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## Colombia: Thousands of Displaced People Face Destitution in Urban Areas

Hundreds of thousands of displaced people live in harsh conditions in urban centers and represent the most vulnerable of the poor people of Colombia.

Despite greater commitment from the Colombian government to address their needs, several obstacles continue to prevent the displaced from accessing decent housing, basic social services like health care and education, and income generating activities. The government of Colombia must recognize that displaced people have less ability than other vulnerable groups to integrate into urban settings and cope after displacement. The Colombian government needs to prioritize the needs of the displaced and increase significantly its financial contribution to provide them with essential services and opportunities to create sustainable livelihoods.

Over 2.5 million Colombians have been forcibly uprooted from their homes since the mid-1980s, and this dramatic flow has continued with more than 300,000 people fleeing last year. They escape the ongoing internal conflict between the national army and the leftwing guerrilla of the FARC, as well as fighting between the FARC and right wing paramilitary units which have not yet been demobilized, or which have regrouped after demobilizing and formed new criminal armed groups. The fighting has lately been concentrated in the southern and eastern areas of the country, and has become increasingly aimed at the control of territories used for coca plantations, strategic areas used for processing the coca leaves and corridors for transportation to the international market. Civilians are also forced to flee when aerial fumigations of coca plantations are preceded by national army operations against illegal armed groups.

The majority of the displaced end up staying in the urban centers, unable to return because of protracted insecurity in their areas of origin, or because their land has been occupied or illegally acquired by others during their

absence. Once in towns, displaced persons suffer stigmatization, rejection and often persecution by members of the recipient communities, so their tendency is to “disappear” into anonymity. Moreover, the national authorities recognize that at least 30% of the displaced do not register with the government mainly for fear of being targeted afterwards by either paramilitaries or guerrilla groups. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian displaced are even more vulnerable, since their specific cultural, social and economic habits developed in rural and collectively owned lands hamper their capacity to survive in the cities.

In the department of Chocó, one of the poorest areas of the country, where since the mid-1990s tens of thousands of people had been displaced, a group representing thousands of displaced families recently put together, in collaboration with the Office of the Ombudsman and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a detailed study that revealed how sporadic and insufficient the assistance provided by the authorities has been in recent years. In Quibdó, the departmental capital of Chocó, the survey identified 3,090 displaced families, two thirds of which are headed by women, and this group of 15,000 people represents 16% of the city population. During the last few years, around 60% of the displaced have received some form of assistance, but the core of it has been emergency food and supplies for the first three months of displacement only, and some access to health and primary education. In terms of social and economic integration the data are shocking: only fifteen people received help with housing, fewer than one hundred accessed income generating schemes, and fewer than 200 participated in vocational training courses.

Around half of the surveyed households are not included in the official government's registry of displaced (Sistema Unico de Registro) and therefore do not have access to social services, and will be prevented from benefiting from special programs that may be offered by the Colombian government. Ignorance about the registry process and fear kept people from registering. "Not only were people scared to register, but when interviewed by the authorities they remained vague about the identity of those who caused the displacement because they feared being associated with one or the other armed group. This means that many saw their application rejected," said a representative of the displaced. A high official from the Colombian government's agency responsible for internally displaced people, the Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation [known as Acción Social], assured Refugees International, "Those displaced not registered will be easily included in other registry mechanisms like the subsidized health insurance database – SISBEN." The reality, however, is that only 17.4% of the displaced in Quibdó are currently in that system and the rest won't qualify as potential beneficiaries of planned assistance.

Returns have often proven in the past to be unsustainable and often coerced, with blatant disrespect of the basic principles of voluntariness, safety and dignity (see: <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/6988/>). The best durable solution for those who have been displaced for years is to support their social and economic integration in urban areas. While recognizing this, the government is firmly convinced that the internally displaced are not worse off than other poor people living in the cities, and has framed its response in terms of programs of assistance for all vulnerable people, with a minimal share reserved for the displaced.

This basic assumption is false, since displaced households have to face greater obstacles to access the labor market and social services, like health assistance and education, and have to rebuild their livelihoods entirely. These particular difficulties have been also highlighted by recent studies conducted by the Catholic Church in collaboration with the University of the Andes in Bogotá, which reported how displaced households, even after years of refuge, are far from being well integrated and continue to be much poorer than the resident poor. Displaced people lose their capacity to support themselves, working 40% less than before displacement, and after fleeing and living in urban areas their unemployment rate is six percentage points higher than resident poor people. Housing conditions, low levels of hygiene and nutrition deficiency lead to new diseases in around 20% of the displaced families. And even when

programs providing income generation activities have been implemented, beneficiaries were only lifted up from complete destitution to levels of poverty equal to those faced by resident poor people.

While the government has the primary responsibility to address the needs and protect the rights of the displaced, complementary initiatives from international and national groups can have a significant impact on the lives of many displaced Colombians. Of particular interest is the program funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) that is designed to benefit almost a million Colombians, of whom 75% will be internally displaced, over a five-year period. Managed by a consortium of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Pan-American Development Foundation (PADF), which work with implementers selected through a public tender, the program has had a slow start. RI visited Quibdó in September of 2005 and the IOM representative assured us then that activities were about to begin. In June of this year IOM was no longer there, replaced by PADF, which had just established its office and was still evaluating proposals.

According to potential implementing organizations, the proposal submission process has been administratively cumbersome and technical support for proposal writing for local organizations is lacking. Even more worrisome is that essential information provided through the survey conducted by the displaced was not used in the needs assessment phase. Moreover, any project will only benefit registered displaced people. While recognizing that more time may be needed for adjustments, RI believes that the process needs to be simplified and accelerated, and more supportive of local organizations, especially those groups representing the displaced themselves.

## **REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS THAT:**

### **THE GOVERNMENT OF COLOMBIA**

- Take seriously the increasing evidence underlining the particular vulnerability of displaced communities living in urban areas. Greater resources should be devoted to housing improvement projects, income generating activities and vocational training courses, placing priority on households headed by women.
- Address urgently the status of thousands of unregistered displaced households in order to include them in programs offering opportunities for social and economic integration in urban areas.

## THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- ❑ Make sure that partner agencies IOM and PADF coordinate their interventions closely with representatives of the displaced communities and that training opportunities for writing project proposals are provided to applicants.
- ❑ Monitor program implementation, assuring that displaced households represent three quarters of the beneficiaries and that groups of internally displaced living in small municipalities have the same access to it as those residing in the departmental capitals.

## THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR)

- ❑ Increase assistance to strengthen organizations representing the internally displaced and support them in surveying their needs in other departments of the country.
- ❑ Continue to provide these organizations with protection and human rights awareness training, which ultimately will allow access to existing legal mechanisms to redress abuses and violated rights.

*Advocates Andrea Lari and Kristele Younes just returned from a one-month assessment of the internal displacement situation in Colombia.*