

**UNHCR REGIONAL OFFICE FOR  
NORTHERN SOUTH AMERICA**

**2003**

**Executive Committee Summary  
COLOMBIA SITUATION**

## I. Context

Despite the initiatives taken to find a negotiated solution to the Colombian conflict, the humanitarian situation has deteriorated further with a sharp rise in internal displacement. The region is characterised by uncertain political and economic developments. In Colombia, the volatile political situation has affected not only the humanitarian situation but also the economy. During the last year the economy of Colombia has suffered severely from low coffee prices causing high levels of unemployment. On 20 February 2002, the peace process in Colombia was abandoned and the conflict has intensified since then. All factions (Armed Forces, paramilitary forces and guerrilla groups, particularly the FARC) in the conflict have increased their fighting power and pursued their relentless struggle for control. The number of kidnappings, car-bombs and attacks on the country's infrastructure have dramatically increased and led to a further rise in the level of violence. In August 2002 the new Government of President Alvaro Uribe was sworn in.

The civilian population continues to be a perpetual target with more internal displacement and violations of their rights. It is estimated that more than 1.5 million persons were displaced since 1995. Today, Internally Displaced Persons are still in dire need of protection and assistance, as few alternatives and durable solutions are available. While many Colombians have exercised their right to seek asylum abroad, many IDPs cannot or do not wish to avail themselves of this option.

Following a request of the Colombian Government to work with IDPs, UNHCR started its operations in 1999. UNHCR's response to the Humanitarian crisis in Colombia is based on a comprehensive regional, two track approach aimed at:

- i) promoting a co-ordinated and effective response to internal displacement in Colombia to ensure both protection and solutions for IDPs, and
- ii) the reinforcement of protection and assistance programs for refugees and asylum seekers in neighbouring countries.

Over the past three years, UNHCR has obtained important experience with IDPs in Colombia. Its' work has been acknowledged by the Colombian Government and the international community. Donor countries have supported the activities and prospects for continued funding in 2003 are promising. In October 2002, the UN Country Team will complete a Humanitarian Plan of Action that will prioritise activities on behalf of IDPs for the coming two years.

UNHCR has identified four main themes for its programme on behalf of IDPs:

- **Institutional Strengthening**, by promoting an effective, integrated State and civil society response to address the consequences of internal displacement;
- **Prevention and Protection**, by reinforcing and applying the legal framework for IDPs in accordance with international legal standards;
- **Solutions and Integration**, by supporting viable return processes and improving conditions for IDPs in receiving communities, through unhindered access to basic services;
- **Co-ordination and advocacy**, by contributing to humanitarian initiatives in favour of IDPs through international co-operation, effective co-ordination and by raising public awareness.

An important trend is the increasing number of Colombian asylum seekers in the region and other parts of the world. It has been estimated that more than 1.2 million Colombians have left the country over the last five years. The number of Colombians applying for asylum in North America and Europe has also increased rapidly. The provision of reliable and updated country of origin information has become important to support asylum applications of Colombians in need of international protection.

Since the start of the operation in 1999, UNHCR has increased its presence in Colombia. At the moment, UNHCR has a Branch Office in Bogotá and three offices in the field (Apartadó, Barrancabermeja and Puerto Asís). In order to reach national coverage, UNHCR is planning to open a fourth field office to cover the Atlantic Coast region of the country.

Although progress has been made in the Colombian IDP programme, many constraints still need to be addressed in the near future. The IDP problem continues to be rather invisible as acts of violence causing displacement are generally not punished. National legislation defending the rights of IDPs exists, but local application and the implementation of protection activities on behalf of IDPs still lags behind. UNHCR will have to ensure that IDP issues appear high on the political agenda of the new Government. UNHCR will also have to encourage the incoming Government to incorporate IDP provisions in its four-year development plan.

## **II. Protection**

Dissemination and application of IDP legislation at the local level will remain a priority in Colombia. From the start UNHCR has worked within the framework of Law 387, the law that defines the rights of IDPs and the protection and assistance regimes. UNHCR is co-operating with the National Ombudsman, the General Procurator's Office, the National Registry and the Municipalities to ensure that discrimination against IDPs is addressed and the National System for the Integral Attention to IDPs (SNAIPD) is strengthened. Training sessions on IDP legislation and its application will continue to be among the key activities of UNHCR in Colombia.

Through its field presence, UNHCR has been able to accompany return and relocation processes. The field staff will further support the Municipal Committees to address IDP issues, such as disputes about land and property, shelter needs, access to basic services (health/education) and employment opportunities. Protection networks in areas of displacement will be reinforced to work on prevention of further displacement and exchange of information related to population movements or trigger effects. The security of IDPs and their leaders is a point of concern, as measures adopted by the Government do not always provide adequate guarantees. The security of Humanitarian Aid Workers has also deteriorated and will have to be enhanced.

Protection of IDPs and prevention against further displacement is further enhanced, by supporting initiatives of IDP's and their associations. IDP associations have mitigated the effects of displacement and play an important role in improving access to basic services such as: health and education, as well as shelter, employment and productive activities. Associations will advocate for the respect of IDP rights and enhance the security of their own leaders.

The number of Colombians fleeing the conflict has been growing further during recent years. According to the Government counterpart 'Red de Solidaridad Social' (RSS) internal displacement increased from 128,000 new IDPs in 2000 to 190,000 in 2001. The NGO CODHES' (Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento) estimates are much higher with 317,200 IDPs in 2000 and 341,920 in 2001. During the first semester of 2002 some

168,000 Colombians were displaced compared to some 95,000 IDPs in the same period of 2001, showing a further increase in internal displacement (76%). To improve IDP statistics, the Government information system needs to be further enhanced. More information is also needed about the age and gender breakdown of the IDP population. So far, little attention has been paid to IDP's in urban areas, who amount to approximately 30 to 50% of the overall IDP population. Currently, the UNHCR IDP programme is assisting more than 80,000 persons. Through the opening of a 4<sup>th</sup> office in the Atlantic Coast Region, UNHCR will be able to support another 30,000 IDPs.

As part of its traditional mandate activities, aimed at reinforcing the regional asylum regime, UNHCR Colombia provides international protection and assistance to a small caseload of refugees and asylum seekers in Colombia.

As internal flight alternatives are becoming increasingly questionable, it cannot be ruled out that cross-border movements will continue. Although the number of Colombian asylum seekers in neighbouring countries is still relatively low, UNHCR should be prepared for larger refugee flows. UNHCR is working in the neighbouring countries of the region to strengthen asylum procedures to assure that fleeing Colombians in need of international protection will have access to it. At the same time, UNHCR Colombia tries to keep abreast of the situation in border areas, and analyses the potential causes of displacement, contributing to a regional protection strategy.

Together with the UNHCR Regional Office in Venezuela, contingency plans for critical border areas will be updated regularly. The UNHCR Offices in Bogotá and Caracas, as well as in the field (in particular Puerto Asis, Lago Agrio, Ibarra and San Cristobal) co-ordinate closely and exchange relevant information on population movements.

### **III. Differentiated Approach**

The IDP programme in Colombia highlights the importance of gender mainstreaming, and targets displaced women, adolescents, children and indigenous populations. This focus is of particular importance as the specific needs of these groups, who are more affected in the process of internal displacement, have to be addressed to ensure adequate protection and the search for durable solutions.

According to the RSS, 49% of total IDPs are women. Displaced women are often exposed to a double exclusion: as women, and as IDPs. In this sense the gender imbalance can be more acute due to displacement. Political violence and armed conflict have affected women more directly, as displaced women are often assuming a new role as head of household (34% of the displaced families in Colombia are headed by women). Many displaced women lack identity documents. UNHCR's interventions on behalf of women will aim at the strengthening of women organisations and increase the participation of women in IDP associations. To empower displaced women, support will be provided to enhance their self-reliance.

The RSS estimates that 46% of the IDPs is under 18 years of age. Access for displaced children to primary education is a major concern. In coordination with the Ministry of Education, UNHCR will increase educational coverage for displaced children in selected areas. The integration of displaced children is a difficult process as many have been traumatised by the conflict. The vulnerability of adolescents is increasing due to the possibility of forced recruitment into the ranks of different armed actors. UNHCR, in coordination with UNICEF, will promote alternatives to recruitment, designing programmes to enhance vocational training and employment opportunities.

Although Afro-colombians represent 9% and Indigenous 2% of the total population of Colombia, they represent 25.8% of the total displaced population. UNHCR will support minority associations that advocate respect for the cultural and property rights of displaced minorities. Further data collection is needed to have a thorough understanding of the problems faced by displaced minorities.

#### **IV. Towards Solutions**

Together with State and civil society institutions, UNHCR will promote the search for sustainable solutions for those IDPs that are looking for integration into the receiving communities. In situations where return is not a possible option, UNHCR will support relocation projects, in which IDPs will receive support to restart daily life. Reintegration and relocation activities of RSS will be supported through the Joint Technical Unit (JTU), by providing technical assistance and by encouraging the inclusion of IDP projects in Municipal development plans.

If viable, UNHCR will advocate for return to places of origin. Where possible, IDP return movements will be accompanied by UNHCR staff. UNHCR will facilitate reintegration activities in co-ordination with Community-Based Organisations and the authorities. IDP associations are playing a crucial role in finding durable solutions for internal displacement. Once established and empowered, IDP associations will facilitate reintegration activities and advocate for access to basic services. Within this context, UNHCR plays a facilitating and co-ordinating role and is not focusing on material assistance and/or emergency relief. However, in a limited number of cases, UNHCR will support IDP associations with inputs to start income generating activities that will allow them to support their families and regain self-reliance.

#### **V. Advocacy and Coordination**

Despite the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis in Colombia and its impact on Colombian society, the phenomenon of internal displacement has not found a high position in the political and social agenda in Colombia. During a recent mission, the Chairperson of UNHCR's Executive Committee mentioned the invisibility of and silence about displacement in addition to the violation of human rights as crucial factors that have led to a deterioration of the humanitarian crisis in Colombia. The ECXCOM Chairman exhorted the UN system to rise IDP issues forcefully at international level. In 2003, UNHCR will continue to develop its strategy of advocacy for internal displacement in order to gain public and political attention.

The UNHCR office in Bogotá has always recognised the importance of co-ordination with different stakeholders. More effective protection networks and partnerships will be established to facilitate co-ordination and avoid duplications. Complementarity and interface with ICRC will be ensured, and regular exchanges of information are taking place at field level and in Bogota. Currently, UNHCR is working with four Government partners (RSS, Ombudsman, Procurator's office, Registry) and fourteen Colombian Non-Governmental Organisations. Regular PARinAC meetings will be organised to discuss new developments and issues of common interest.

UNHCR is the designated co-ordinator on displacement issues for the UN system in Colombia. This task is supported by OCHA through the assignment of staff to UNHCR. A Thematic Group on Displacement (Grupo Temático sobre el Desplazamiento GTD) was created to facilitate inter-agency co-ordination on IDP issues. The GTD, with participation of the RSS, is now in the process of completing a joint UN Humanitarian Action Plan. This plan will set priorities for UN interventions on behalf of IDPs. Once finalised, it will be presented to the Colombian authorities to assist the incoming government in defining their IDP policy. It will also be presented to the international community in order to ensure sufficient donor support for IDP projects.