colonization, such as in Urabá, the Upper Magdalena, Caquetá and Putumayo, "the state does not exist, and therefore there is no governmental power to arbitrate eventual conflicts."⁶ The rise of leftist guerrilla groups in the 1950s coincided with the rise of anarchy and conflict across large portions of the countryside. Tirado-Mejía notes that "it is no coincidence that the guerrilla has often taken over by force the role of the mediator" and become "well accepted by a large percentage of the populations."⁷

In the cities, gangs known as *brigadas populares* attracted the support of guerrillas. Other gangs also formed, particularly "cleanup squads" comprised of young upper-class men seeking

to rid cities of “undesirables” and, eventually, displaced people.⁸ These gangs had support from drug traffickers and the young men who joined them were known as *sicarios*.⁹ “Thus by the mid-1960s,” observes Tirado-Mejía, “violence, which had hitherto been mostly rural, also became urban.”¹⁰

The influence and power of narco-traffickers, who support both guerrillas and paramilitaries and private interests according to their interests in a given territory, are another element. Rural areas located on the periphery of state control have attracted drug traffickers for decades, and as a result has given rise to “that ambiguous alliance between guerrillas and drug traffickers.”¹¹ Drug traffickers have also promoted the rise of paramilitary groups, which are militia units that wealthy landowners and drug traffickers have created to displace peasants and increase their own holdings.

In the past decade, these right-wing paramilitary forces have become a significant force in the Colombian war landscape. In addition to the support of large landowners, drug interests and businesses, these groups are acknowledged to have the support of the army” to carry out their activities.¹² It is a widely held view in Colombia that the dramatic decrease in the reported human rights violations attributed to the army and the accompanying dramatic increase of these violations attributed to paramilitary organizations is no coincidence, but reflects a deliberate strategy on the part of the military to “sanitize” its image.

Although guerrilla actions contribute to forced displacement, paramilitary actions are responsible for the majority of Colombia’s current displacement, according to experts on Colombian displacement. Paramilitary operations have spread rural violence and displacement to all but 2 of Colombia’s 33 geographic *departamentos*. Commenting on this feature of Colombian conflict, a UN High Commission on Human Rights officer commented, “54 percent of displacement is caused by paramilitaries. There is a relationship between the army and paramilitaries. In the South of Bolivar, we have deplorable responses from the army.”¹³

Finally, the already lethal level of violence in Colombia is exacerbated by the environment of impunity that reigns throughout the country. Given the fact that “there is a 97 percent probability that a criminal will escape sentence,” violence and other criminal acts in Colombia take place in an atmosphere where “justice is practically nonexistent.”¹⁴ This grim reality allows guerrilla, paramilitary, drug trafficking and other groups to define “justice” in their own terms.

HUMAN RIGHTS

The history of violence in Colombia has fostered conditions which have produced one of the world’s most abysmal human rights records. Not only are levels of violence and human rights abuse extraordinarily high throughout the country, but the judicial system is completely unable to address the unending onslaught of crimes and murders—politically motivated or otherwise—that terrorizes the Colombian citizenry.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights opened an office in Bogotá in April 1997, under the direction of Almudena Mazarrasa. Its first report, issued

in March 1998 at the 54th session of the UN High Commission for Human Rights documented the “abundant evidence of continued joint military and paramilitary actions that ended with human right violations as well as a disregard for the laws of war by all parties to the conflict.” Mazarrasa left Colombia at the end of 1998 and was replaced by Mr. Anders-Kompass from Sweden.

NGO personnel promote human rights work at great personal risk. Within the past few years, numerous human rights workers or organization leaders have been targeted and killed because of their work. One prominent victim was Jesus Maria Valle Jaramillo, director of the Committee for Human Rights in Antioquia. He was murdered in his office in Medellín on February 27, 1998, presumably by paramilitary gunmen. A Committee activist who assisted the Women’s Commission delegation while in Medellín described to the Commission the threats to her own safety which forced her to live in exile in Ecuador for several months.

Testimony by scores of women in virtually every town or city visited by the delegation underscored the disregard for human rights that permits the phenomenon of displacement to hurtle forward with such ferocity. Kidnapping, assault, torture and murder—directed primarily toward men—is common, and is often accompanied by assault on women and the burning and looting of homes. Rape is also reported, though it remains difficult to document. And while surviving family members are able to make formal *denuncias* (complaints) about these crimes in some cases, more frequently the fear of retaliation silences the survivors. Victims harbor no illusion that the perpetrators of these acts will be brought to justice.

Colombia’s record in human rights has been well documented by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.¹⁵ The US State Department has also documented the continuing violation of human rights in Colombia; in its 1997 report, the State Department noted the high number of human rights abuses committed by the Colombian military as well as the Colombian government’s unwillingness to confront or control human rights abuses perpetrated by paramilitary forces.¹⁶

III. KEY CONCERNS FOR WOMEN

Forced displacement in Colombia is clearly a “women’s issue.” As noted above, 58 percent of the people forced to leave their homes are female and 39 percent of displaced households are headed by women. For hundreds of thousands of Colombian women, mostly from rural areas, the trauma and upheaval often forces them from an established, stable existence into circumstances of outright desperation.

Typically, a woman decides to flee her home after a husband, brother, father or son has been kidnapped or murdered. Traumatized and terrorized, she will leave as quickly as possible—often within hours—for a hastily chosen destination. Upon arrival in that destination, she will be lucky to count on the help of a friend or relative for immediate, temporary shelter, whether it is a corner of a shack in an outlying barrio or a covered corridor in a downtown building. Just as likely, she will find no support whatsoever and will have to scramble to find a foothold in the barrios or at the edges of smaller towns.

To compound their anguish, displaced women generally flee their homes with children. Of the many women the delegation interviewed throughout the country, most were responsible for several children. In addition, displaced women frequently care for elderly parents or other family members. Some women even take in orphans. The pressure of finding a way to ensure the well-being of dependents, who at a minimum need shelter and food, is often overwhelming. Employment is scarce, salaries are low and child-care issues add to the difficulty of keeping a job, if one is found.

In scores of interviews with displaced women, the Commission heard the same themes repeated: women were forced to leave their homes under threat of violence and death; they lost husbands, brothers, fathers in massacres, assassinations, disappearances; they took their children and fled for the safest place they could find, most often cities, where they could hide among the large populations. Left with no home, no income and continued threats against themselves and their families, they turn to menial jobs or street vending, sometimes ending up begging or prostituting themselves in order to provide food for their children.

Displaced women find little or no assistance in making the transition to their unbidden new existence. Women interviewed by the Commission reported difficulty in obtaining the 90-day ad hoc grants available through the International Committee of the Red Cross or the Colombian Red Cross, or in obtaining the small “pension” that is supposed to be available from the Ministry of the Interior.¹⁷ Many others did not know this assistance was a possibility, or never applied for it as they feared their lack of documentation would prevent them from receiving help. A small minority of the displaced obtained a modicum of help from NGOs or church groups. This emergency help is usually a one-time-only provision and does not include materials for shelter or help in finding employment, two critical concerns.

For many rural women, forced displacement means an abrupt shift in the way they negotiate their lives. Before being forced to flee, they operated mostly in the “private” sphere, of family, home and neighborhood. When their husbands and male support network are killed, disabled or disappear, women are forced to operate in the “public” sphere, dealing with government representatives, NGOs and other officials, with whom they may have had little contact in the past. This transition can be abrupt, intimidating and traumatic.

For Colombia, as in most places in the world, those in charge of making the decisions about how to assist the displaced, how to bring about peace and how to end the culture of impunity are men. Women are not involved in the peace process, do not hold leadership positions in government offices addressing the problems of the displaced or among the many human rights and relief groups working there. The few women’s groups which have tried to address the issue of displacement struggle to find support and an audience.

PROFILE: ONE WOMAN’S STORY

My situation is that my husband was director of a peasant organization in our area. He was helping to organize land for the peasants. He began to receive threats and when he went to Bogotá to a meeting I received a letter that was a threat against him. I called him and told him not to come back.

Some months before, the national president of the organization had been killed and the department president was killed six months before that. There were at number of people killed. All these men were being killed and leaving widows. My husband was going back and forth to Bogotá for some time. That night I called and said it is too dangerous to come back. Finally one night my house was assaulted. They broke everything in the house. They beat me—it is a miracle I am here because in that moment I thought I would die for sure. They hit me on the head. They wanted to take my 10-year-old daughter but a neighbor rescued her, and took her to a school to hide.

They told me if my husband did not present himself, they will take my girl. For one month we were in hiding. My husband was in hiding and the threats continued against my daughter because they wanted to get him. One of my daughter’s teachers was assaulted as a way to get to my daughter. She was raped but didn’t report it. One month passed—finally we left at night. The women’s association brought us to Baranquilla and then to Bogotá. We stayed in one house in Bogotá for six months, but then we got calls and threats there, saying they know where my daughter was studying. We went to the Ministry and we got a place to stay for one month: a room in an auberge.

We don’t know who is calling. We consider them paramilitaries. In this country all of this happens if you try to defend your rights. If you say anything critical of any functionary, you are threatened with death. Everyone is afraid to say anything. We are very guarded. My husband can’t walk around. He is afraid he will be recognized.

We have been here about one year.

My daughter has been very affected by this life and has had to have psychological help because of all the pressure. She sees the psychologist at school.

Shelter

Throughout Colombia, there is an urgent need for shelter for the thousands of displaced persons streaming into the various “areas of reception.” Most of the displaced move into urban areas, with the cities of Bogotá, Medellín, Cartagena and Cali among the top destinations.

There are two levels of need. First, immediate temporary shelter should be available to the newly displaced as they make their transition into their new city or town. Second, there is equally great need for long-term shelter for the burgeoning populations of displaced that crowd urban areas and maintain only a tenuous existence in their marginal barrios. The displaced frequently “invade” unoccupied private property, so their hold on their shelter is doubly tenuous. Not only do these people lack basic services—electricity, water, sanitation, transportation—but they are subject to being evicted from these lands at any time.

In Medellín, the Commission visited a neighborhood of about 2,000 people who live high in the hills that rise high above the city, in precariously perched rickety wood and cardboard structures. The barrio is stripped clean of vegetation and when it rains the hillside becomes a dangerous corridor of slick mud. Women interviewed in this neighborhood related their despair at having nothing with which to shield themselves and their children from the rain, wind and cold. In this neighborhood, there is an informal pattern of passing along available shelter to newcomers arriving from elsewhere in Antioquia and other regions.

In small villages such as San Pablo in the south of Bolivar, women use wood planks, mud and sticks to build shelter. They, too, live on the outskirts of the town, next to streams of waste water, where access to water, sanitation and electricity is difficult or impossible. The Commission visited families in bare ranchos in outlying areas of town, where the dirt floors frequently turn to mud because of their proximity to the Magdalena River.

In Turbo on the Gulf coast, about 3,000 displaced persons who fled en masse from a campaign of violence intended to clear them from their homes in the Rio Sucio region of Chocó have found shelter in the town coliseum. Hundreds of beds and cots are pressed together in the coliseum’s entryway, a cavernous concrete room, with peeling paint and dusty floors. They cook and wash outside the coliseum, in makeshift kitchens and wash areas that surround the stadium. Other displaced families in Turbo occupy *albergues* that were constructed for them by European aid organizations to relieve overcrowding at the coliseum. The Commission visited an *albergue* surrounded by chain link fencing that consisted of a series of long, wood plank buildings divided into smaller living quarters, where families of five to seven people were crammed into one small room.

PROFILE: DISPLACED WOMEN LIVING IN THE TURBO COLISEUM

Gina

“I will tell you what happened to me: it happened to all of us. On February 28 at 2:00 P.M., we were working in the cornfields and planting corn, cutting, harvesting rice and plantenos, because that’s what we did. Our life was agricultural. Lots of kids were playing in groups. And suddenly, mothers ran, children ran, even tiny ones. There were some children abandoned as they slept in the fields.

We came back the same day. And we were all mixed up. Some children were lost and others weren’t with their mothers. When we came back that day, they said we had to leave our houses or they wouldn’t be responsible for what happened to us. There weren’t sufficient boats or motors. We had to use canoes. There were children of four years carrying children of five months. We got on the boats and left.

They damaged our things—robbed everything. For two days we had nothing to eat.”

Evagelina

“Puerta America is where we arrived. From here we waited for a boat to take us to Turbo. When we arrived, police were there. We lined up and they took our information. They put our names on a municipal board and brought us to the Coliseo. We had to cook in open air, under the sun, in the water and on the ground of the Coliseo. We started to organize as committees.”

Cenobia Perez

“I have two children. As my friend said, when the children heard the attack, the kids were afraid. When we got here, they had memories of it and got upset at night. My children are 15 and 8. They still have fear and nervousness whenever they hear noise. A lot of the children were affected this way.”

Maria Perez

“It’s been a hard trauma for children and adults. We never experienced bombing or gun fighting. We have been too sick, a sickness we didn’t know before. There have been a lot of children who had to go to Bogotá for medical treatment. Here we have medical attention, but just a little. The children are always asking when can we go home, because here they suffer a lot.

The men are busy organizing for our return and the women are here trying to support the men and support the country. We hope to return as soon as possible—but with conditions we ask of government, for our land and security. If the government doesn’t agree to fulfill its pledges, we won’t move. We don’t want to return if we have to leave again.”

Food

Hunger is constant for many of Colombia's displaced, and malnutrition is a serious problem for displaced children. Mothers reported that the struggle to feed their children—and the anxiety of knowing that their children were hungry—caused them unending anguish. In urban areas, families who were once self-reliant and frequently grew much of their food, lack money to buy food. For the displaced who remain in rural areas, if there is any land on which to grow vegetables or fruit, access to food and the ability to barter for food may be somewhat better.

In Bogotá, a mother told the Commission: “Now I just leave my children at home. It is too difficult to take them out, because then they see things they want to eat and become upset when I can't buy anything for them.” Women reported that their incomes were too small and too irregular to feed themselves and their families adequately. In Medellín, women told the Commission that often they were able to eat only once a day and that their children suffered constant hunger.

Doctors of the World conducted a nutritional survey among the displaced population living at the sports stadium and the two *albergues* that constitute the “camp” for the displaced in Turbo. It found that 68 percent of the children were malnourished. The agency Justicia y Paz provides supplemental food, but the families say it is usually available only once per week. Mothers and medical personnel questioned whether this limited supplemental feeding represented enough of a caloric and nutritional gain to make much difference for the affected children.

In Turbo, poor health results not only from lack of food, but from lack of water. The displaced population is dependent on collecting rainwater in large plastic containers or on delivery of water. The supply is variable and often is woefully inadequate. Women reported that: “Sometimes four or five days go by with no water. Sometimes we must go to the school nearby to get water, but they don't always give it to us. There are days the children don't eat because there is not enough water to cook with.”

Complaints from the Turbo community centered on the overall scarcity of food, not inequitable distribution. The camp committee that oversees food distribution is respected and does its work in a methodical and fair manner. In addition, there is a community store in the camp which sells basic goods and foodstuffs at low prices. Despite this positive organization, hunger and lack of food remain primary concerns for camp residents.

Protection

Lack of protection is a pressing problem for Colombia's displaced. With no safe havens, displaced persons hide their identities to limit chances that they will be hunted down by paramilitary or guerrilla groups, abused by government authorities or exploited by other Colombians. The decision to hide also excludes the displaced from obtaining services to which they, as citizens, are theoretically entitled. Displaced children are preyed upon, vulnerable to direct offenses like rape and forced recruitment into gangs or militias, and are victimized by their parents' inability to obtain basic services for them.

Although primary responsibility for protecting its internally displaced citizens falls to the Colombian government, this is yet another responsibility the government has failed to accept. One government official responsible for assisting the displaced stated, “They [the displaced] are recognized as victims, but there is no recognition of the concept of protection for IDPs.” The government has also limited the roles of the two key UN agencies responsible for protection concerns, the High Commissioners for Human Rights and Refugees. A vigorous local human rights community has long advocated for the international community, and especially the Colombian government, to assume their responsibilities to protect and advocate for the displaced, but with extremely limited success.

Documentation

All Colombian citizens count on their possession of an identity card or the “*Cédula de Ciudadanía*” (Citizenship Card). The *cédula* allows a Colombian citizen to vote, drive, work and qualify to leave the country, among other things. To acquire this card, it is necessary to obtain two preliminary cards. These are the *Registro Civil* (Civil Registration), which every citizen is supposed to carry with them and, for the displaced, the *Certificación de Desplazados* (Certification of Displacement). Finally, there is the *Cédula de Ciudadanía*, which lists information such as a person's place of origin, name, date of birth, height, specific scars and skin color. It also documents where the person received a card.

Not all rural families possess identification cards. They may apply for a card only in order to register their children for school. Often, displaced persons may have possessed an identity card in their place of origin but left it behind in the rush to flee. Once displaced, they frequently hesitate to apply for any identity card because this would call attention to their displacement. As one NGO official working Bogotá commented, “Many IDPs avoid sending their children to school, as it may expose the family as IDPs and make their life harder.”

Displaced Colombians also may not know how or where to obtain an identity card. Card applications are drawn-out and difficult. One Colombian NGO that helps displaced Colombians to process their identity card applications commented that the process a displaced person must endure to obtain an identity card is “a government strategy for not doing anything.”

Still, life without an identity card is difficult. A veteran researcher of Colombia's displaced commented that, in a sense, “the displaced are not even citizens. If you take the identity card as an indicator of citizenship, you have to have one. Without it, you cannot get access to state agencies.” Without these cards, it is often not possible to obtain services, such as schooling or access to a health clinic.

Even if a displaced person does carry an identity card, government officials may argue that the displaced person can only obtain services in the location where they received the cards in the first place. In such cases, the displaced person is being asked to seek out services in the very area from which he or she felt compelled to flee.

Social Disintegration of the Family

The trauma and subsequent dislocation of displaced families place them in circumstances of unmanageable pressure. Frequently, the burden of extreme poverty and the loss of traditional roles for family members causes families to split apart. Many women resort to begging and prostitution in order to bring in an income. The need to work also forces women to leave children alone for long periods of time. Children, unable to attend school and often forced onto the streets to earn money, may end up as street children. The tragedy of initial displacement is thus compounded by the subsequent negative pressures on all family members.

The targeting of fathers is a standard war tactic in Colombia that leaves many displaced children without their traditional protector. The impact of this trauma and loss on surviving family members can be devastating. Even if the father remains with the family, the impact of displacement on men is severe. As a Colombian expert on the displaced notes: “[The father’s] stature erodes during displacement... He is dependent on others. He feels degraded by accepting handouts.” Husbands, suddenly without work in an unfamiliar and hostile urban environment, frequently abandon their families.

Health

In every city and town visited by the Commission, displaced women related their concern and frustration over lack of access to adequate health care services. Despite the existence of a government health care system to which they theoretically have access, displaced women are often unable to obtain these services for themselves or for their children.

In many instances the primary obstacle to receiving health care services is the lack of an identity card which the prospective patient must present to the hospital or clinic in order to receive attention. Once again, the requirement of documentation highlights the impossible bind in which many displaced are trapped.

According to the 1993 Health Sector Reform (Law 100), there is a fourth card that is supposed to entitle poor and unemployed Colombians to receive health services from public or private clinics. Displaced Colombians do not often qualify for such cards. According to Law 100, the displaced are entitled to the Municipal Plan, which is designed to cover Colombians lacking the health card. This plan for *Los Repobres* (The Extremely Poor) includes not only the displaced but homeless people as well. However, municipal governments may lack either the funds or the will to provide such services. Thus, even when displaced people do qualify for health services, they may receive no attention.

In Turbo, displaced women expressed extreme frustration at their lack of access to health care and to the bureaucratic requirements that have impeded them in their quest for decent treatment. Malaria cases are reported regularly within the camp, and a majority of children suffer from some degree of malnutrition. Women related instances of children and older people dying from lack of attention in the early days of their forced displacement when the medical system refused to accommodate their emergency situation.

In Turbo, the displaced did receive special health care cards which acknowledged their displaced status and entitled them to health care in the Turbo and Apartadó health care systems. But these cards were not honored when presented. Displaced women speculated that they were refused service because the resources at the hospitals and clinics were inadequate to take on the additional burden of the displaced population. Displaced women in Bogotá and Medellín also reported that their lack of documentation prevented them from accessing the health care system and that there were not enough clinics, especially as they live in barrios far from well-established neighborhoods.

While reproductive health care services are more or less available to Colombian women through the national health system and the services of organizations like Profamilia, displaced women suffer from lack of access to this particular area of health care, just as they lack access to health care in general. Profamilia embarked on a project to assist the displaced, but it is only in one region and has limited funding. In Barracabermeja and San Pablo, the Organización Feminina Popular has organized successful campaigns to screen for cervical cancer. This type of outreach service for displaced women, covering a whole host of reproductive health concerns, is badly needed.

Health professionals interviewed in Montería and Bogotá stated there were clear differences between the health profiles of patients who were poor and those who were displaced. Most of the differences they highlighted, including malnutrition, respiratory illnesses, diarrhea, parasitic diseases and sexually transmitted diseases, applied directly to children’s health and are indicators of the extreme precariousness of the living situations of the displaced.

Employment and Income Generation

The priority concern for displaced women is income generation. Dozens of women described the extreme difficulty of finding work and the meager, unpredictable means by which they survive. One woman organizer noted that because most of the displaced are from rural areas and entering urban settings, the pressure for immediate cash is enormous: new arrivals must buy food, pay rent and purchase materials to build shelters, send their children to school and pay for transportation.

The search for a job is complicated by the stigma associated with being displaced. Prospective employers demand to know an applicant’s place of origin and ask “What did you do that caused you to become displaced?” or “Who caused you to flee?” Many assume that the displaced are troublemakers and will bring trouble with them to their jobs. Many women try to find work as domestic helpers, cleaning homes or doing laundry. These jobs are usually temporary or sporadic, and they are difficult to obtain. Furthermore, these jobs frequently require that a woman “live in,” returning to her home for only one day a week. Many women stated that employers consider them too old to employ if they are in their late 20’s or early 30’s.

Another common way for displaced women to earn money is to become vendors selling food, trinkets, clothing or housewares. But many women find this way of life difficult and extremely competitive. Hours are long and earnings are meager at best. "They don't want us out there," said one woman in Medellín, describing other, more established vendors and city officials. "And now, because of the holidays, they are trying to clean up the streets and won't give us permission to sell."

Women also are frustrated that they have no means to start small businesses or use the skills that they bring with them to their new locations. They despair of ever acquiring sufficient capital—to buy a sewing machine or establish a small market inventory—that they believe would allow them to earn a better income for themselves and their families. These commonly shared frustrations highlight the need for micro-enterprise programs that target women. The efficacy of micro-enterprise and revolving loan fund programs for women has been amply demonstrated in various countries over the past 20 years. In Colombia, women are ready to participate in such programs and frustrated that they do not exist.

As a complement to micro-enterprise loans, there is a need for training programs that would allow women to develop their business skills. Government training programs do exist, if a sufficiently large and cohesive group is able to present itself for such a program. However, these programs are not followed up with small loans or any type of small business mentoring. Women interviewed by the Commission viewed these programs as "just out of reach" for them because of the requirement that a group of 25 women organize itself in order to qualify.

Women need technical assistance to develop business ideas and analyze projects to determine markets, pricing and other critical information that will ensure a profit. In Turbo, for instance, displaced women had spent considerable resources and time to launch a small line of crochet items and were concerned that there did not seem to be a market for their products. In Colombia, as in many other countries, women who have the desire and energy to create an income-generating project lack the perspective or experience to make a realistic assessment of their project idea.

ANMUCIC, a rural women's association, has supported the development of craft projects in different parts of the country that have met with some success. However, marketing and distribution of these well-made craft items remains a long-term obstacle to their fledgling businesses. Programs that recognize the need for developing a means of promoting, transporting and distributing goods will be essential to the success of micro-enterprise projects.

Finally, lack of child care or any safe place for small children presents an obstacle for many women as they try to hold onto jobs in a competitive environment. The program of *guarderías* run by Bienestar (Social Welfare Ministry) has been a boon to poor mothers in the past. However, the restructuring of this programs by the new government may reduce the number of centers and/or increase fees in order to meet a budget deficit. Women told the Commission they would not be able to pay increased fees for the program.

Rebuilding a Future

For most displaced families, their future is filled with anxiety and uncertainty. While most would like to return home, they will not if they have no promise of security. There have been some attempts to resettle families to other areas, but most have not met with much success, usually because of lack of government commitment and resources.

To resettle on new land, the government works through the Institute for Agrarian Reform (INCORA) to locate appropriate farm land, make arrangements for the displaced to purchase the land, and provide basic assistance for the families to move and establish new homes and farms. Unfortunately, this resettlement process has been employed for very few communities and with limited success. In one case, a group of 12 displaced families, mostly headed by farm women, organized them into a small association and requested a farm from the government. (They had initially fled to the city of Montería, but found they could not get work and had no means to support their families or send their children to school.) In 1998, the government agency INCORA gave the women a *finca*, *La Duda El Tomate*, and they moved to the countryside. The Office for Rural Women of the Ministry of Agriculture provided technical assistance in getting the project organized.

But by the end of 1998, the women were struggling to succeed on their new land. Those families with men have been able to construct their own wood houses, but female heads of households with smaller children and no extended families are still living in communal shelters. The Women's Commission talked to the women who explained they had to till their land, care for their children and build their houses at the same time. They received three months worth of food as humanitarian assistance, but are now struggling to find food. Sometimes they receive food from their neighbors and sometimes they look for odd jobs or they return to Montería to beg for food in the streets. Some said they were considering moving back to Montería because they are so desperate.

The women also described many health problems, saying their children suffered from malnutrition and rashes. The women said they were having difficulty obtaining credit for income-generation projects, and although they had requested training, they never received it. (This training is important, because they are required to develop project plans which are then submitted to the agrarian bank for financing.)

In a more successful resettlement, INCORA has supported 58 displaced families, 14 of them headed by women, who escaped violence in their villages in the province of Córdoba. INCORA provided land for these families in the village of Valencia, and also offered technical assistance and supplies to build houses, which are made of brick and wood. In addition, the Office for Rural Women provided technical assistance and pushed for gender sensitive programming, so that the female headed-households would not be left to beg and borrow. The women earn income through micro-enterprise projects, including sowing rice and corn, and raising livestock, and selling these on the market. The biggest concern for these families now is education for their children, as there is no school in the area.

IV. KEY CONCERNS FOR CHILDREN

Witnessing Violence: Children and Trauma

The primary targets of Colombia's violence are civilians. Colombian military groups, including national army and police units, rarely attack each other directly. Most often, they attack civilians whom they label as collaborators with their opponents. Common tactics include abducting, torturing and murdering men and placing women in an untenable position by forcing them to cook for and, therefore, assist a particular faction, whether it is guerrilla or military. In either case, the survivors feel so threatened and traumatized that they can no longer remain in their community.

Too commonly, tactics of terror are carried out in front of children. Psychosocial trauma among displaced children appears to be serious and widespread. After witnessing acts of extreme violence, often against members of their families, most displaced children are left without the structured environments of family and school which could help them to recover from their traumatic experiences. Displaced children are frequently idle and live in environments where fear and insecurity predominate.

"People Who Come to Kill"

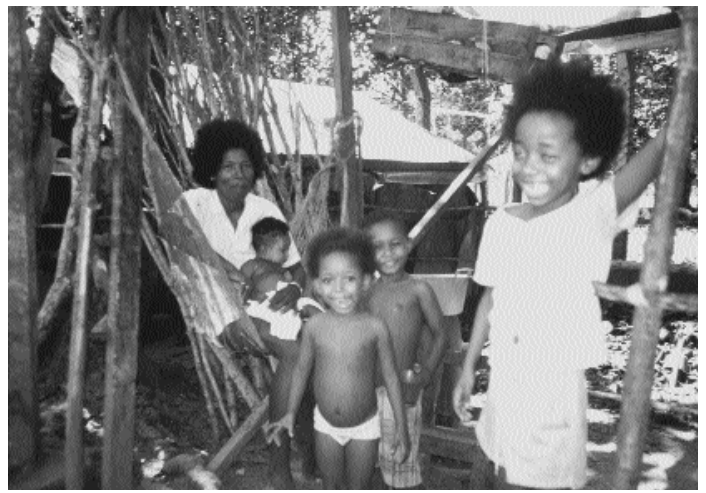
"At 8:00 a.m. on a Monday, about 300 paramilitary soldiers surrounded our village. They had five men [from a nearby village]. They tied them together like animals, shot four of the men and cut the head off the fifth man. After this, the paramilitaries split up and went into each house in our village."

"The paramilitaries know which houses the guerrillas visit for food and water when they pass through our village. There were 12 paramilitaries in my house on that Monday. I had to feed them. After they left to fight guerrillas nearby, my neighbors warned me to stay in my house, because the guerrillas had returned to the town [when the paramilitaries left]. They entered another villager's house to assassinate one man for helping the paramilitaries. Since I had to cook for the paramilitaries, the guerrillas would call me a collaborator with them. So I decided to go to another town."

"My children saw a lot, they're all traumatized. They see the guerrillas and paramilitaries as the same as people who come to kill."

Two programs that represent a small start in addressing the problem of children traumatized by violence are run by *Fundación Educativa Amor* and by UNICEF. The first program works in the municipality of Soacha, located on the outskirts of Bogotá. Of approximately 1 million residents in Soacha, about 160,000 are displaced. Within that huge sub-population, the *Fundación* program serves a total of about 500 displaced mothers and their children.

The *Fundación* center conducts evaluations and provides family and individual counseling. The program then extends beyond counseling, since that alone is insufficient to meet a family's psychosocial needs. They help families access basic state services, such as health clinics, by assisting them through the maze of bureaucratic requirements and restrictions that confront displaced families. The Soacha program also includes



a school (preschool through secondary), health promotion and prevention programs, a small business program and an art and culture project.

The UNICEF program, funded by the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO), the Colombian Red Cross and other organizations, is more focused and reaches far more displaced children. The target group is displaced children between the ages of 7 to 14. The program also selects displaced adolescents between the ages of 15 to 18 to become their teachers. Teacher training lasts a month, and allows UNICEF workers to identify and address trauma that the adolescents are suffering. The teenaged teachers are supervised by displaced parents, who volunteer and become part of the program as well. Teachers and supervisors work with groups of 20 children twice a week for at least three months. UNICEF has trained 500 volunteer supervisors and 20 teen teachers, who have worked with 5,000 children. The materials employed are of high quality, but the program's reach remains limited to two IDP camps and to sections of Urabá.

Education

In Colombia, 20 percent of children aged 6 to 11 are not enrolled in primary school. Almost all of these children are from poor families. The government's expenditure on education as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product is one of Latin America's lowest (3.1 percent). Support for primary education is also in decline, falling from 50 percent of the national education budget in 1975 to 38 percent in 1990 to 1993.¹⁸

Although the 1991 Colombian constitution calls for nine years of compulsory education for all Colombian children, nearly all of the displaced children and their parents interviewed for this report stated that their children are not in school. Actual statistics on displaced child enrollment in school do not exist, although it is widely believed that most Colombian displaced children do not attend school. The most common reasons given for this, by displaced Colombians as well as government and agency officials responsible for the displaced, are bureaucratic or monetary restrictions.

Even if a displaced child is permitted to enroll in a local school, lack of money to support schooling frequently presents an insurmountable roadblock. Although school is supposed to be free to all Colombians, it is common for schools to require payment for books, uniforms and other

fees from the parents of students. Within displaced families, especially those headed by women, this money is scarce.

The result of these financial roadblocks and bureaucratic maneuvers is an education system that is at best discouraging to displaced families and at worst sharply discriminatory. It is rare to find displaced children attending school, and common to find school-aged children working at home or in the street. One expert on Colombia's displaced noted that "Displaced parents see no return for the effort of trying to get their children into school, and they need the cheap labor their children can provide."

In Cartagena, two cooperative schools are available to poor and displaced children living in Barrio Nelson Mandela, a neighborhood of approximately 25,000 displaced people. These two cooperatives represent a rare opportunity for displaced children and they have attracted limited capital assistance from international agencies such as the European Community Humanitarian Organization. The municipal government funds the schools. The schools receive US \$42 per child, and all of the money goes to pay salaries, which are low. (One school director receives \$13 dollars per month, less than a third of the pre-displacement salary he received as a teacher.)

Even though parents are expected to pay for all school supplies, demand is extremely high for entrance into the school. School administrators stated that a census a year prior to our interview found 9,654 school-aged children under 15 living in the barrio. (They added that the figure is outdated because displaced families continue to enter the neighborhood.) There are 1,876 children in school under the age of 15, or 19.4 percent of the eligible students in that barrio. There are no secondary schools in the area.

Enrollment figures for one cooperative's primary school reveals declines in school enrollment, particularly girls' enrollment. School administrators report that parents pull their daughters out of school "when boy and girl students start to like each other." Displaced parents, accustomed to rural life, are also particularly afraid for the safety of their daughters and often feel they will be safer if they remain at home. School officials report that many displaced students, after reaching adolescence, move in with other teenagers, either as friends or married partners.

School assistance to the displaced from NGOs and United Nations agencies is slight and does not appear to be coordinated. UNICEF, for example, provides minimal support, largely in the form of "edu-kits" that have been distributed to 2,000 displaced students. The material each student receives is contained in a blue cardboard folder. All of the materials in each "edu-kit," such as pencils, exercise books and erasers, are imported from Europe. UNICEF's decision to only use imported materials for these kits is troubling because more displaced children could probably have been supported if UNICEF had used materials purchased locally. Such a move would have also supported local practices, since the school equipment students commonly use is purchased inside Colombia.

Adolescents

An expert on the problems of Colombia's displaced highlighted the "fundamental mendacity" of viewing displaced people as victims while overlooking their potential as contributors to society. This is especially true for displaced adolescents. Very few programs exist for this critical age-group. Although many displaced adolescents require access to secondary school education, vocational training and employment programs would be more appropriate. Without such programs, increasing numbers of displaced youths risk being absorbed into violent and illegal activities such as paramilitary work and prostitution.

Girls

Although statistics on sexual exploitation of the displaced remain unavailable, evidence suggests that it is widespread. The few girls who are able to enter school are frequently removed by parents seeking to guard their daughters against sexual violence and early marriage. Guerrilla or paramilitary groups often perceive village girls as girlfriends of their adversaries, and so may rape and/or abduct the girls. Some girls choose to avoid this fate by joining a military group, thereby becoming less vulnerable.

The breakdown of family support structures puts girls at risk of sexual violence and exploitation. Health experts working with the displaced say it is common to find 12- and 13-year-old displaced girls who are pregnant. One expert noted that in rural areas that are under siege, displaced families no longer have time or resources to devote to their children. For girls, the struggle for food, health care, shelter and security forces them into sexual relationships or marriages at early ages.

It is important to recognize the difference between sexual exploitation and prostitution: sexual exploitation is when a person has limited power and the more powerful person uses sex to take advantage. This can result in forced marriage, men insisting on sex in exchange for food or goods, and other abusive situations. Labeling women and girls as "prostitutes" does not help to shed light on the problem of sexual exploitation, or to implement prevention and assistance programs. The Women's Commission interviewed a 16-year-old who was pregnant and had syphilis, and who some in the community were calling a prostitute. However, when interviewed, the girl said she did not have sexual relations with different men, or for money, and that she had only one partner.

One aid worker told the Women's Commission, "many girls start having sexual relations at eleven, and become prostitutes at about 13." Another described the problem this way: "Starting with girls age 13 to 15 years old, prostitution becomes a consequence of inactivity. The girls don't go to school, and so remain at home with little to do. They tell their parents they receive presents from [male] friends. They may trade sex for clothes, money or school fees. The men decide what to give them, sometimes nothing."

While some displaced women and girls do become prostitutes in order to survive, there have been no studies or data linking displacement and prostitution. Monteria health professionals

thought that most of the prostitutes in their town were displaced girls, in part because, as one professional said, “Men prefer young displaced girls because they’re so cheap.” But this kind of anecdotal information can do more harm than good: Colombia’s internally displaced are already pariahs in many communities. Clearly, reliable studies and data on sexual exploitation and prostitution and the link to displacement is urgently needed.

Boys

No group of displaced Colombians is more ignored than adolescent boys. People are afraid of them, local authorities may treat them like criminals, they lack educational or employment opportunities, and programs for youths are exceedingly rare. Those who attempt to sell items in the streets may be attacked by others who do not want competition. Thus, violence and criminality may appear to these boys to be the only available avenues for opportunity. Displaced boys are hired as contract killers and as prostitutes. For a desperate displaced boy, joining a gang or militia can be lucrative. Unless opportunities are provided to allow them to become positive contributors to Colombian society, displaced adolescent boys will continue to be preyed upon and become prime contributors to Colombia’s many forces of violence.

Within the context of armed conflict, the situation of adolescent boys is grave. They comprise significant proportions of fighting forces on all sides, and their combined total numbers are in the many tens of thousands. Human Rights Watch estimates that some paramilitary units are up to 50 percent children, with some as young as eight years old. Findings which note that guerrilla fighting units may be 30 percent children may have to be revised: Human Rights Watch cites a government specialist working with guerrilla militias in Antioquia who reported that some militias are 85 percent children. The police and national army employ about 45,000 children to serve in various capacities that put them at direct risk: as members of the army, air force, the navy, the National Police and as members of the Juvenile Civic Police and Student Police, which often work in war zones. National authorities also use suspected or actual child guerrilla soldiers as guides and informants.¹⁹

Family members expressed great fear for their sons. In Barrancabermeja, displaced mothers voiced concern that the only models for adult male behavior that their sons are soldiers or guerrillas. From a very young age, their sons play all-too-realistic war games with one another. Parents reported that their sons typically leave home in the mornings and return late at night. In Medellín, mothers report that their adolescent sons are at great risk when they stay out at night, either as part of a gang or wandering at the periphery of a gang. It is routine for young men to fall victim to violent murder each night in that city.

One mother commented that her son, whom her neighbors complain is a thief, “does not listen. He is outside society.” A veteran Colombian researcher of the displaced concludes that “many displaced youths see no future [for themselves].” With education and employment opportunities so often unavailable, and a reputation for criminality chasing them,

displaced adolescent boys wander at the edges of an already marginalized displaced society. The profound alienation these boys experience, and their desire to somehow belong, drives many of them into paramilitary organizations where, in the words of a Medellín human rights worker, they feel safe and powerful once they possess a gun and receive a salary.

Programming for Children

As displacement increases, realistic opportunities for returning or resettling displaced Colombians further decrease. The gap between humanitarian needs, in the medium and long term, for displaced children and the humanitarian response to these needs remains vast and is growing. And while a long-term response for many of Colombia’s displaced will first require peace in rural areas, mid-term responses—that is, those lasting from the time of the initial 3-month emergency assistance for at least 21 months—call for immediate strengthening. Without an enhanced, coordinated international humanitarian assistance program for the mid-term, displaced children will continue to be denied their rights to health, education and security.

Improved access to education is the only meaningful way to create a more positive future for displaced children. Without education, children will have little chance of making their way into a productive adulthood. Increased access to quality schooling for displaced children also will facilitate their recovery from traumatic stress, and potentially reach most if not all displaced children. In turn, teachers should be trained to identify and refer students suffering from extreme trauma to appropriate health professionals.

Improved health care for displaced children will require not only better access to clinics and hospitals but health care promotion campaigns to convince the displaced to seek the health services they need. The range of significant health problems—from malnutrition and disease in younger children to reproductive health care for adolescent girls—constitutes a major health challenge in Colombia. The international community can assist with programs to expand access to the displaced, as well as develop targeted health education programs for displaced adolescents that address their many reproductive health concerns.

Agencies and governments should also develop psychosocial programs that address the broad range of problems produced by violence and displacement. Among the measures that should be considered are trauma programs. UNICEF’s and *Fundación Educativa Amor’s* programs currently respond to a fraction of children in need of trauma services and should be expanded to address the needs of the vast target population. Realistically, even if these and other child trauma programs are rapidly expanded, the need will remain huge.

The problem of street children in Colombia is serious and growing, but it is not clear whether displacement is the primary element driving the increase in this population. While assistance to street children is needed, research followed by targeted programming is also needed to establish whether there is a correlation between displacement and the rise in the street children population, and what that correlation might mean for prevention and programming.

V. COLOMBIA'S RESPONSE TO THE DISPLACED

In 1992, in the face of a growing crisis already involving at least 300,000 of its citizens, the Colombian government acknowledged that the phenomenon of forced displacement was a consequence of the political violence that dominates Colombian society. The report *Displaced by Violence in Colombia*, published in 1995 by the Catholic Bishop's conference of Colombia, brought increased public and governmental attention to the crisis.

The Government

As a result, the Colombian legislature enacted the wide-ranging Law 387 in July 1997. Law 387 established measures "for the prevention of forced displacement; [and] the attention, protection, consolidation and socioeconomic stabilization of the internally displaced by violence in the Republic of Colombia." It pledged to "provide special attention to women and children, preferentially to widows, women heads of households and orphans." The law established a right to emergency humanitarian aid for three months, with the possibility of extending the aid for an additional three months under exceptional circumstances. It also states a governmental commitment to aid the displaced in returning to places of origin, with guarantees for their safety and for accompanying programs of socioeconomic consolidation and stabilization.

Unfortunately, no cohesive government structure or budget existed to implement Law 387. The continuing lack of implementation of this "model" law is viewed as proof of lack of political will within Colombia to address the displacement crisis. The diffuse list of government agencies responsible for implementing the law has created an overall situation of minimal accountability. The focus on decentralization of government services (shifting of responsibility to the local level) has also rendered implementation of Law 387 moot, as local agencies lack the resources or training to cope with this burden. In late 1998, the new Pastrana administration was in the process of developing its own response to the requirements of Law 387. Until this policy is in place, questions about the new government's sincerity regarding its intent to deliver assistance to its displaced citizens will continue.

Current Political Context

The fact that 1998 was the worst year ever for internal displacement in Colombia was overshadowed by the presidential election in July. Andrés Pastrana Arango won the election by campaigning forcefully on a peace platform. At the time of the delegation visit, a palpable atmosphere of expectation that this process would begin in earnest was clearly present. As corollary to Pastrana's election, the US has expressed renewed interest in Colombian affairs. The US government has signaled its intent to support Pastrana and, in January 1999, Secretary of State Albright identified Colombia as a country wherein "democracy is threatened" and deserves support.

Despite recognition of the problem of forced displacement in 1992, government response remains minimal and ineffectual. Even after years of extensive study and discussion, Colombian agencies responsible for the displaced are mired in debate about how many people are displaced, how they should be defined, what kind of assistance should be provided and how long such assistance should continue. At the close of 1998, the new administration continued to flounder in "transitional planning" while government agencies continued to address the problems of the displaced separately.

Even as one international agency official complained that Colombian violence and displacement is "over-analyzed and over-documented," government response remains poorly coordinated and under-funded. Government and international agency officials are cynical about the current state of Colombia's displaced and continue to deny the severity of the problem. One government official stated that his government "hasn't really determined what it will do about the IDPs it has counted." Another official commented on the stalemate within the new administration, "As long as various components of the government have no common approach or view of the problem, it makes it difficult to form policies."

Who are the Displaced?

The seemingly endless debate about how to count displaced Colombians presents a primary roadblock to providing adequate humanitarian assistance to this huge population. The Colombian government continues to criticize NGO figures which place the numbers of displaced at more than a million, instead maintaining that 340,000 citizens have been displaced since 1996. Unofficially, government officials admit that they do not "dispute the [CODHES] figures, but [other groups] are looking at the last 15 years [of displacement], while we're looking at the last three."

Government statistics on the displaced omit those persons who are "unregistered" with either the government or Red Cross. This failure to recognize what is probably the largest segment of displaced Colombians is emblematic of the government's refusal or inability to address the issue of internal displacement.

Displaced Colombians do not register with the government for many reasons, the most significant of which is fear. After a husband has been murdered or a family has received death threats, the displaced often seek to protect themselves by maintaining a low profile. It is not uncommon for agents of guerrillas or, more often, paramilitary groups to track displaced families to cities and continue to threaten them. One displaced woman living in Bogotá stated, "The Paramilitaries [who displaced her] visit all the time."

Many displaced Colombians harbor a fear that government officials work in collusion with paramilitary groups. Such fears are stoked by experiences with government officials, often policemen, who fail to respond to violence in their villages. One woman explained that, in her village, "The Paramilitaries killed some men and burned houses at 6:00 a.m., when people were inside their houses. Policemen never came to investigate the incident." In this and many other cases, displaced Colombians choose to avoid the very government authorities charged with their protection. As a Colombian human rights

expert observed, “the majority of the displaced...try to be invisible.”

Critics of high displacement figures also claim that statistics on Colombia’s displaced population are arbitrary. Why, they ask, does CODHES choose 1985 as the year to begin counting displaced Colombians? What of those displaced earlier? This disagreement is significant, because the moment a “displaced person” is reclassified as a “poor person,” his problems no longer require humanitarian assistance, but instead fall under the aegis of development work.

From Samper to Pastrana: Continued Inaction

The arrival of the Pastrana administration in mid-1998 has not altered the confused and inadequate government response. Government and international institutions involved with Colombia’s displaced remain focused on, as one UN official observed, “issues of negotiation or responsibility, and not implementation.” The new administration is well aware of the criticism that it has yet to either develop a policy or implement the government’s existing laws in support of the displaced. One frustrated government official commented that the “government has given messages about the displaced as a low priority” for this administration, despite “the huge disparity between government policy and the realities” that confront the displaced. An international humanitarian agency official added that “everything [mandating government support to the displaced] is just on paper.”

This continuing inattention, despite the magnitude of the displacement crisis, is explained in part by the new administration’s focus on successfully establishing a peace process in Colombia. The Pastrana administration plan is to negotiate peace with the guerrilla forces, one faction at a time beginning with the guerrilla group, the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces. The peace process is strongly supported by Colombia’s most important bilateral benefactor, the US government, which has pledged development support to guerrilla areas after peace has been achieved. The peace negotiations, however, address only a portion of the eventual peace equation, considering that war and unprecedented levels of displacement rage across areas controlled by a range of violent groups. Commenting on this out-of-control state of conflict, a United Nations official said, “if we don’t do something soon, there will be 3 million” displaced people in Colombia.

As the government struggles to maintain a peace process, it continues to give little attention to how and when it might implement existing laws designed to support displaced Colombians. Significantly, within the government there exists a negative perception of displaced people as, in the words of one government official, “a public order problem.” Reports of homeless displaced families being harassed or accosted by authorities are common. An NGO official observed that “the police and army see the displaced as prostitutes, thieves and coca farmers, and treat them as the enemy.”

This attitude mirrors a negative view of the displaced that is widely held in Colombia: that the displaced are not only victims of violence, but importers of violence into the new communities they inhabit. One Colombian NGO official described the “common stereotype” of displaced people as “relatives of guerrillas and violent. People won’t rent

rooms to the displaced, and the press describes IDPs in ways which support this impression.” A leader of the displaced described it more directly: “to be displaced in Colombia is to be considered a terrorist or a thief.”

Despite specific reform laws in education (Law 115) and health (Law 100) that entitle displaced Colombian citizens to services in these areas, the displaced frequently find it difficult if not impossible to obtain these services. When they are available, the services supplied by different ministries are poorly coordinated. One government official commented that current “government programs worsen the condition of the displaced because they are incoherent and misdirected.”

Displaced women interviewed in Bogotá and other cities reported that the end result of their attempts to negotiate with agencies such as Bienestar (the government institute for children and families) and the Ministry of the Interior was the statement, “We’d like to help you, but we have no money.” In some cases, these responses are the result of current decentralization reforms, which have resulted in expanded responsibilities for municipal governments and insufficient funding to carry them out. A United Nations official working with municipal government officials commented that “the government is decentralized and the municipalities are broke.”

In sum, a displaced Colombian is lucky if he or she manages to receive stopgap emergency assistance in the form of a meager pension or a one-time handout of food and supplies designed to last two to three months. While the vague promise of further assistance from the government remains, the emergency handout and pension generally constitutes the only form of assistance available—and it is assistance that many never obtain.

National Nongovernmental Organizations

The relationship between the government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) has been marked by tension and suspicion. A vibrant human rights community exists in Colombia, with numerous NGOs conducting research and investigations, monitoring conditions for the displaced and sharing information locally and internationally about the war and displacement in Colombia. However, NGOs with experience and expertise providing direct services—such as agriculture projects and health care—to uprooted communities are fewer in number and their operations are not well coordinated. These NGOs are usually locally based, often church affiliated, and suffer from lack of financial resources.

The Grupo de Apoyo de los Desplazados (GAD) was formed in 1994 as an umbrella organization for 13 different national NGOs working on issues of displacement. The focus of GAD, and of its member organizations, is accompaniment and legal protection. It also seeks to promote dialogue between organizations of the displaced and the Colombian government, as well as to focus attention on the issue by the international community. GAD both reports on the ongoing crisis and publishes information from other national sources. GAD does not include women’s rights or children’s rights organizations as members.

In Bogotá, the NGO Mencoldes, affiliated with the Mennonite Church, provides counseling for recently arrived displaced persons and maintains a clothing bank for them. Mencoldes

tries to provide psychological support and “spiritual accompaniment” for the displaced as they weather the abrupt transition from small town or rural life to life in Bogotá, and also offers advice in negotiating possible assistance from the Colombian government.

In addition, Mencoldes has set up a shelter program for nine families in Bogotá, and has established an adjunct pre-school/kindergarten program to serve the numerous children in the shelter. The original plan was for the families to reside in the shelter until the government made arrangements for them to receive new land to farm. However, the government agency INCORA has not been able to organize their resettlement, and the families are still packed into the albergue, or temporary shelter, after more than a year. The Mencoldes staff is stymied in its attempt to support these families.

ANMUCIC (Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas e Indígenas de Colombia), is active throughout Colombia and claims a membership of 100,000 rural women. Founded 15 years ago to improve the quality of life for rural women, in recent years it has found it necessary to respond more and more frequently to the needs of displaced women. In Bogotá, where the association is headquartered, ANMUCIC provides temporary shelter for displaced women and helps them to negotiate the government bureaucracy for aid. The association also helps women to participate in income-generating projects, ranging from bakeries to crafts to chicken and egg production.

Maria Emma Prada, president of the association, is convinced that priority funding for displaced women must be in the area of micro-enterprise loans and productive projects. She has stated, “Within ANMUCIC we have displaced women who are dispersed, living in whatever corner of Bogotá, hoping to wash clothes in some family’s house or sell some product on the street, or hoping for a coin from a friendly hand... For them it has been difficult, if not impossible, to find some solution that will truly help their stability—economic, social or emotional.” To date, obtaining funding for such programs has proved all but impossible, and the association relies on dues it collects from its membership to carry out its work.

Profamilia (La Asociación Probienestar de la Familia Colombiana), an independent chapter of the International Federation of Planned Parenthood, maintains a large and very active presence throughout Colombia. Within its network are 47 women’s clinics, 8 men’s clinics and 11 youth centers located in 35 cities throughout the country. Profamilia tries to compensate for the shortcomings of the government health system in the areas of reproductive health; it provides services to 60 percent of couples in Colombia who use contraceptives.

Profamilia’s Executive Director María Isabel Plata, stated that displaced women are at a disadvantage in accessing reproductive health care. Also, taking into account that displaced women are, in fact, uprooted rural women who often are less educated and have had less access to health care than urban women, programs must be designed with their backgrounds and needs in mind. Profamilia is eager to work with displaced women in a variety of health programs—including mobile outreach clinics, dissemination of information

regarding the rights of all citizens to health care, conducting PAP smear campaigns and HIV/AIDS campaigns—but lacks funding to undertake these programs. Two areas which also merit attention, according to Profamilia, are mental health and intrafamilial violence, including sexual violence.

Justicia y Paz (Justice and Peace) is a Jesuit organization which provides assistance in various communities, including Turbo, where it helped to organize the community and has assisted the women’s group in setting up micro-enterprise projects.

While there is much energy and commitment on the part of NGOs, their relationship with the government is severely strained and has impaired their ability to provide assistance. Some government officials view the NGOs as guerrilla sympathizers, while NGOs see some government representatives as colluding with paramilitaries, big business and the Colombian armed forces, who have all been implicated in human rights abuses. Rather than working together, the two groups operate in a tense atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion, with each questioning the motives and operations of the other.

VI. INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE TO COLOMBIA

United States

The relationship between the United States and Colombian was severely strained for several years because of US concerns about narco-trafficking ties to the Colombian government of Ernesto Samper. After his election, the US alleged that President Samper accepted \$6 million in drug money. Additionally, the US government “decertified” Colombia for failing to live up to its obligations to combat narco-traffic. Andrés Pastrana’s election on a peace platform in July 1998 has changed the US perception of the Colombian government, and the US is now committed to supporting the new administration.

The first tangible evidence of this support is the recent decision to greatly increase US funding for Colombian security and counter-narcotics efforts. In early December, at the same time the Women’s Commission was in Colombia, the US approved almost \$300 million in additional security assistance for Colombia. This assistance, pushed through by Congressmen concerned about the drug trade, is earmarked for the fight against drugs (such as spraying coca crops).

Humanitarian assistance from the US to Colombia totals only \$2.2 million. \$2 million is from the US Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration for the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross. The remaining \$200,000 is US Agency for International Development funding for Catholic Relief Services’ development work in the Chocó region. The three-fold increase US military assistance to Colombian security forces has created a ratio of 131:1 between US assistance to counter-narcotics and US humanitarian assistance (\$289 million to \$2.2 million). The existing US humanitarian support largely supports short-term emergency assistance to the displaced under the auspices of the ICRC.

United Nations

In Colombia, the United Nations is represented by UNDP, UNICEF, UNHCR, the World Food Programme and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. A UNICEF official admitted that UN agencies had “not done much” for the displaced so far. Another UN official admitted that, in general, “the UN has had a fairly late start on [Colombian] IDPs.”

UNDP is currently bringing in consultants and working with the Ombudsmen’s office to look at methods to prevent displacement and to develop an “early warning” system. UNDP supports the Presidential Council, which coordinates implementation of Colombian law with regard to the displaced.

UNHCR arrived in Colombia only last year, after receiving mixed signals from the Colombian government. At first, the government accepted the establishment of a UNHCR office consisting of just one official. Its mandate is limited to technical assistance, which the Colombian government clearly needs. However, UNHCR itself has had an internal debate about what kind of role it should play in Colombia. While some argue that UNHCR should do more to assist the displaced, others have said it stretches the agency’s mandate beyond current capacity.

At this time, UNHCR is not providing or planning to provide direct humanitarian assistance to Colombia’s displaced. It can, in limited ways, work to prevent displacement and develop durable solutions. UNHCR’s extensive experience in war-affected areas gives it technical experience which can be shared with the government, NGOs and others responding to the crisis. It plans to work with the government to formulate a plan to respond to the displaced; a UNHCR consultant noted that the first phase of this work is to assess the total number of internally displaced. In addition, UNHCR can help strengthen protection mechanisms, including monitoring and evaluation of a national protection plan when and if one is put in place. A traditional role for UNHCR is accompaniment, ensuring returns to areas of expulsion in dignity and safety.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights opened an office in Bogotá in April 1997 under the direction of Spanish lawyer and diplomat Amuldena Mazarrasa, with a staff of five experts and a deputy director. In 1998, the staff of experts was increased to 12. The mandate of the office is to prevent abuse and provide protection. The office receives complaints regarding human rights abuses and provides technical assistance on issues such as military justice system reform, laws regarding internally displaced persons and laws regarding military justice. The office has also made “public declarations” designed to focus attention on human rights issues. In relation to the internally displaced, the UNHCHR has made declarations regarding the lack of humanitarian assistance to the displaced and the failure to implement Colombian law and Guiding Principle 18.

In the overall context of the high rate of human rights abuses in Colombia, attention to the specific problems of the displaced has merited scant attention. When High Commissioner Mary Robinson visited Colombia in October 1998, she suggested a gender perspective to human rights abuses may be appropriate. A UNHCHR official stated that

there is pressure to name a Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Colombia, but that because of the stigma attached to such a post the Colombian government is resisting this idea.

UNICEF’s program for Colombia is primarily focused on development. Its two main programs for the displaced are providing psychosocial services and roofing materials for displaced children, both of which are limited in scope. UNICEF has provided trauma counseling to communities after massacres. It supports some national and local NGO work in this area and also provides technical assistance to national institutions such as Bienestar. UNICEF also provides funds to CODHES.

International Committee of the Red Cross

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) maintains a network of 15 regional offices throughout Colombia in areas where conflict is most intense, as well as a headquarters in Bogotá. The ICRC provides emergency assistance to displaced families, including money for transport to destinations chosen by those who are fleeing and *mercados* (emergency aid packages of basic necessities such as cooking equipment, dishes, mattresses and blankets). The ICRC distinguishes between assistance and individual cases (fewer than 10 families) and “massive” cases (more than 10 families or 50 persons). ICRC is also very active in negotiations to release hostages and in monitoring the conditions of detainees and prisoners.

Currently, ICRC provides 90-day emergency assistance to displaced Colombians. The ICRC considers support for this period sufficient, and a government official admitted that, despite its own declarations that ICRC programs cannot substitute for the State’s obligation to provide assistance and protection to the displaced, “basically, implementation for IDPs is being carried out by the ICRC, not the government.”

According to the ICRC, from January to September 1998, it assisted a total of 97,296 persons. Almost 120,000 *mercados* (10,000 Colombian pesos supplied as a week’s assistance) were offered to displaced, along with over 26,000 household equipment kits and 20,000 hygiene kits. Medellín, with 9,137 persons, harbored the great majority of individual cases attended to by the ICRC, followed by Bogotá (6,620 persons), Sincelejo (6,020 persons), Villavicencio (5,770 persons) and Bucaramanga (2,278 persons). For cases of “massive” displacement, Apartado led the totals with 18,692 persons attended, followed by Bucaramanga (14,889 persons), Barrancabermeja (12,881 persons), Medellín 97,227 persons) and Sincelejo (4,255 persons). From January through September 1998, ICRC statistics reveal a sharply rising demand for assistance for the displaced totaling approximately 7,000 “individual cases” and 22,000 “massive cases” for September alone.

The ICRC is clearly the most active international organization working on behalf of the displaced. As its role and mandate is limited to emergency assistance, the organization cannot adequately respond to the pressing longer-term needs of the displaced. Nor is it able to assist anywhere near the number persons who theoretically are entitled to it. It is striking to note that the type of assistance the ICRC offers the internally displaced of Colombia—small sums of money,

basic hygiene, cooking and household kits—resembles the emergency assistance offered in refugee crisis situations worldwide. ICRC statistics on assistance to internally displaced Colombians provide eloquent testimony to the sudden destitution of its clients, who lack even a pot in which to boil water or a blanket with which to cover themselves.

Other International NGOs

There are a limited number of international nongovernmental organizations working with the displaced in Colombia, compared to places where massive displacement has occurred, such as Bosnia and Rwanda. One reason is the problem of security: Colombia has one of the highest rates of crime in the world and also leads the field in the rate of kidnapping. Americans in particular, have been targets.

However, Catholic Relief Services, Project Counseling Service, Jesuit Refugee Services and Doctors Without Borders-France, Spain and Netherlands, Oxfam, and Save the Children are among those operating in Colombia. And, as awareness about the level of displacement has increased, more NGOs are exploring opportunities to provide help to uprooted communities with programs of health care, shelter and water and sanitation services. Peace Brigade is a human rights monitoring group, which escorts local human rights and humanitarian workers in an effort to stave off assassination attempts and to draw attention to atrocities.

Doctors of the World is also based in Bogotá. It sends health teams into the countryside on a short-term basis to conduct specific health campaigns and as staff for health posts in rural areas. In Turbo, the small health dispensary is staffed by a nurse from Doctors of the World.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Cognizant of the tremendous challenge that a serious improvement in the response to the displaced population of Colombia poses and of the urgency with which this challenge must be met, the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children offers the following recommendations.

To the Government of Colombia

1. The government must meet its responsibility to protect its forcibly displaced citizens, who are mostly rural women and children. A more vigorous response to human rights violations, both during and following displacement, is urgently needed. Additionally, the problem of providing safe and viable means to allow displaced Colombians to return to their homes requires a serious response.
2. The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement call on governments where the displaced are present to provide assistance and protection to them. The Colombian government has failed to address the plight of the displaced, leaving tens of thousands of children without health care or education. The government must commit itself to assisting the displaced and to providing better levels of health care, education and income-generation programs throughout the country.
3. The current limit on assistance beyond the three to six months stipulated in Law 387 must be expanded. This short-term focus amounts to nothing more than a palliative for the displaced and denies both the severity of the loss the displaced have suffered and the difficult circumstances they endure.
4. Education, vocational training and employment opportunities must be provided to displaced children. Hundreds of thousands of displaced children, denied access to schooling and the benefit of a stable home life, have no alternatives to lives of inactivity and illegal employment.
5. Services to the displaced should be expanded, including building schools and clinics in poor urban neighborhoods. The spurious assumption that providing basic services will "attract" people into cities should be rejected. The displaced do not choose to migrate to cities to enjoy facilities that may be available to them. They leave their rural homes under duress, in search of protection in urban areas.
6. The government must streamline the process of acquiring identification cards and insure that the cards and the services displaced Colombians require are readily available. Displaced Colombians must be viewed as citizens who are most in need of government services.
7. The Colombian government should actively seek assistance from experienced UN agencies and NGOs and welcome the contributions of potential donor nations to ameliorate the extraordinary internal crisis of forced displacement.
8. Protection measures for children must be put into place. Without such measures, displaced children's lives will continue to face widespread trauma, sexual violence and exploitation. The Government should develop a comprehensive protection policy with the assistance of international agencies such as the UNHCHR and UNHCR.
9. Policemen and other government officials should be trained about the realities of displacement and their role in protecting the displaced. Such training should include specific information on the rights of women, children and adolescents, who constitute the majority of the uprooted. This training would counteract the dangerous stereotypes that lead law enforcement officials to perceive the displaced as threats to public order. This training might be incorporated into existing training that the United States Government provides to Colombian authorities.
10. The government should ensure that internally displaced women participate in key decisions about return, relocation and/or integration into new communities. The government should support the work of The Rural Women's Office at the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Office for Equality of Women, two excellent resources. In addition it should encourage all offices to work with women's NGOs, including the National Network of Women's Associations.

To the UN High Commissioner for Refugees

1. UNHCR should aggressively promulgate the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement among other national and international agencies and use them as a tool for its work. It should bear in mind that Section 2 of Principle 4, which states that “Certain internally displaced persons, such as children, especially unaccompanied minors, expectant mothers, mothers with young children, female heads of household, persons with disabilities and elderly persons, shall be entitled to protection and assistance required by their condition and to treatment which takes into account their special needs.”
2. UNHCR should help the government develop a national strategy for addressing the problems of internal displacement. It should provide technical assistance and emphasize better coordination among government agencies at the federal, regional and local levels. It should focus on depoliticizing the issue of displacement, and focusing on the humanitarian imperative to assist civilians.
3. UNHCR must promote a better humanitarian response to the urgent needs of the displaced, especially for food, shelter, water, health care, income generation and psychosocial assistance over the medium and longer term.
4. UNHCR should work with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to aggressively promote better protection and to prevent displacement. It should push the government to provide protection when communities receive threats of displacement. It should monitor protection issues facing the displaced. And, it should work with NGOs and other independent organizations to advocate for better protection.
5. UNHCR should use its expertise in finding durable solutions for uprooted peoples and advise and assist the government and displaced on this issue. UNHCR, as an independent, impartial entity, should provide analysis, evaluate options and help negotiate return, local integration or resettlement for displaced families and communities. The agency’s experience running the Bosnian Women’s Initiative, and its experience assisting women in Central America, should serve as models for replication in Colombia, where 58 percent of the displaced are women and 39 percent of displaced families are headed by women.
6. UNHCR should promote protection for human rights workers and others under threat, to flee to other countries. In Colombia, thousands of people, from human rights workers to peasant leaders to church workers, have been targeted and have fled to neighboring countries and beyond. UNHCR’s office in Colombia should provide host countries with up-to-date information about the human rights situation in Colombia and should work to ensure refugees are not forcibly returned.

To Other UN Agencies

1. Within the UN framework, UN agencies should advocate for a more vigorous international response to the humanitarian crisis in Colombia. Increased contributions by donor governments should be solicited and used in well-coordinated efforts that respect the work of local organizations.
2. UNICEF should work with UNHCHR in considering children’s protection officers, who could assist government and NGOs in assessments, monitoring, and training initiatives that address the rights abuses against displaced children, including child prostitution, child soldiering and other abuses.
3. UNICEF might consider mounting a large-scale advocacy campaign to promote the rights of displaced children in Colombia. Done in coordination with other UN agencies, this would include public education within Colombia and internationally, and could serve to mobilize greater awareness about the condition of uprooted children in Colombia and generate greater political will to respond to their plight.

To the US Government

1. The United States government should provide substantially increased funding for humanitarian assistance for the displaced, with emphasis on assistance to women and children, including income-generation, health and education projects. This assistance might be provided through an umbrella grant arrangement, with a US NGO serving an administrative and monitoring function. US NGOs could partner with capable national NGOs in Colombia which have the experience to implement field programs.
2. The US should demand increased accountability from the Colombian government with regard to its responsibility for its displaced citizens and for undertaking measures to mitigate the numbers of persons who become forcibly displaced. The current exclusive focus on military-oriented assistance fails to adequately recognize and support the broader needs of Colombian society as it takes its first steps toward serious peace negotiations with guerrilla forces. In fact, the overwhelming US emphasis on military support to Colombia may impede the development of a humanitarian response by the Colombian government.

To Nongovernmental Organizations

1. There is critical need for shelter, water and sanitation assistance. In the barrios on the peripheries of urban areas there is inadequate shelter, no clean water or sanitation infrastructure and scarce electricity.
2. Children and adolescents are high risk: young people have no access to school and end up on the streets or recruited into armed groups. Program areas that should be considered include education, training, health care, income generation for adolescents and young adults.

3. Income-generation projects are urgently needed so female heads of household can provide for their families. These projects are most urgently needed in Bogotá, Medellín and other major urban centers, as these are the areas into which most displaced are moving. Needs assessments and market feasibility studies must be integral parts of these initiatives to ensure greater likelihood of success.
4. NGOs should strengthen joint advocacy so that the current displacement crisis is distinguished from regional problems of poverty. NGO advocacy should include the voices of the women, children and youth who are displaced and bring their daily struggle for survival to the forefront of discussions with the Colombian government, the public and the international community.
5. Anecdotal evidence of high levels of sexual violence against women and girls suggest that a study should be conducted to determine the actual level of gender violence in Colombia and to provide assistance when it does occur. This assistance should be combined with service delivery, so that women in need of pre-natal, post-natal, family planning, STD/AIDS or other health concerns, can receive help and also discuss sexual violence concerns they may have. This type of project might be run through the RHR consortium and in collaboration with Profamilia, the Colombian-based health provider.
6. The links between sexual exploitation, prostitution and displacement should be studied, with program responses in place once reliable data is collected. It is important to know if women and girls are turning to prostitution to survive; or if girls are marrying at young ages, or trading sex for food and shelter. Women and girls should then be offered protection through programs which tackle the root causes of the problem: lack of security and income.

To All Governments, Donors and the International Community

1. Strongly negotiate with the Colombian government for a better response to internal displacement. The international community should insist that the government abide by Law 387 and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. The emphasis must be on long-term, durable solutions which address human rights violations, socio-economic factors, and participation of the displaced in making decisions about their future.
2. Work together to distinguish the current displacement crisis from regional problems of poverty. NGO advocacy should include the voices of the displaced and bring their daily struggle for survival to the forefront of discussions with the Colombian government and the UN.
3. Provide resources to the UN agencies, NGOs and Colombian government so that they can better address the crises of internal displacement and provide shelter, food, health care, education, psychosocial recovery and income generation are addressed. Donors should ensure that programs give priority to children, adolescents, female heads of household and others most at risk.

VII. CONCLUSION

The plight of Colombia's 1.5 million displaced people constitutes a major humanitarian emergency. No one questions that an enormous population has been uprooted—and continues to be uprooted—against its will. What is extraordinary, however, is the lack of attention and assistance from the Colombian government and the international community that this desperate situation has evoked. The displaced in Colombia are damned twice: by their violent displacement, which robs them of the stable, productive lives they once enjoyed, and by the indifference or outright hostility their plight has engendered within their own society and the world.

The situation of displaced Colombians is particularly urgent because the majority of the displaced are women and children. Women struggle valiantly to support themselves and their families while thrust into circumstances of outright desperation. Hundreds of thousands of children, shut out from schools and health care, suffering from malnutrition and without decent shelter, are being lost as the violence which rages unchecked across the Colombian landscape claims its next generation of victims.

A Will to Act

Evidence from the Women's Commission's December 1998 visit to Colombia supports the widespread conclusion that the Colombian government lacks the political will to address the needs of its displaced citizens. Few of the 834,000 Colombian children who are currently displaced receive even minimal assistance from their own government. Essential protection measures for displaced Colombians are not present. Law 387, intended to ensure programmatic attention to the needs of the displaced, lays dormant. Basic state services for the displaced are difficult to access. And although members of Colombia's civil society have lobbied the Colombian government to respond to the assistance and protection needs of the displaced for years, they have met with little to no success.

The international community has been slow to recognize and respond to Colombia's humanitarian emergency. United States aid remains focused on anti-drug policy rather than incorporate that objective into a more broad-based policy that addresses the larger context of Colombian society. The United Nations effort, through its agencies UNICEF, UNHCR and UNHCHR, must be substantially strengthened. The European Community has provided assistance and should advocate for increased levels of funding and a stronger role UN agencies.

The imperative is clear: the Colombian government and international donors must step up their response to the crisis of Colombian displacement or risk prolonging indefinitely the violence that wracks the country. It is impossible to imagine that peace will be attained in Colombia without a concerted effort to address the damage wrought by the generation-long conflict that rages throughout the country. Only as a vision of social justice emerges through the commitment of the government and society at large and through the constructive assistance of the international community to benefit the country's dispossessed will peace have any prospect of taking root in Colombia.

NOTES

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2. "Colombia Rebel Chief Says Threats Made Him Miss Talks," by Diana Jean Schemo, New York Times, Jan. 9, 1999, p. A4.
3. "In Search of Hope: The Plight of Displaced Colombians," Liliana Obregón and Maria Stavropoulou, in *The Forsaken People: Case Studies of the Internally Displaced*, R. Cohen and F. Deng, Eds., Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998, p.403.
4. "Uprootedness, Gender and Internal Displacement in Colombia," by Nora Segura-Escobar and Donny Meertens, in *Beyond Law* 6(7), 1997, pp. 15-33.
5. Obregón and Stavropoulou, p. 405.
6. "Violence and the State in Colombia," by Alvaro Tirado Mejía, in *Colombia: The Politics of Reforming the State*, ed. by Eduardo Posada-Carbó, London: MacMillan Press Ltd. & New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998, p.113.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
8. Kline, p. 56.
9. *Ibid.*: pp.114-115.
10. Tirado-Mejía, p. 114.
11. Project Counselling Service, "Colombia," in *Internally Displaced People: A Global Survey*.
12. UNHCR, Colombia office. They report that the only two Departamentos without violence are Amazonas and Guainía.
13. Tirado-Mejía, p. 120.
14. *War Without Quarter: Colombia and International Humanitarian Law*. Human Rights Watch, New York, NY, 1998, p. 218.
15. *War Without Quarter: Colombia and International Humanitarian Law*. Human Rights Watch, 1998.
Colombia: Paramilitaries, "Disappearance" and Immunity. Amnesty International, 1998.
16. *Colombia Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1997*. U.S. Department of State. Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, January 30, 1999
17. The ICRC and Colombia Ministry of Interior provide a package of food and basic supplies which is designed to last 90 days.
18. "State Weakness and Clientelism in Colombian Education," by Jesus Duarte, in *Colombia: The Politics of Reforming the State*, Eduardo Posada-Carbó, ed., London: MacMillan Press and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998, pp. 125-153.
19. See also "Little Bells and Little Bees: The Forced Recruitment of Children," in the Human Rights Watch report, *War Without Quarter: Colombia and International Humanitarian Law*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 1998, pp. 192-203.

Selected Listing of Organizations Working with the Internally Displaced in Colombia

Association for the Promotion of Social Alternatives (MINGA)
Catholic Relief Services
CEDAVIDA
Center for Popular Investigation and Education (CINEP)
Colombian Commission of Jurists
Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (Bienestar)
Colombian Red Cross
Consultoria for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES)
Corporation for the Support of Victims of Socio-Political Violence (AVRE)
Corporation Maria Cano
Doctors of the World-France
Doctors of the World-Netherlands
Doctors of the World-Spain
Epsicopal Conference
International Committee of the Red Cross
International Organization for Migration
Javeriana University Law School
Jesuit Refugee Services
Justicia y Paz
Latin American Institute for Alternative Legal Service (ILSA)
Medellín Human Rights Committee
Mennonite Foundation for Community Development (Mencoldes)
National Association of Peasant, Indigenous and Black Women (ANMUCIC)
National Association of Solidarity and Assistance (ANDAS)
Popular Women's Organization of Barrancabermeja (OFP)
Profamilia
Project Counselling Services Unicef
Republic of Colombia, Ministry of Agriculture, Office for Rural Women
Republic of Colombia, Ministry of Education
Republic of Colombia, Office for the Equality of Women
Republic of Colombia, Presidential Advisor for Human Rights
Republic of Colombia, Presidential Advisor for Attention to Populations Displaced by Violence
Save the Children
Social Solidarity Network (Red de Solidaridad Social)
Taller de Vida
United Nations Development Programme
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
United States Agency for International Development
World Food Programme

GUIDING PRINCIPLES ON INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

INTRODUCTION: SCOPE AND PURPOSE

1. These Guiding Principles address the specific needs of internally displaced persons worldwide. They identify rights and guarantees relevant to the protection of persons from forced displacement and to their protection and assistance during displacement as well as during return or resettlement and reintegration.

2. For the purposes of these Principles, internally displaced persons are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.

3. These Principles reflect and are consistent with international human rights law and international humanitarian law. They provide guidance to:

- (a) The Representative of the Secretary-General on internally displaced persons in carrying out his mandate;
- (b) States when faced with the phenomenon of internal displacement;
- (c) All other authorities, groups and persons in their relations with internally displaced persons; and
- (d) Intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations when addressing internal displacement.

4. These Guiding Principles should be disseminated and applied as widely as possible.

SECTION I—GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Principle 1

1. Internally displaced persons shall enjoy, in full equality, the same rights and freedoms under international and domestic law as do other persons in their country. They shall not be discriminated against in the enjoyment of any rights and freedoms on the ground that they are internally displaced.

2. These Principles are without prejudice to individual criminal responsibility under international law, in particular relating to genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Principle 2

1. These Principles shall be observed by all authorities, groups and persons irrespective of their legal status and applied without any adverse distinction. The observance of these Principles shall not affect the legal status of any authorities, groups or persons involved.

2. These Principles shall not be interpreted as restricting, modifying or impairing the provisions of any international human rights or international humanitarian law instrument or rights granted to persons under domestic law. In particular, these Principles are without prejudice to the right to seek and enjoy asylum in other countries.

Principle 3

1. National authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons within their jurisdiction.

2. Internally displaced persons have the right to request and to receive protection and humanitarian assistance from these authorities. They shall not be persecuted or punished for making such a request.

Principle 4

1. These Principles shall be applied without discrimination of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion or belief, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, legal or social status, age, disability, property, birth, or on any other similar criteria.

2. Certain internally displaced persons, such as children, especially unaccompanied minors, expectant mothers, mothers with young children, female heads of household, persons with disabilities and elderly persons, shall be entitled to protection and assistance required by their condition and to treatment which takes into account their special needs.

SECTION II—PRINCIPLES RELATING TO PROTECTION FROM DISPLACEMENT

Principle 5

All authorities and international actors shall respect and ensure respect for their obligations under international law, including human rights and humanitarian law, in all circumstances, so as to prevent and avoid conditions that might lead to displacement of persons.

Principle 6

1. Every human being shall have the right to be protected against being arbitrarily displaced from his or her home or place of habitual residence.

2. The prohibition of arbitrary displacement includes displacement:

- (a) When it is based on policies of apartheid, “ethnic cleansing” or similar practices aimed at/or resulting in altering the ethnic, religious or racial composition of the affected population;
- (b) In situations of armed conflict, unless the security of the civilians involved or imperative military reasons so demand;
- (c) In cases of large-scale development projects, which are not justified by compelling and overriding public interests;
- (d) In cases of disasters, unless the safety and health of those affected requires their evacuation; and
- (e) When it is used as a collective punishment.

3. Displacement shall last no longer than required by the circumstances.

Principle 7

1. Prior to any decision requiring the displacement of persons, the authorities concerned shall ensure that all feasible alternatives are explored in order to avoid displacement altogether. Where no alternatives exist, all measures shall be taken to minimize displacement and its adverse effects.

2. The authorities undertaking such displacement shall ensure, to the greatest practicable extent, that proper accommodation is provided to the displaced persons, that such displacements are effected in satisfactory conditions of safety, nutrition, health and hygiene, and that members of the same family are not separated.

3. If displacement occurs in situations other than during the emergency stages of armed conflicts and disasters, the following guarantees shall be complied with:

- (a) A specific decision shall be taken by a State authority empowered by law to order such measures;
- (b) Adequate measures shall be taken to guarantee to those to be displaced full information on the reasons and procedures for their displacement and, where applicable, on compensation and relocation;
- (c) The free and informed consent of those to be displaced shall be sought;
- (d) The authorities concerned shall endeavour to involve those affected, particularly women, in the planning and management of their relocation;
- (e) Law enforcement measures, where required, shall be carried out by competent legal authorities; and
- (f) The right to an effective remedy, including the review of such decisions by appropriate judicial authorities, shall be respected.

Principle 8

Displacement shall not be carried out in a manner that violates the rights to life, dignity, liberty and security of those affected.

Principle 9

States are under a particular obligation to protect against the displacement of indigenous peoples, minorities, peasants, pastoralists and other groups with a special dependency on and attachment to their lands.

SECTION III-PRINCIPLES RELATING TO PROTECTION DURING DISPLACEMENT

Principle 10

1. Every human being has the inherent right to life which shall be protected by law. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his or her life. Internally displaced persons shall be protected in particular against:

- (a) Genocide;
- (b) Murder;
- (c) Summary or arbitrary executions; and
- (d) Enforced disappearances, including abduction or unacknowledged detention, threatening or resulting in death.

Threats and incitement to commit any of the foregoing acts shall be prohibited.

2. Attacks or other acts of violence against internally displaced persons who do not or no longer participate in hostilities are prohibited in all circumstances. Internally displaced persons shall be protected, in particular, against:

- (a) Direct or indiscriminate attacks or other acts of violence, including the creation of areas wherein attacks on civilians are permitted;
- (b) Starvation as a method of combat;

(c) Their use to shield military objectives from attack or to shield, favour or impede military operations;

(d) Attacks against their camps or settlements; and

(e) The use of anti-personnel landmines.

Principle 11

1. Every human being has the right to dignity and physical, mental and moral integrity.

2. Internally displaced persons, whether or not their liberty has been restricted, shall be protected in particular against:

(a) Rape, mutilation, torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and other outrages upon personal dignity, such as acts of gender-specific violence, forced prostitution and any form of indecent assault;

(b) Slavery or any contemporary form of slavery, such as sale into marriage, sexual exploitation, or forced labour of children; and

(c) Acts of violence intended to spread terror among internally displaced persons.

Threats and incitement to commit any of the foregoing acts shall be prohibited.

Principle 12

1. Every human being has the right to liberty and security of person. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention.

2. To give effect to this right for internally displaced persons, they shall not be interned in or confined to a camp. If in exceptional circumstances such internment or confinement is absolutely necessary, it shall not last longer than required by the circumstances.

3. Internally displaced persons shall be protected from discriminatory arrest and detention as a result of their displacement.

4. In no case shall internally displaced persons be taken hostage.

Principle 13

1. In no circumstances shall displaced children be recruited nor be required or permitted to take part in hostilities.

2. Internally displaced persons shall be protected against discriminatory practices of recruitment into any armed forces or groups as a result of their displacement. In particular any cruel, inhuman or degrading practices that compel compliance or punish non-compliance with recruitment are prohibited in all circumstances.

Principle 14

1. Every internally displaced person has the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose his or her residence.

2. In particular, internally displaced persons have the right to move freely in and out of camps or other settlements.

Principle 15

Internally displaced persons have:

(a) The right to seek safety in another part of the country;

(b) The right to leave their country;

(c) The right to seek asylum in another country; and

(d) The right to be protected against forcible return to or resettlement in any place where their life, safety, liberty and/or health would be at risk.

Principle 16

1. All internally displaced persons have the right to know the fate and whereabouts of missing relatives.
2. The authorities concerned shall endeavour to establish the fate and whereabouts of internally displaced persons reported missing, and cooperate with relevant international organizations engaged in this task. They shall inform the next of kin on the progress of the investigation and notify them of any result.
3. The authorities concerned shall endeavour to collect and identify the mortal remains of those deceased, prevent their despoliation or mutilation, and facilitate the return of those remains to the next of kin or dispose of them respectfully.
4. Grave sites of internally displaced persons should be protected and respected in all circumstances. Internally displaced persons should have the right of access to the grave sites of their deceased relatives.

Principle 17

1. Every human being has the right to respect of his or her family life.
2. To give effect to this right for internally displaced persons, family members who wish to remain together shall be allowed to do so.
3. Families which are separated by displacement should be reunited as quickly as possible. All appropriate steps shall be taken to expedite the reunion of such families, particularly when children are involved. The responsible authorities shall facilitate inquiries made by family members and encourage and cooperate with the work of humanitarian organizations engaged in the task of family reunification.
4. Members of internally displaced families whose personal liberty has been restricted by internment or confinement in camps shall have the right to remain together.

Principle 18

1. All internally displaced persons have the right to an adequate standard of living.
2. At the minimum, regardless of the circumstances, and without discrimination, competent authorities shall provide internally displaced persons with and ensure safe access to:
 - (a) Essential food and potable water;
 - (b) Basic shelter and housing;
 - (c) Appropriate clothing; and
 - (d) Essential medical services and sanitation.
3. Special efforts should be made to ensure the full participation of women in the planning and distribution of these basic supplies.

Principle 19

1. All wounded and sick internally displaced persons as well as those with disabilities shall receive to the fullest extent practicable and with the least possible delay, the medical care and attention they require, without distinction on any grounds other than medical ones. When necessary, internally displaced persons shall have access to psychological and social services.
2. Special attention should be paid to the health needs of women, including access to female health care providers and services, such as reproductive health care, as well as appropriate counselling for victims of sexual and other abuses.

3. Special attention should also be given to the prevention of contagious and infectious diseases, including AIDS, among internally displaced persons.

Principle 20

1. Every human being has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.
2. To give effect to this right for internally displaced persons, the authorities concerned shall issue to them all documents necessary for the enjoyment and exercise of their legal rights, such as passports, personal identification documents, birth certificates and marriage certificates. In particular, the authorities shall facilitate the issuance of new documents or the replacement of documents lost in the course of displacement, without imposing unreasonable conditions, such as requiring the return to one's area of habitual residence in order to obtain these or other required documents.
3. Women and men shall have equal rights to obtain such necessary documents and shall have the right to have such documentation issued in their own names.

Principle 21

1. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of property and possessions.
2. The property and possessions of internally displaced persons shall in all circumstances be protected, in particular, against the following acts:
 - (a) Pillage;
 - (b) Direct or indiscriminate attacks or other acts of violence;
 - (c) Being used to shield military operations or objectives;
 - (d) Being made the object of reprisal; and
 - (e) Being destroyed or appropriated as a form of collective punishment.
3. Property and possessions left behind by internally displaced persons should be protected against destruction and arbitrary and illegal appropriation, occupation or use.

Principle 22

1. Internally displaced persons, whether or not they are living in camps, shall not be discriminated against as a result of their displacement in the enjoyment of the following rights:
 - (a) The rights to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, opinion and expression;
 - (b) The right to seek freely opportunities for employment and to participate in economic activities;
 - (c) The right to associate freely and participate equally in community affairs;
 - (d) The right to vote and to participate in governmental and public affairs, including the right to have access to the means necessary to exercise this right; and
 - (e) The right to communicate in a language they understand.

Principle 23

1. Every human being has the right to education.
2. To give effect to this right for internally displaced persons, the authorities concerned shall ensure that such persons, in particular displaced children, receive education which shall be free and compulsory at the primary level. Education should respect their cultural identity, language and religion.

3. Special efforts should be made to ensure the full and equal participation of women and girls in educational programmes.

4. Education and training facilities shall be made available to internally displaced persons, in particular adolescents and women, whether or not living in camps, as soon as conditions permit.

SECTION IV—PRINCIPLES RELATING TO HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Principle 24

1. All humanitarian assistance shall be carried out in accordance with the principles of humanity and impartiality and without discrimination.

2. Humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons shall not be diverted, in particular for political or military reasons.

Principle 25

1. The primary duty and responsibility for providing humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons lies with national authorities.

2. International humanitarian organizations and other appropriate actors have the right to offer their services in support of the internally displaced. Such an offer shall not be regarded as an unfriendly act or an interference in a State's internal affairs and shall be considered in good faith. Consent thereto shall not be arbitrarily withheld, particularly when authorities concerned are unable or unwilling to provide the required humanitarian assistance.

3. All authorities concerned shall grant and facilitate the free passage of humanitarian assistance and grant persons engaged in the provision of such assistance rapid and unimpeded access to the internally displaced.

Principle 26

Persons engaged in humanitarian assistance, their transport and supplies shall be respected and protected. They shall not be the object of attack or other acts of violence.

Principle 27

1. International humanitarian organizations and other appropriate actors when providing assistance should give due regard to the protection needs and human rights of internally displaced persons and take appropriate measures in this regard. In so doing, these organizations and actors should respect relevant international standards and codes of conduct.

2. The preceding paragraph is without prejudice to the protection responsibilities of international organizations mandated for this purpose, whose services may be offered or requested by States.

SECTION V—PRINCIPLES RELATING TO RETURN, RESETTLEMENT AND REINTEGRATION

Principle 28

1. Competent authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to establish conditions, as well as provide the means, which allow internally displaced persons to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence, or to resettle voluntarily in another part of the country. Such authorities shall endeavour to facilitate the reintegration of returned or resettled internally displaced persons.

2. Special efforts should be made to ensure the full participation of internally displaced persons in the planning and management of their return or resettlement and reintegration.

Principle 29

1. Internally displaced persons who have returned to their homes or places of habitual residence or who have resettled in another part of the country shall not be discriminated against as a result of their having been displaced. They shall have the right to participate fully and equally in public affairs at all levels and have equal access to public services.

2. Competent authorities have the duty and responsibility to assist returned and/or resettled internally displaced persons to recover, to the extent possible, their property and possessions which they left behind or were dispossessed of upon their displacement. When recovery of such property and possessions is not possible, competent authorities shall provide or assist these persons in obtaining appropriate compensation or another form of just reparation.

Principle 30

All authorities concerned shall grant and facilitate for international humanitarian organizations and other appropriate actors, in the exercise of their respective mandates, rapid and unimpeded access to internally displaced persons to assist in their return or resettlement and reintegration.

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