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COLOMBIA: FLOOD RESPONSE IMPROVES, BUT CHALLENGES REMAIN

Heavy rains and flooding in Colombia over the past fifteen months have affected more than three million people. While the initial humanitarian response was weak, there have been noteworthy improvements both on the ground and institutionally. But with significant numbers of people still displaced or affected by the disaster, challenges remain. Increased support is needed to address ongoing problems at poorly maintained shelters and to help affected communities restart their lives. Ambitious plans to relocate people away from at-risk areas will require the full participation of affected communities if they are to succeed. On the national level, major changes are underway to strengthen disaster management and build climate resilience. Nevertheless, weak local institutions threaten to undermine new and ambitious central government initiatives. Local capacity-building and accountability mechanisms must be prioritized.

UNPRECEDENTED FLOODS TEST COLOMBIA'S DISASTER RESPONSE CAPACITY

Over the past year and a half, Colombia has been inundated by unusually heavy and persistent rains. The strong La Niña conditions that emerged in 2010 resulted in the worst flooding in nearly a century, affecting 93 percent of the

country's municipalities. The situation worsened in late 2011 when La Niña conditions reappeared causing more flooding and landslides. More than 3.2 million people were affected by the disaster, 1.35 million hectares of agricultural land were flooded, and thousands of roads were damaged or washed away. While there are no exact figures of the number of

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ The Colombian government must continue to support populations displaced by the 2010-2011 La Niña disaster by clarifying management responsibilities at temporary shelters and addressing water and sanitation problems. Support is also needed to develop better shelter strategies going forward.
- ❑ Plans to relocate displaced people away from flood-prone areas must be implemented with the full participation and consent of affected populations.
- ❑ As it winds down the emergency response phase of the disaster, the Colombian government should prioritize livelihood programs for vulnerable populations living in the hardest-hit areas.
- ❑ The United States and other donors must invest in local government capacity to both strengthen natural disaster management and support land restitution and reparations programs for conflict victims. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) should ensure that ongoing programs to support municipalities implementing the Victims' and Land Restitution Laws incorporate support for disaster risk reduction and emergency response.
- ❑ The UN Humanitarian Country Team should conduct a lessons learned workshop with donors to identify how it can better coordinate and execute natural disaster response activities in the future, and clarify its role in supporting the Colombian government-led response. UN programs for populations affected by both floods and conflict should seek to strengthen the response capacity of local institutions.

people displaced, over 440,000 homes were reportedly damaged or destroyed by floods and landslides. Today, tens of thousands of people remain in temporary shelters.

Given the overwhelming size and scale of the disaster, in early 2011 the newly-elected Santos Administration decided to launch a major campaign to raise flood aid and set up a new, public-private initiative – *Colombia Humanitaria* – to administer the funds. As RI described in its [May 2011 report](#), despite strong political will at the national level and a budget of over US\$80 million, *Colombia Humanitaria* encountered significant challenges in distributing emergency assistance in a timely and effective manner. Contractual delays, bureaucratic obstacles, corruption, poor coordination, lack of government access to large areas of the country, and incomplete information meant that thousands received little to no assistance. Tragically, it was the most vulnerable sectors of society who were hardest hit yet often received the least amount of aid, including victims of Colombia's decades-long, internal armed conflict, and poor communities living in remote areas or on flood-prone, marginal lands. Their pre-existing vulnerabilities and exposure to risk made them more susceptible to the disaster, while their poverty, disenfranchisement, and lack of safety nets have made it far more difficult for them to recover or seek redress.

ONE YEAR LATER: PROGRESS, BUT CHALLENGES REMAIN

In February 2012, RI returned to visit many of the hardest hit areas. The team found that the Colombian government's response to flood victims improved in many respects during the latter half of 2011. Specifically, most people RI interviewed said that shipments of food aid and clean water became more regular by mid-2011. Physical improvements were also visible and homes and schools appeared newly painted and refurbished. Thanks to emergency education programs, and the fact that displaced populations are no longer using schools as shelters, thousands of children who were not able to attend classes are back at school. In addition, *Colombia Humanitaria* is funding numerous programs to provide psycho-social support to affected communities, particularly children, to help them to cope with loss, fear, and an uncertain future.

Yet numerous humanitarian concerns remain, especially in parts of the country that are still flooded. Of particular concern are the thousands of people who remain displaced by the disaster. The slow pace of construction of temporary shelters meant that most flood victims were displaced three or four times before being provided with shelter or returning home. Many spent months – in some cases up to a year –

living in shacks along the road, or in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions in schools or churches, under the constant threat of eviction.

While many of the displaced are now living in temporary shelters, problems such as lack of adequate water and sanitation persist due to insufficient shelter management. For example, in Atlántico Department, the latrines in the shelters in Santa Lucia, Manatí and Candelaria have never worked and overall, sanitary conditions are poor. At one of the shelters in Manatí, two of the water tanks have collapsed and make-shift cooking areas constructed by the residents (none were provided in the original design) are unsafe. One aid agency that had built some of the shelters told RI that the government had provided money only to build the shelters, not to maintain them. Representatives of the local mayor's office also claimed they did not have money to fix the problems.

In some departments RI visited – including Atlántico and Bolívar – ambitious plans are underway to relocate displaced populations away from flood-prone areas. But securing land and building homes is likely to take time – more than a year according to the Atlántico Governor's office. Thus, it is likely that the existing temporary shelters, designed to last three to six months, will be housing displaced populations for far longer.

The persistent rains and floods have also made it difficult to restore livelihoods. Many of the hardest hit communities – for example, in La Mojana region in southern Córdoba and Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities – lived below the poverty line prior to the disaster. Many are farmers who lost crops and animals during the floods and who, due to persistently wet conditions, have been unable to replant. The lack of robust livelihood programs was particularly concerning because *Colombia Humanitaria* stopped delivering food aid to most areas at the end of 2011 as the government wound down the “humanitarian response” phase of the emergency. Several national and local government officials expressed concerns about creating dependencies now that more than a year has passed since the onset of the crisis. Yet it was unclear how people – especially in areas that are still flooded – could be expected to become more self-sufficient when their livelihoods had been significantly diminished and alternative sources of income remain scarce.

[See a video report from this mission.](#)

Going forward, far more attention is needed to ensure that those who remain displaced are provided with adequate shelter, water, and sanitation, and that affected populations are given access to livelihoods. Departmental and local governments require greater assistance to develop improved shelter strategies and ensure that minimum international

standards for the treatment of displaced populations are met. The government should consider entering into contracts or making arrangements for improved shelter management at existing shelters, and international agencies with expertise in shelter management, water, and sanitation should be brought in to address technical problems.

The Colombian government's decision to bifurcate the response to the floods into two phases – the humanitarian response phase managed by *Colombia Humanitaria*, and a rehabilitation and reconstruction phase managed by the Adaptation Fund – has the advantage of providing an opportunity for the government to evaluate disaster risk before initiating reconstruction. As mentioned above, in some areas, the government has not allowed people living in flood-prone areas to return. In this regard, the government deserves credit for resisting a common, post-disaster scenario that puts vulnerable people right back in harm's way. However, in the near-term, phasing the response has slowed rehabilitation programs that could have produced permanent solutions more quickly, leaving many people displaced for long periods with limited assistance.

Moreover, in the long-term, relocating thousands of people is a challenging task that will be fraught with difficulties and present serious risks for affected populations. The government appears focused on ensuring success and has engaged the private sector, including architectural competitions for the housing design and private land donations. Yet the need to more fully engage affected communities themselves in relocation plans, and to ensure their free, prior, and informed consent, should not be overlooked. This includes obtaining the full participation of affected communities in all phases of the relocation process from the choice of site to the design and construction of suitable and culturally-appropriate housing. The new locations must provide access to basic services, education, markets, livelihoods, and employment. RI visited many communities that are divided about government relocation plans because the selected sites are too far away, the houses and/or plots of land are too small, or the housing designs or construction materials are inadequate. Communities must be given greater opportunity to drive the process rather than be cajoled along. Of utmost importance, monitoring and accountability measures must be put in place along with procedures to afford affected communities with complaint mechanisms and due process guarantees.

A WAKE-UP CALL LEADS TO MAJOR INSTITUTIONAL IMPROVEMENTS

While the economic and human impacts of the floods cannot be underestimated, the crisis has had some important

positive outcomes. First and foremost, it raised awareness of the high disaster risks that Colombia faces, and the need to better prepare for and manage those risks. Having made disaster management a national priority for decades, Colombia (like many countries, including the United States and Japan), thought it was prepared. However, the severity and geographic scope of the 2010-2011 La Niña disaster put the system to the test, and exposed serious flaws. The creation of *Colombia Humanitaria* was well intentioned, but ran into significant challenges that substantially hindered the prompt distribution of humanitarian aid. But a more endemic problem was the lack of capacity at the local level.

Colombia deserves credit for confronting these shortcomings, and the country's renewed focus on disaster risk management is evident in several major institutional changes. In November 2011, the government elevated the Directorate for Disaster Management out from under the Ministry of Interior to an executive level office that reports directly to the President, and which is administratively and financially independent. The main objectives of the new National Unit for Disaster Risk Management (UNGRD) are to direct the implementation of disaster risk management, create policies for sustainable development, and coordinate the operation of Colombia's National Disaster and Prevention Relief System (SNPAD). In addition, the 1989 law that created SNPAD (Decree 919) is currently being revised to further strengthen the country's disaster management system with a greater focus on prevention and risk reduction. In order to effectively accomplish its expanded responsibilities, both the agency's staff and budget have been substantially increased.

In addition, the Ministry of Environment has received preliminary approval from the Adaptation Fund to improve flood control in key watersheds. One of the project components, led by the country's national weather service (IDEAM), will be to design and implement an integrated early warning system comprised of a network of 457 hydro-meteorological stations. With the ability to measure river flows in real time, the new system will guarantee that hydro-meteorological information reaches decision-makers and communities in a timely manner.

BOLSTERING LOCAL GOVERNMENT CAPACITY TO RESPOND TO BOTH CONFLICT AND NATURAL DISASTERS

Whether the national government's new focus on disaster management and climate change adaptation will ultimately prove successful will depend largely on its ability to effectively implement its plans at the local level. The recent elections, and the fact that newly elected governors and

mayors are now drafting development plans, provides an important opportunity, and one on which the government is capitalizing. A revision of Decree 919 currently under consideration would require municipalities to set aside a certain percentage of their budgets for disaster preparedness and response. In addition, UNGRD is working with the National Training Service (SENA) to implement a training program for the departmental and municipal disaster management committees (CREPADs and CLOPADs), local communities, local operators, and the Red Cross. To complement these measures, the government should institute accountability and oversight mechanisms.

Both international agencies and donors have an important role to play in bolstering disaster management at the local level, and several programs are already underway. With funding from the European Union, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in cooperation with the Colombian government is implementing a promising program in northern Colombia that aims to assist departmental and local governments in both disaster risk management and climate change adaptation more broadly. Oxfam UK recently received funding from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to build capacity at three CLOPADs in flood-prone municipalities. One of the first steps in the project will be to analyze where the bottlenecks are occurring at the local level, thereby providing much needed, ground-level diagnostics to complement top-down government initiatives.

Going forward, the United States and other donors must focus on programs that take a holistic approach to building strong local governance in insecure parts of the country. In the year ahead, local governments – in addition to strengthening disaster risk management – will be taking on new responsibilities and authorities in connection with the implementation of the 2011 Victims' Law and Law on Land Restitution, two historic pieces of legislation that seek to provide redress for victims of Colombia's decades-long, internal armed conflict. Currently, in cooperation with the Colombian government, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) is implementing a program to help re-establish a state presence in 51 municipalities previously under the control of illegal armed groups and to facilitate the implementation of Victims and Land Restitution Laws. A central component of the program will be to improve municipal government capacity and assist newly-elected, local officials and their staff in drafting land use and development plans. Since many of the areas in which USAID is working were heavily affected by the 2010-2011 floods, disaster risk reduction and emergency planning should be incorporated into the program, including assistance to municipalities to ensure inclusion of budgetary set-asides for disasters into

their development plans. In fact, disaster risk reduction and emergency response planning would complement planned assistance in the areas of agriculture, livelihoods, infrastructure, and land titling. Finally, donors should support programs to increase the oversight capacity of agencies from Colombia's Public Ministry, such as the Inspector General (Procuraduría General de la Nación) and the Ombudsmen's Office (Defensoría del Pueblo).

DEFINING A ROLE FOR THE UN HUMANITARIAN COUNTRY TEAM (HCT)

As RI noted in its May 2011 report, many perceived the HCT's response to the 2010-2011 floods as weak, especially given the alarming humanitarian conditions that persisted on the ground. While the Colombian government would not allow the UN to raise funds to launch a more comprehensive response, many felt that the HCT was slow to react to the crisis and that coordination was weak.

A year later, some improvements have been made, most notably an effort to map and target the "doubly affected" population – those people affected by both conflict and floods. (According to CODHES, four in ten flood victims are conflict IDPs.) With \$5.55 million in funding from the Colombian government, the HCT is implementing a program to assist doubly affected populations in the Pacific region with water and sanitation, shelter, early recovery, food security, and health care. Specific benefits of the program design include its multi-sectoral approach and its focus on the quality of the intervention, not just the distribution of material assistance.

Yet less clear is whether the HCT has seized upon the 2010-2011 floods disaster as an opportunity to re-think its approach to natural disaster response going forward. On the positive side, new tools have been put in place to improve information flow. These include an emergency response or "situation room" that allows sharing of information among the government, UN agencies, and other humanitarian actors, as well as a new platform for online information sharing with field volunteers. But on a broader level, it did not appear that the HCT and donors had assessed and evaluated lessons learned, or put in place plans or processes that in the future would allow international agencies to quickly identify and fill protection gaps in the government-led response. RI spoke to several organizations that remain skeptical regarding the ability of the HCT to effectively coordinate and respond to sudden-onset natural disasters, given the large number of agencies involved (11 UN Agencies and more than 35 international non-governmental organizations), and its inability to undertake rapid, executive decision-making.

The HCT appears to continue to feel constrained by its limited funds and operational role in natural disaster response, and by its concerns of jeopardizing its working relationship with the Colombian government. These constraints seem to have dampened both the appetite for a more critical self-assessment, as well as the enthusiasm for identifying more creative and effective approaches to allow the HCT to fully capitalize on its complementary, technical support role. But the fact remains that despite Colombia's middle-income status and its well-funded, central government initiatives, many parts of the country remain highly insecure and inaccessible to the state. At the same time, local institutions are incapable of effectively responding to humanitarian needs in the case of natural disasters.

As a first step, the HCT should convene a workshop or conference for both humanitarian agencies and donors to evaluate lessons learned from the 2010-2011 La Niña disaster, and on how to implement a more effective and speedy response in the future. The broader question of the UN's role in middle-income countries like Colombia that still face humanitarian needs should also be explored. The Joint Program for doubly affected populations in the Pacific region marks an important step forward that hopefully will build both the national and local governments' confidence in the UN's ability to play a complementary role, and that can be expanded and replicated in the future. Going forward, efforts should be made to ensure that this and other programs work to bolster existing local government response systems, as opposed to running parallel to them, and incorporate international best practices and a rights-based approach.

The information contained in this report is based on information gathered by Alice Thomas, Program Manager of RI's Bacon Center for the Study of Climate Displacement, during a three week visit to Colombia in February 2012. Ms. Thomas interviewed Colombian government officials, UN agencies, US government officials, international and local non-government organizations, religious organizations, and representatives of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement. She also interviewed dozens of affected communities in Sucre, Córdoba, Atlántico, and Bolívar Departments.