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The human cost of Colombia's 40-year-old armed conflict is perhaps most dramatically expressed through the forced internal displacement of over 4 million people since 1985¹. In a country of 45 million this number is of grave concern². Those who have been forced to displace —the majority of whom come from rural areas— are usually forced to leave behind their homes and possessions as well as their lands which have provided them with a livelihood. Internal displacement in Colombia corresponds with the internal conflict and the human rights abuses that accompany it. The human rights violations which cause the civilian population to displace include: extra-judicial killings, forced disappearances, massacres, or acts of torture. In addition, confrontations between armed actors that violate international humanitarian law also lead to the displacement of the civilian population.

Human rights organisations maintain that forced displacement will only begin to be resolved when solutions are found to the social and political conflicts causing the current armed conflict in Colombia. According to the lawyer Soraya Gutiérrez, «Forced displacement represents the most effective tool for the consolidation of political interests and economic projects»³.

In this respect, the only option remaining for internally displaced communities has been self-organisation and civil resistance. Even though they have been forced from their land, they have returned to stay in the midst of a war they did not choose but have had to suffer. For instance, there are the experiences of the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, the Humanitarian Zones in Chocó, the Peasant Farmer Reserve Zone in the Cimitarra River Valley, or the Humanitarian Refuge in the Catatumbo region, all of which have received international accompaniment from organisations like PBI.

Without exception, all of the armed actors have been responsible for the forced displacement of individuals, families and whole communities. On several occasions, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has determined the Colombian State's responsibility for the occurrence of forced displacement, as in the case of the paramilitary massacre of Mapiripán, which caused the forced displacement of numerous families⁴. Moreover, Ruling T-025 of 2004 issued by the Colombian Constitutional Court indicated that Colombian authorities have repeatedly neglected to provide timely and effective protection to the internally displaced population. In this respect, the Court has ordered the State to carry out different measures to re-establish the rights of this population. Likewise, the representative for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Jean Noël-Wetterwald, stated that «there is still much to be done on the ground». ●

1 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, October 2008

2 UNDP World Report, 2006

3 «El desplazamiento interno en Colombia: una tragedia humanitaria», Soraya Gutiérrez (CCAJAR), Speech given at the 36th Congress of the International Federation for Human Rights, Lisbon, April 2007

4 From 15 to 20 July 1997, one hundred AUC members —with the collaboration and complicity of State officials— detained, tortured and murdered at least 49 civilians in Mapiripán, Department of Meta.

PBI Colombia's funding agencies

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Photo from cover:

Effects of the war: a displaced family as they wait to leave the region, Meta Airport.

Jesús Abad Colorado / Fundación Dos Mundos

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Print: Editorial CÓDICE Ltda.
Tel.: 2177010 - 2494992.
casaeditorial@etb.net.co

Forced displacement in Colombia: a crime and a humanitarian tragedy

By Elizabeth Kerr¹

The human cost of Colombia's 40 year old armed conflict is perhaps most dramatically expressed through the forced internal displacement of over 4 million people since 1985³. In a country of 45 million this number is of grave concern⁴. Those who have been forced to displace—the majority of whom come from rural areas—are usually forced to leave behind their homes and possessions as well as their lands which have provided them with a livelihood. Behind each man, woman and child who have been forced to flee their home lies a story of loss related to Colombia's on-going conflict. These stories relate how the human rights of the civilian population have been violated by legal and illegal armed actors who have brought about displacement. Internal displacement in Colombia corresponds with the internal conflict and the human rights abuses that accompany it. The human rights violations which cause the civilian population to displace include: extra-judicial killings, forced disappearances, massacres, torture, and sexual violence. In addition, confrontations between armed actors which violate international humanitarian law also lead to the displacement of the civilian population.

Photo: Leonardo Villamizar



A youth from the Nariño department, a region with a high risk of forced displacement.

«Memory is our resistance. Many people came and told us that we should remain silent [...] then as we decided not to, despite the fear that surrounds us, we preferred to talk. We have talked, as a way of beginning to hope for the possibility of

justice. Without truth there is no justice. So, without memory everything is forgotten, and from that what comes is one loses the sense of what it is to live and struggle, and through forgetting one becomes a slave, one loses one's worth without realising»². ●

introduction

Forced displacement in Colombia is not a new phenomenon, especially if we go back to the Spanish invasion begun in 1492. If we look at recent times there have been different phases of displacement⁵. The first phase of large-scale forced displacement occurred in the 1950s during the period of violent political conflict known as «*La Violencia*» —seen as the direct pre-cursor to the current conflict—, an estimated 2 million⁶ people fled their homes. The second phase of forced displacement took place in the mid-1970s when political conflicts increased as left-wing insurgents stepped-up their presence and activities and the Colombian government responded with increasing repression⁷. The current phase of displacement began from the mid-1980s when a «triple alliance» of security forces, drug cartels and wealthy landowners formed paramilitary death-squads to eradicate the guerrilla⁸. During this phase the level of internal displacement has increased particularly since the mid-1990s when the occurrence of «massive displacements»⁹ began to affect the Colombian countryside.

The highest concentration of displacement in the last 13 years has been between 2000 and 2002 which was characterised by a decisive phase of paramilitary expansion and the breakdown of peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the insurgent group the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). More recently, both government and NGO sources show that there has been a steady increase in internal displacement since 2006¹⁰. In addition, it is quite frequent to find that those who have been displaced often suffer more than one displacement¹¹.

Territorial and political control

The phenomenon of forced displacement must be viewed within the context of an internal armed conflict being fought over the assertion of political, economic and territorial control. Whilst forced displacement in the mid 1980s and 1990s targeted those rural poor politically active from the agricultural frontiers of Colombia; the waves of displacement in the 2000s have targeted populations in areas rich in natural resources for legal and illegal commercialisation (e.g. African Palm in Chocó or coca plants in the south of Colombia). The implementation of large-scale development projects¹³ is a contentious issue with repercussions on the communities living in areas where these projects are proposed or built. Since 2001, the Colombian organisation the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission has been denouncing paramilitarism for displacing Afro-Colombian communities in the Lower Atrato area of Chocó. The organisation argues that paramilitaries are then turning over the land —seized from these communities— to companies who use it for growing African Palm for the production of palm oil¹⁴.

The Colombian Institute for Development (INCODER) has also questioned the legality of the ownership of land used for the cultivation of African Palm and cattle ranching¹⁵. It states that the land of peasant farmers has been invaded and those living there have been submitted to covert military strategies which have threatened their lives¹⁶.

«That week I went down from a farm. The area was full of soldiers. They invited us to meet in the square. They told us that we had five days to leave the area and then the 'mochecabezas' [lit. head-hackers] would come. People at first thought they were lying. But we started to sell off what we had. When we had just two days left I went down to Apartadó to sell a chicken. When I was in the bus, the FARC appeared and detained the driver. They took the driver to the river bank. I heard the gun-shot. After that I decided we should not wait out the full five days. [...] We came down to San José de Apartadó. When we arrived, only two families were left there. Justice and Peace, Cinep [...] had been there for just eight days. They helped us find somewhere to stay. We stayed there for a year. [...] Shortly after we moved to Apartadó we decided to form the Peace Community. [...] We had to create the community because of the conflict, we had to create a space in the middle of the war, otherwise our lands would be taken and we would be killed»¹². ●

As a consequence of displacement, the geography of land ownership has changed substantially in Colombia, leading some to call forced displacement part of a «counter-agrarian reform»¹⁷. Since the 1980s, there has been a process whereby the land of the displaced communities has gradually been taken over by large landowners who have had strong ties with paramilitaries. It is estimated four to five million hectares has been taken over by paramilitary groups¹⁸. This is three times as much land as was redistributed under the past four decades of agrarian reform. This situation aggravates the historical inequality of land distribution in Colombia where 1.4% of landowners own 65% of the total agricultural land¹⁹.

Although the Colombian state has one of the «most advanced legal frameworks in the world»²⁰, the various rulings of Colombia's Constitutional Court show that state institutions continue to fail to address the needs of the civilian population displaced, or at threat of displacement.



Photo: Elsa Margarita Prilla Vasquez / Fundación Dos Mundos-UNHCR

Colombia Images and Realities: forced displacement and homelessness.



Displaced families in Bogotá.

The consequences of internal displacement are multiple. Social, family and community networks are broken down as communities are torn apart by conflict. The majority of those displaced in Colombia's violent conflict move to urban areas. Many live in the *cinturones de miseria* (poverty belts) of urban centres in overcrowded and dangerous living conditions. Unemployment levels for this sector of society are more than the national average, whilst those who do work do so under precarious conditions, with the majority of those displaced working in the informal sector.

Intra-urban displacement

Flight to the city does not necessarily mean the end of displacement, nor of involvement in the conflict. An increasingly worrying trend has been the increase of 'intra-urban displacement', displacement within the same city or town. This form of displacement which is not officially recognised by the State affects between 8-12% of the displaced population²². For example, in Medellín, Colombia's second largest city, there has been marked increase in intra-urban displacement as different illegal armed

groups vie for territorial control of the *barrios* (popular neighbourhoods)²³. The local human rights unit of the Inspector General's Office in Medellín reported that in 2007 there was a 32% increase in intra-urban displacement. Organisations like the Popular Training Centre (IPC) that register displacement stated that paramilitary groups were responsible for 63% of the cases, guerrilla groups for 10%, 6.7% were carried out by gangs, and 10.9% by unknown groups²⁴.

Women are most affected

There are marked gender dimensions to internal displacement in Colombia. The Civil Society Follow-Up Commission found that women comprise 48% of the internally displaced population registered with the RUPD (the State's registration system), with 41% of women heading households. The national average is 24%. Amongst the principal causes of displacement is sexual violence. According to one study carried out by PROFAMILIA in 2006, 28% of displaced women were victims of sexual violence (at a national level 21% of women have suffered sexual violence)²⁵. However, this crime is not often registered or recognised

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OR THOSE AT RISK OF DISPLACEMENT**



The return of displaced families.

as a war crime. Many women are also abandoned after the family is displaced.

Indigenous and African-descendant communities

Minority populations such as indigenous groups and African-descendants are over-represented in the displaced population in comparison to their proportion of the general population. Afro-Colombians make up around 16.6% of the population of those internally displaced, whilst their

representation in the general population is 11%. Indigenous people make up 6.5% of those internally displaced, whilst they only make up 2% of the overall population²⁶. A UNHCR report, published in August 2008, claimed that although between 10,000 and 20,000 indigenous people register as displaced each year, many do not register either because they lack information as to how to register, or due to the remoteness of their location.

In response to the failure of the Colombian state to adequately respond to the needs of the displaced, members of civil society in Colombia (including the displaced population) have been organising and calling for the social and economic rights of those displaced; and for reparation and justice to be awarded to the victims of forced displacement. Peace Brigades International has been accompanying both Colombian NGOs who work on this issue and the civilian population directly affected by forced displacement since 1994²⁷. ●

Latest figures for forced displacement in Colombia

- Internal displacement currently affects 6-10% of the national population²⁸.

- Precise statistics for the number of people who have been internally displaced in Colombia are unavailable. There are three sources of statistics on internal displacement available: the RUPD (Unified Registration System on Displaced Population) which is run by the Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation; the SISD system run by CODHES; and the Catholic Church's six-monthly bulletin from its research centre on mobility (Pastoral Social). The Human Rights and Displacement Consultancy (CODHES) estimates that over 4.6 million people have been displaced since 1985²⁹. The Colombian government figures places the figures at 3.2 million people displaced since 1997 when it began registering internal displacement³⁰.

- The rates of under-registration are notably high. The national survey carried out by the Civil Society Follow-Up Commission revealed that 34.3% of those internally displaced are not registered in the state system (RUPD). Out of these non-registered, 72.8% did not declare their situation of displacement to the relevant authorities, and 26.2% declared but were not included in the Registry³¹.

- According to CODHES, in 2008 the number of people newly displaced has risen by 24%, compared to 2007. The reasons behind this appear to be a new ruling by the Constitutional Court obligating displacements that took place before 2000 to be registered; increased confrontations and military operations against the guerrilla; guerrilla activities; and fumigation and eradication of illicit crops³². ●

Principles on housing and property restitution for refugees and displaced persons

UN Human Rights Subcommission Resolution 2002/7

All refugees and displaced persons have the right to have restored to them any housing, land and/or property of which they were arbitrarily or unlawfully deprived, or to be compensated for any housing, land and/or property that is factually impossible to restore as determined by an independent, impartial tribunal. (Principle 2)

States shall ensure the equal right of men and women, and the equal right of boys and girls, to housing, land and property restitution. [...] States shall ensure that housing, land and property restitution programmes, policies and practices do not disadvantage women and girls. States should adopt positive measures to ensure gender equality in this regard. (Principle 4)

All refugees and displaced persons have the right to return voluntarily to their former homes, lands or places of habitual residence, in safety and dignity. Voluntary return in safety and dignity must be based on a free, informed, individual choice. (Principle 10)

The international community should promote and protect the right to housing, land and property restitution, as well as the right to voluntary return in safety and dignity. (Principle 22)

Photo: Julio César Herrera / Fundación Dos Mundos-UNHCR



The faces of the returning, the anxious faces of a grandmother and granddaughter, moments before their arrival at Bellavista, Chocó.

1 Social Researcher and former PBI Colombia volunteer (2001-2002)

2 PBI Colombia documentary video: «We are land», 2009

3 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, October 2008

4 UNDP World Report, 2006

5 «Feeding the tiger: Colombia's internally displaced people», Kirk, R. and U.S. Committee for Refugees, Washington, D.C., 1993

6 «Violence, conflict, and politics in Colombia», Oquist, P., New York: London, Academic Press, 1980

7 «Situación de los Derechos Humanos en Colombia», Javier Giraldo, January 1994

8 Colombia's violent conflict has been marked by the frequent physical absence of direct confrontation between armed actors, and with the use of political and spatial control of the civilian population as the main battle ground. As such in many cases the principal strategy has been to directly target the civilian population and spread terror so as to destroy the alleged support base of the guerrilla.

9 «Massive» displacements comprise of 50 or more individuals displacing at the same time.

10 IDMC, October 2008

11 IV Foro sobre migración y desplazamiento semana del migrante 2009. Fundación de Atención al Migrante (FAMIG), www.arquibogota.org.co

12 Testimony from a displaced person, member of the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó.

13 Large-scale development projects are understood as «the whole transformation of the territory in the interest of major investment. Its bio-physical structure and social and cultural life are re-structured for those who seek to incorporate the area into the major global economies, generally through models to extract natural resources». In this respect, the objectives are «mineral deposits, fossil fuels, or land that may be brought into international commerce». Additionally, these include «infrastructure projects to transport supplies to

economic centres. These corridors are characterised by transporting diverse commodities, such as energy, water, products, raw materials and more importantly cheap labor.» Examples include Plan Puebla Panamá, the South American Regional Infrastructure Integration Initiative (IIRSA) —which connects with the Pan-American Highway—, «Megaproyectos y Desplazamiento Forzado: Una mirada desde la lógica de los Movimientos Sociales», Article by the Social Observatory on Transnational Enterprises, Megaprojects and Human Rights of Colombia for the Latin American Observatory on Multinationals (OMAL), 2000

14 «Palma, bendita que se hizo maldita. el caso del Curbaradó y Jiguamiandó.» Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission, January 2007

15 On 2 November 2009, the Chocó Administrative Court issued a ruling confirming the many declarations made by the peasant farmers over the years. The court ruling is binding for the 42 «occupants in bad faith», including nine palm companies, two livestock companies, 2 merchandisers, and 29 persons who all must vacate the collective land belonging to the community. «Orden judicial para restituir predios comunitarios en Curbaradó y Jiguamiandó», Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission, 5 November 2009; «Violación de derechos humanos por siembra de palma africana en territorios colectivos de Jiguamiandó y Curbaradó», Ombudsman Resolution N° 39 of 2 June 2005, Human Rights Ombudsman's Office

16 «Despojo en el Bajo Atrato», Delgado, A., Actualidad Colombiana, Edition 143, August 2005

17 See «Agro Ingreso Seguro. Una Nueva Versión del Conflicto entre el Hacha y el Papel Sellado», Cien Días, No.68, CINEP www.cinep.org.co/node/786 and «La Contrarreforma», La Semana, 5 December 2009, www.semana.com/noticias-nacion/contrarreforma/132291.aspx

18 CODHES, 2 February 2005

19 Agustín Codazzi Geographic Institute (IGAC), cited in IDMC, October 2008

20 «Mucha ley y pocos hechos», UPI, 14 July 2009

22 IDMC (July 08) Submission to Universal Periodic Review Mechanism established by the Human Rights Council in Resolution 5/1 of 18 June 2007

23 «Medellín podrá terminar este año con más de 2.000 homicidios», New Rainbow Corporation in the report «La Seguridad Democrática llegó a su techo», November 2009

24 Popular Training Institute (IPC), Press Release, See: <http://alainet.org/active/22539&lang=es>

25 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) Colombia report, October 2008

26 IDMC Colombia report, July 2009 [http://www.internal-displacement.org/idmc/website/countries.nsf/\(httpEnvelopes\)/83215E9A324C3A31C12575E500525BF6?OpenDocument](http://www.internal-displacement.org/idmc/website/countries.nsf/(httpEnvelopes)/83215E9A324C3A31C12575E500525BF6?OpenDocument).

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•CODHES: www.codhes.org/

•Popular Training Institute (IPC): www.ipc.org.co

•«The Dispossessed: Chronicles of the Desterrados of Colombia», Molano, A, Haymarket Books, 2005

28 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre – IDMC, July 2009

29 «Victimas Emergentes: Desplazamiento, Derechos Humanos y Conflicto Armado en 2008», CODHES Informa, Boletín Informativo, No.75, Bogotá, 22 April 2009

30 Figure for September 2009, Social Action: <http://www.accionsocial.gov.co/Estadisticas/publicacion%20septiembre%202009.htm>.

31 Follow-Up Commission, 30 April 2009

32 Op.cit. CODHES, April 2009

The Colombian State's response to internal displacement

- In July 1997 Colombian Congress passed legislation to address internal displacement, Law 387 of 1997 «for the prevention of forced displacement and the support, protection and socio-economic stabilisation of the population displaced by the violence». Law 387 also defined who could benefit from such assistance and established a National System of Comprehensive Assistance to the Displaced Population (SNAIPD), which comprises of 18 government agencies at national, departmental, district and municipal levels.

- In 1999 and 2000 support was reorganised through the National Council for Economic and Social Policy (CONPES) – Document 3057 of November 1999 and Decree 2569 of 12 December 2000, which concentrated the task of coordination and strategic planning in the Presidency's Social Security Network (RSS) and created the Unified Registration System (SUR).

- Law 600 of 2000 categorises forced displacement as a crime, considering it as a breach of international humanitarian law.

- In 2002, the government of Alvaro Uribe Vélez published its National Development Plan 2002-2006, which identified internal displacement «due to its magnitude and characteristics, as the principal humanitarian problem facing Colombia as a consequence of the armed conflict»¹. The administration promised to reinforce the prevention of displacement, better protect the population at risk, improve emergency response capacities (nutrition, shelter, health), create the conditions for return and strengthen the national system for attention to internally displaced people. This was enacted into Law 812 of 2003.

- In 2004, the Constitutional Court, petitioned by hundreds of internally displaced people, who alleged that their constitutionally guaranteed rights were being violated through deficient or absent state action, ruled (T-025 of 2004) that the government was not providing adequate aid, support and services such as health care, education and housing, as required by Colombian law. This ruling considered the government's response to the problems faced by internally displaced people as «unconstitutional». As a result of the Court's involvement, financial allocation by government increased steadily from \$177 million (363 billion Colombian pesos) in 2004 to \$525 million (1,080 billion pesos) in 2008.

- Between 2004 and 2009, a variety of subject-specific writs have been issued relating to the special situation of vulnerability of certain groups including: displaced women, children, indigenous, Afro-Colombians, and the disabled. The Court has ordered the adoption of differential programmes for their attention.



- The Agency currently coordinating the SNAIPD and the National Plan is Social Action, is ascribed to the office of the President. At the local, departmental, and district level, municipalities, departmental governments and districts are responsible for implementing the contents of the National Plan through ad-hoc Committees for the Attention to the Displaced Population, and for drawing local plans of attention (Unified Integrated Plans - PIU) ². ●

1 «Bases del Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2002-2006», Office of the President, Bogotá, 2003: 78, <http://www.presidencia.gov.co/planacio>

2 Sources: Springer, Natalia (2006) «Colombia: Internal Displacement – Policies and Problems» «WRITENET Report», commissioned by the UNHCR, Status Determination and Protection Section; Álvarez Díaz, Oscar Luis (2008) «Estado Social de Derecho, Corte Constitucional y Desplazamiento Forzado en Colombia», Siglo del Hombre Editores, Universidad Nacional de Colombia y Pontificia Universidad Javeriana; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), last updated July 09, <http://www.internal-displacement.org/idmc/>

«Large-scale development projects bring militarisation, which forces us to abandon our lands»

Ana Manuela Ochoa, a lawyer with the National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia (ONIC), speaks about the problem of forced displacement and how it affects indigenous people.

Photo: Marie-Helene Verney / UNHCR



Forced displacement of a Wounaan community in the region of Istmina, Chocó. According to the ONIC, 1.793 indigenous Wounaan were displaced between 2002 and 2009¹.

PBI: How many indigenous people have been forcibly displaced?

Ana Manuela Ochoa: According to the ONIC database, since 2002 to date, approximately 74.000 indigenous people have been displaced from their traditional territories. In the first three months of 2009, we registered 3.000 displaced persons. The Wayúu indigenous peoples in Guajira, the Embera in Chocó, and the Awá in Nariño, have been most affected this year.

PBI: What are the factors that cause the displacement of indigenous people?

AO: One of the principal factors is the presence of State security forces, paramilitaries and guerrilla groups in our territories. Many people also abandon their land because they fear their children may be recruited by armed groups. We have many cases of youth who do not want to be displaced —but also do not want to be recruited— and instead commit suicide.

Another cause of displacement is the presence of crops used for illicit purposes in their territory. People who are not from the communities are introducing these crops and then the people are displaced when the coca crops are fumigated. These fumigations damage traditional crops and as a result create a problem of food security, including the malnutrition or death of children. This year in Vichada, in a community called Barranco Minas, we registered the death of 41 indigenous people due to malnutrition.

indigenous communities

Large-scale development projects also cause displacement. These large-scale development projects bring militarisation, which forces people to abandon their territories.

PBI: What are the different forms of displacement in indigenous communities?

AO: There are different forms specific to indigenous peoples. First, displacement from one reservation to another where they are not registered. As a result, they do not receive any kind of aid. Second, cross-border displacement from Colombia to Ecuador, Colombia to Panama, and Colombia to Venezuela, which especially affects Wayúu, Awá, Embera, Sikuani and Tule peoples. They are not recognised as refugees in these neighbouring countries and, therefore, also do not receive any kind of aid. Third, the collective or individual displacements where whole communities or families leave their territories to other reservations or cities. When the displacement is collective there are many possibilities for them to receive assistance and have the strength to demand their rights. When the displacement is individual, people are not accounted for and the conditions of their assistance are unknown.

Once indigenous people are displaced, they have many difficulties because they do not know city life, which results in cultural shock. Many people do not speak Spanish and they have to try to make themselves understood to authorities at Social Action, which is the State institution in charge of providing assistance to the internally displaced population. Furthermore, there is no differentiated assistance for indigenous peoples.

Photo: Marie-Helene Verney / UNHCR



Massive forced displacement of the Awá indigenous community in the region of Inda Sabaleta, Nariño. In recent years this department has been the part of Colombia most affected by the armed conflict and forced displacement. 9.652 indigenous Awá were displaced between 2002 and 2009².

PBI: What is the situation of confined or blockaded communities?

AO: This year, this has been an issue that has kept us awake at night. There have been a lot of armed strikes by the guerrilla. (The guerrilla takes control of an area and does not let anyone go through this area.) As a result, many communities are blockaded. People are not able to leave their communities. They cannot cross the river or bring food into their communities. The situation remains grave and is also less visible. The situation of indigenous peoples has worsened in 2009, which is reflected in statistics. In 2009, we registered 117 indigenous people murdered throughout Colombian territory and in just the first three months of the year more than 3,000 people were forcibly displaced.

PBI: Can you describe the assistance provided by different government institutions to internally displaced indigenous communities?

AO: To date, there has been no differentiated approach. Indigenous people are treated just as any other citizen. This does not mean that other people do not have the same rights, rather special conditions should be taken into account with indigenous peoples with respect to their language, culture and food. These conditions should be taken into account when assisting these people.

PBI: What do you think about the work done by the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office?

AO: We believe it does a good job.

Confinement

«Far from being a something new, the confinement of the civilian population is a war strategy maybe as old as the armed conflict in Colombia.

Confinement is the situation of violations to rights and freedoms—which entails the restriction of free movement and access to indispensable material for survival—to which the civilian population is subjected as a consequence of explicit or implicit practices of military, economic, political, cultural, social or environmental control exercised by legal or illegal armed groups within the framework of the armed conflict.

The practices of confinement have devastating impact. In the areas where civilians are not allowed to travel freely, their ability to carry out daily activities is affected, including fishing, hunting and working the land, which are vital for their food security. It has been demonstrated that restricting travel—and therefore access to local markets to purchase or sell products—reduces their resources to purchase food, which has an especially adverse impact on women and children».

«Comunidades confinadas de Colombia», Project Counselling Service (PCS), 29 November 2009

The problem is that the decisions made by the Ombudsman's Office and the recommendations and reports presented by the community ombudsmen are not taken into account. In the case of the Awá, despite risk reports and early warnings issued by the Ombudsman's Office—in addition to an Ombudsman's resolution in 2008—the State has not provided them with protection. This is demonstrated by the fact that 68 Awá people were murdered in only 2009.

PBI: What measures have been taken by the communities and ONIC insofar as prevention and humanitarian assistance?

AO: The ONIC does not have the economic capacity to support communities with emergency aid. Nonetheless, we report alleged violations, visibilise what is happening with indigenous peoples, accompany to verify the situation, and demand that the State assist indigenous peoples in situation of displacement.

PBI: What is the psycho-social impact suffered by the internally displaced indigenous communities?

AO: The impact is devastating. Forced displacement may cause people to lose their culture, customs and traditions as well as their identity as a people. The relationship with territory is fundamental and if a person leaves the territory they are not able to keep practising certain rituals. People forget their language and have to dress in a different fashion. As indigenous

«DESPITE RISK REPORTS AND EARLY WARNINGS ISSUED BY THE OMBUDSMAN'S OFFICE, THE STATE HAS NOT PROVIDED PROTECTION IN THE CASE OF THE AWÁ»

peoples, we have a lot of dignity and for many indigenous people it is strange to see other indigenous people begging in the street. We are people that work the land and it is difficult to live in a context where we cannot grow crops, fish or hunt.

PBI: What is the situation of internally displaced women?

AO: There are many internally displaced indigenous women. For instance, in the Kankuamo territory more than three hundred men were murdered over the last twenty years. Of these, 127 were murdered during the Uribe government. This means there are approximately 300 widows and 600 orphans. Many women were forced to flee when their husbands were killed and they became the heads of their households. Moreover, many women have been sexually violated. The murder of their spouses and their forced displacement are frequently reported to the relevant government agency, but the sexual violation is taken as another act that will not be investigated. Additionally, men

generally have more access to Western culture. In many indigenous communities, women do not know the Spanish language, a decision taken by these communities to preserve their culture.

PBI: What measures should be taken by the State?

AO: It is fundamental to comply with Resolution 004 of 2009. With respect to internal displacement, this means differentiated assistance is taken into account in prevention, fulfilment, implementation and economic support for the development of life plans for indigenous peoples. We believe that indigenous territories have to be completely demilitarised. If all the armed groups leave our territories, we will be able to live in peace. We also want them to make our territories whole, that is, for there not to be any settlers remaining in our territories. On many occasions, these settlers grow crops used for illicit purposes in our territories and as a result there is fumigation and the presence of armed groups. ●



Uwa family from Casanare. The Uwa have worked with the organisation COS-PACC to develop strategies to prevent displacement in this department. 1.208 indigenous Uwa were victims of forced displacement between 2002 and 2009³.

45.339 indigenous people were displaced from 2002 to 2009. The most affected communities were the Nasa (10.659 displaced people), the Awá (9.652 displaced people), and the Embera (8,484 displaced people).

«IX Informe sobre violencia sociopolítica contra mujeres, jóvenes y niñas en Colombia». Women and Armed Conflict Working Group, December 2009

1 Sistema de información sobre pueblos indígenas. «Derechos humanos de las mujeres indígenas» en «IX Informe sobre violencia sociopolítica contra mujeres, jóvenes y niñas en Colombia». Women and Armed Conflict Working Group, December 2009

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

«There is still a lot to be done on the ground»

Jean Noël-Wetterwald has been the representative for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for two and a half years and is now finishing his term. He will be telling his yet to be appointed successor that «Colombia is special because of the people, the lessons of courage given every day by displaced people, and the quality of the UNHCR team in Colombia». The representative has found very committed colleagues. Mr. Noël-Wetterwald spoke with PBI about the State's response to the magnitude of forced displacement and the challenges for 2010.

PBI: How does UNHCR perceive the State's response to Ruling 025 of 2004? What have been the achievements and what continue to be the difficulties?

Jean Noël-Wetterwald: Without a doubt, the State's response became more coherent. However, a series of very clear rulings by the Court have said the response is not yet sufficient and I believe this to be true. When you see the response's impact in the field there is still much to do. Nonetheless, we were very interested in seeing that in October 2009 Social Action presented a series of proposals to change and modify these public policies and I believe these modifications go in the right direction. We are very enthused by what we see; however there is always the challenge to have a policy with impact and unfortunately the number of newly internally displaced population adds to the existing population. This remains a major challenge.

PBI: Have there been budgetary changes to make the assistance more realistic?

JNW: Over the last years, the biggest challenge has been achieving a budget. But the budget is not everything; there have to be policies with impact and a differentiated approach. All of this is being put into practice.

PBI: What is the specific situation for indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities and what are the problems or difficulties they presently face?

JNW: Unfortunately, we see that Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities are disproportionately affected by displacement. We are very concerned that the internal armed conflict is increasingly carried out in remote areas of the country and, as a result, Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities living in these areas are struck even worse by the conflict.

PBI: Have gender or ethnic perspectives been incorporated into the Colombian State's public policies?



Jean Noël-Wetterwald has been the Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for the past two and a half years.

JNW: Yes, and I believe the UNHCR team in Colombia should be proud of this. After many years and much work with the respective Ministries, we were able to have the Presidency's Office for Woman's Equity issue a directive to all State institutions on gender-based differentiated assistance. Likewise, with support from our staff, substantial progress has also been made in other areas (for instance with indigenous people, Afro-Colombians or the disabled). It is a necessary first step and in a few years we are going to see if the directives have an impact. We believe that a differentiated approach may close the gap between the legal and administrative framework, which is good but has not achieved the desired impact for the beneficiaries and communities. We believe this differentiated approach will allow for more impact since it concerns the effective and differentiated needs of these distinct categories.

PBI: How do you perceive the situation for internally displaced women?

JNW: Unfortunately, women are the most affected by the conflict and forced displacement. Why is this dramatic? First, since according to the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office and Profamilia, one of every six displaced women are the victims of sexual violence and, of them, 18% were displaced as a consequence of this violence. Second, many women are the heads of their households and, therefore, have more difficulties in accessing State services. Another important element is that women have more difficulties if they try to hinder the recruitment of minors. This also demonstrates the need to have specific policies for women. The challenge then is to see how this may be implemented and ensure that the gender directives have a positive impact on internally displaced women.

PBI: How does UNHCR perceive the situation of economically confined or blockaded communities?

JNW: This is another drama and symptom demonstrating that some parts of Colombia

continue to face a very intense internal armed conflict. In this case, these communities must be assisted, but it must be insisted that all of the parties in the conflict respect international humanitarian law. If UNHCR insists so much in the appropriate use of terms to describe what occurs in Colombia, it is because these terms have implications insofar as obligations for the different actors. If there is a conflict in Colombia, the parties to this conflict are bound by international humanitarian law and confining communities goes against IHL.

PBI: Last year UNHCR signed an agreement with the Ministry of Agriculture to verify the gaps existing in public policy with respect to the restitution of land to displaced communities. What has been done to date?

JNW: The issue of land is a fundamental in terms of the conflict and violence. With the Ministry of Agriculture, we have tried to see how we could improve access to land through public announcements for land grants. First, we see that public announcements are made every year but the internally displaced population does not have access to this mechanism due to the technical requirements. We want the procedure to be improved to guarantee more access to all displaced people, but in particular to women who to date have been at a disadvantage. Another example of how we encourage a differentiated policy is by ensuring that women have access to State services. We have not seen the final results of this year's

public announcement, but we hope statistics may demonstrate that a greater percentage of internally displaced people have access to this mechanism this year.

Second, some displaced people have access to land through re-location mechanisms. We have studied some emblematic cases to see how through these cases we may change the re-location procedure and we have achieved some results. Now this must be implemented as a policy.

Even though the issue of the land restitution was not a part of the partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture, it is a critical issue. It must be ensured that this restitution is carried out in conditions of security for the beneficiaries. Unfortunately, we have seen that several displaced persons and leaders—who had their land returned—have been threatened or even worse murdered because they did not receive security conditions. For us, before implementing any programme or policy for restitution, we need for all the security guarantees to be in place for those who receive the land.

PBI: With respect to the dynamics of the armed conflict, do you see new forms of displacement?

JNW: Armed confrontations are the most classic cause of displacement, but there are other forms that concern us. We see that threats by these same armed groups is a serious issue and we are pleased by the fact that the authorities take this issue

seriously. We are also concerned by the fact that there are still displacements due to large-scale development projects even though there are no armed confrontations. The so called emerging criminal groups also displace the population. For us, it does not matter what they are called or how they are classified, what matters is that these people have the capacity to threaten, kill and forcibly displace.

PBI: The under-reporting of the internally displaced population has implications for the implementation of assistance and prevention programmes. How is UNHCR working with Social Action or other State institutions to guarantee a system with reliable registration?

JNW: This is a fundamental issue since all of our actions are based on the recognition of rights. The only way to access these rights is through the recognition of the status of being internally displaced. We are working with Social Action to try to improve registration because there have been several problems. Of course under-reporting is one problem, but we also see that there are people who would not have to be registered. For us, the credibility of the registration must be strengthened to ensure that those who should be registered are and those who should not be are not.

PBI: What will be the trends in forced displacement next year?

JNW: We do not keep records. Our sources come from the Social Action database as well as evaluation from the civil society and the non-governmental organisation CODHES. It is still difficult to express a trend because the figures will be compiled throughout the next year. Nonetheless, we see that displacement is a phenomenon with major impact in the regions. There are regions with more internally displaced population and regions with less. Even though the national registration may give us a national trend, it should not be ignored that we have to concentrate in the regions to be able to prevent displacement in some parts of the country. I believe the prevention of displacement is something that deserves attention from national and local government institutions and international agencies. There is still space to improve the prevention of displacement in Colombia.

PBI: As for prevention, do you think that the early warning systems are functioning well?



A small-scale farmer from Nariño.

state response

JNW: The system is functioning well in the sense that all the risk reports are very serious. These reports have included many acts of displacement and human rights violations that have taken place. The challenge is to ensure that these reports become risks reports and early warnings and that the institutions incorporate them. In every way possible, we have tried to strengthen the early warning system, which is an example for everyone on how we may act. Unfortunately further action must be carried out, specifically institutions still need to incorporate this fantastic tool developed by the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office.

PBI: What are challenges lay ahead for UNHCR in 2010?

JNW: I believe there are so many challenges that they need to be prioritised. One: registration. Two: land. Three: public policy and differentiated approach. Four: international borders.

PBI: And lastly, what are the biggest difficulties faced by refugees in neighbouring countries?

JNW: The issue of documentation. We recognise, thank and value the generosity of the neighbouring countries receiving Colombians in need of international protection. A lot of work still has to be done to document these cases and ensure we go from an informal to a formal protection. UNHCR colleagues in the neighbouring countries are working on this with the respective authorities in each country. ●



The campaign «Pilgrimage for Life and Peace along the Atrato River» launched in 2003. This is an initiative of local, national, and international organizations to highlight the humanitarian situation in the Chocó.

	Recognised Refugees (Colombian)	In situation of Refugee (Colombian)	Total
World	77,220	296,300	374,000
Ecuador	28,875 (+23,825 petitioners)	82,300	135,000
Venezuela	1,161	200,000	201,161
Panamá	-	-	15,303
Costa Rica	9,939	N/A	9,939
United States	26,447	N/A	26,447
Canadá	11,843	N/A	13,080

Figures: UNHCR, Population Data Unit, corresponds to figures from December 2008.

Women: bearing the brunt of forced displacement

«Art is the only thing war cannot break», says Daira Quiñones, an Afro-Colombian singer-songwriter who has performed community work for more than twenty years. She is from Tumaco (Nariño), an area sorrowfully known for the armed conflict¹ and African palm crops that have displaced thousands of people². In 2001, due her struggle to recover land she was forced to flee to Bogotá. She says she was lucky since many of her friends were murdered. Ms. Quiñones —along with others from Tumaco who started the Pacific Art and Culture Foundation (FUNDARTECP) in her region ten years ago— began to support other forcibly displaced and marginalised women in Bogotá. Today they are 280 women who implement productive projects, micro-loans and community kitchens principally in Bogotá and Tumaco. Her goal is to create a network of women throughout the country. Ms. Quiñones, along with other women and youth, have tried to instil the arts in all of their social work.



Daira Quiñones, FUNDARTECP.

A historical ruling

14 April 2008 was an important date. The Constitutional Court issued a pronouncement on the vulnerability faced by women in situation of displacement. Resolution 092 «Protection of the fundamental rights of women victims of forced displacement due to the armed conflict» is an historical ruling since «in national jurisprudence a legal body had never before carried out the task of analysing the situation of women as a collective and with respect to a crime»³. It is important to emphasise the gender approach since «unfortunately,

women are the most affected by the conflict and displacement», stated the representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Jean Noël-Wetterwald. According to the study by the Court, women represent half of the internally displaced population: «The Court revealed 18 gender facets or aspects of displacement that impact women differentially»⁴.

Sexual violence

Violence and sexual abuse is one of the patterns established by the Court⁶. At least 17% of the 2.100 women interviewed

The Court's study highlighted 18 gender aspects of displacement that impact women differentially, including⁵:

-Violence and sexual abuse

-Intra-family and community violence

Women head of households without the conditions for minimum subsistence

-Social discrimination of indigenous and African-descendant women

«**F**irst, I was forcibly displaced in 1999. I made a statement in Rionegro (Antioquia), but I did not find any solution and this is why I had to return to Chocó. During this first displacement I was sexually violated on several occasions. During one of these violations I became pregnant with my girl and to date I do not know if she is the daughter of the guy I lived with then. And worse yet, I was never able to talk about this openly for fear of being stigmatised and rejected by others. This is something that has marked my life forever»¹⁵. ●

Photo: Leonardo Villamizar



A Nariño woman.

by the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office in 2008 admitted situations of forced displacement as a consequence of acts of sexual aggression and violence⁷. The risk reports from the early warning system by the Ombudsman's Office also demonstrate that sexual violence and exploitation increased 69% in 2008 in relation to the previous year⁸. «We have seen children raped, even here in Bogotá», asserted Youana Sáenz, secretary general and gender officer at the Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES)⁹. Unfortunately, sexual violence is much more common than what is believed. In fact, according to the last report by the international NGO Oxfam, «sexual violence is one of the principal causes for forced displacement in Colombia»¹⁰. Nonetheless, for different reasons, statistics do not capture this reality. Women feel ashamed and distrust in speaking out¹¹ and when they find the courage to report cases of sexual violence before government agencies, the crime is taken as another act not to be investigated¹², states Ana Manuela Ochoa, lawyer with the National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia (ONIC). In fact, many national regulations are not up to date with international standards and judicial operators do not receive the necessary training or know international standards¹³. Additionally, in many regions of Colombia the databases «do not include cases of sexual violence and when they do they only prioritise sexual violence and do not include figures for forced prostitution,

forced abuse, sexual blackmail and forced sterilisation, among other acts»¹⁴.

Discrimination of indigenous and African-descendant women

The Constitutional Court has also confirmed that indigenous and African-descendant women face «a triple discrimination for being women, for being displaced, and for belonging to certain ethnic groups»¹⁶. «In Bogotá, there is still racial discrimination in the twenty-first century», states Sáenz in this respect. Some Afro-Colombian women have expressed that they cannot rent housing because they have many children and youth have dropped out of school because of the discrimination they face¹⁷. But there is also hope. Daira Quiñones says she and many other women have been able to demonstrate that they want to work with dignity and this has helped to change the mentality of the people that discriminated them previously¹⁸.

Socio-economic pressure and its consequences

Nearly half of the internally displaced families are headed by women²¹ who

as a result have to assume all family responsibilities. 60% of the internally displaced women work independently—for instance as street vendors—and 20% are domestic servants²². Frequently they do not earn enough money or do not have work. «It is hard to say, but our women are practising prostitution to be able to give food to their children», states Youana Sáenz. Likewise, the trade of women for prostitution has increased along the border with Panama, and due to lack of resources, child prostitution has become common in forcibly displaced communities²³. Furthermore, when women are the only adults in charge of a home they have difficulties in accessing State services, as stated by UNHCR representative Noël-Wetterwald.

«It is always women who have to keep their family together. It is difficult for the black man to get work in Bogotá, so then women have to put on the work smock for her children and her home», states Ms. Sáenz. Moreover, «black men are male chauvinists and they do not like women working, which encourages the break-up of the nuclear family», adds Ms. Sáenz.

According to estimates from the Follow-Up Commission on Forced Displacement Public Policy, 249,137 Afro-Colombian women have been registered as displaced persons¹⁹.

According to the ONIC database on indigenous peoples, 17,861 indigenous women have been victims of forced displacement²⁰.

The socio-economic stress of displacement also leads to violent behaviour within families—an even greater problem in displaced communities²⁴. Intra-family violence is often caused by different tensions, including conditions of overcrowding in housing the families rent, lack of money to purchase food, unemployment, and change in roles²⁵.

For Ana Manuela Ochoa, there is another facet that affects indigenous women. In many indigenous communities, men have greater access to Western culture and women—who frequently are the guardians of the culture and customs—do not even speak the Spanish language. When they come to the city and have to deal with government authorities in charge of assisting internally displaced population, they have difficulties in accessing humanitarian aid.

Gender perspective in government policies

UNHCR has evaluated the degree to which a gender perspective has been incorporated into public policy and works with the Colombian government to promote policies with a gender approach²⁶. The UNHCR representative is optimistic. After many years working with the respective ministries, gender directives have been issued. However, the representative also recognises that it still has yet to be seen if these directives are able to have a positive impact for displaced women²⁷.

Constitutional Court Resolution 092 of 2008 issued several orders, including the demand that Social Action establish and implement 13 specific programmes for internally displaced women²⁸. Just after the publication of the resolution, twelve social organisations created a national roundtable to follow up on these demands²⁹. A year and a half

later, the roundtable confirmed the government had not yet complied with the order to design and implement these programmes. Specifically, the roundtable expresses that even the most developed programmes «do not incorporate strategies leading to the effective enjoyment of the rights of women in situation of displacement»³⁰. Furthermore, in 2009 these programmes only benefited 600 of the more than one and a half million internally displaced women³¹.

Women under threat

Many women dedicate their lives to contributing to the reconstruction of the social fabric and specifically to supporting internally displaced communities. Unfortunately, women and their families have become the targets of aggression. The Court demonstrated that «over the last years there has been an increase in socio-political crimes against women leaders within the framework

Photo: Delphine Magre / Fundación Dos Mundos-UNHCR



Colombia Images and Realities: Kuna indigenous woman in Arquíá.

of the conflict»³². In 2002, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights granted precautionary measures of protection to a group of women that includes Daira Quiñones. State support to comply with these measures has been minimal to date, criticises Ms. Quiñones, but thanks to the accompaniment from MINGA and the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective (CCAJAR), she has been able to travel to Tumaco to continue with her community work. The women at the Grassroots Women's Organisation (OFP) continue to support internally displaced women despite the persecution, stigmatisation and threats they receive³³. Meanwhile, many women involved in political organisations have ceased their social work in order to avoid threats and persecution³⁴.

Daira Quiñones —along with the other 280 women at FUNDARTECP— continues with her community work. One important project is the work to recover their memory and culture. «At times it is hard to preserve your identity here in the city», says Ms. Quiñones. Music is fundamental. At FUNDARTECP they play music with the old bambuco, which is a variant of the traditional bambuco practised by their ancestors and is similar to other African rhythms. It keeps her hope alive to return to Tumaco with dignity some day. ●



The Constitutional Court has confirmed that indigenous and afro descendent women face a triple discrimination for being women, displaced, and pertaining to a distinct ethnic group¹⁶.

1 All armed groups operate in Tumaco due to its importance for illegal economies. The FARC have been present since the 1980's; the ELN with Comunereros del Sur Front; and paramilitaries —previously known as the AUC— have been present with Libertadores del Sur Front. After the paramilitary demobilisation, the region was one of the first areas where the so called «emerging criminal groups» appeared, including the «Black Eagles» and «Rastrojos». Furthermore, there is also the presence of the New Generation Organisation, known as NGO. «La mala hora de Tumaco», *El Espectador*, 13 May 2009

2 According to figures from Social Action, from 2002 to 2009 28,531 persons were forced to flee from the municipality of Tumaco. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Colombia: Profile on the municipality of Tumaco

3 «Que la Corte siga comprometida con las mujeres desplazadas», *Hechos del Callejón*, Number 51, December 2009

4 «Las mujeres desplazadas, las más afectadas», *Hechos del Callejón*, Number 51, December 2009

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

7 CODHES Informa: Boletín informativo, No. 75, Bogotá, 22 April 2009

8 *Ibid.*

9 Interview with Youana Sáenz, AFRODES, 7 December 2009

10 «La violencia sexual en Colombia, un arma de guerra», Oxfam, September 2009

11 «Colombia: las mujeres desplazadas exigen que se respeten sus derechos», *Refugees International*, October 2009

12 Interview with Ana Manuela Ochoa, lawyer with ONIC, December 2009

13 «Violencia sexual, un crimen silenciado», *Hechos del Callejón*, No. 51, December 2009

14 *Ibid.*

15 Testimony by an Afro-Colombian woman in situation of forced displacement in: «Las mujeres negras afrocolombianas en situación de desplazamiento» in the «IX Informe sobre Violencia Sociopolítica contra mujeres, jóvenes y niñas en Colombia». Women and Armed Conflict Working Group, December 2009.

16 *Ibid.*, 4

17 *Ibid.*, 4

18 Interview with Daira Quiñones

19 «Las Mujeres Negras Afrocolombianas en Situación de Desplazamiento» in the «IX Informe sobre Violencia Sociopolítica contra Mujeres, Jóvenes y Niñas en Colombia», Women and Armed Conflict Work Group, December 2009

20 «Derechos humanos de las mujeres indígenas» in the «IX Informe sobre violencia sociopolítica contra mujeres, jóvenes y

niñas en Colombia», Women and Armed Conflict Work Group, December 2009

21 *Ibid.*, 20

22 *Ibid.*, 4

23 *Ibid.*, 20

24 *Ibid.*, 20

25 *Ibid.*, 20

26 «Colombia: las mujeres desplazadas exigen que se respeten sus derechos», *Hechos del Callejón*, No. 51, December 2009

27 Interview with Jean Noël-Wetterwald, UNHCR representative

28 «Que la Corte siga comprometida con las mujeres desplazadas», *Hechos del Callejón*, December 2009

29 *Ibid.*

30 CODHES, Bulletin No. 12, September to November 2009

31 *Ibid.* According to Social Action there are 1,583,388 women in situation of displacement.

32 «El impacto: distinto para ellas», *Hechos del Callejón*, No. 51, December 2009

33 «Llamado Urgente», *Observatorio para la Prevención de los Defensores de Derechos Humanos*, 19 February 2009

34 *Ibid.*, 32

Twelve years of peaceful resistance: the war continues

«This is an experience in peace-building. A community saying 'No' to the conflict», PBI Volunteer.

Photo: Elizabeth Kerr



By Elizabeth Kerr

Sitting outside Don Pedro's¹ small wooden house in the village of La Holandita, one of the community's most senior members recounts how he arrived in Urabá from the district of Dabeiba in the north of Antioquia. «I was 21 when I came here with my brother. We came because of the violence. There was more work here. I worked as a day labourer. The land is better here. I'm nearly 80 now». Don Pedro's story is one similar to many of Colombia's small farmers, 'campesinos'. It tells of Colombia's difficult rural history and how forced displacement has been an integral part of it. Many individuals and families who fled the bipartisan political violence of the 1950s and 1960s came to the sparsely populated region of Urabá in the top north-west of Colombia in search of work and land to settle on². Hoping for a peaceful existence, and realising that the land was more productive than in their places of origin, a series of families came to populate the mountainous area above the town of Apartadó. Through hard work and various struggles to gain access to land and better living conditions the small farmers began to develop the area so that it became economically prosperous³.

Nevertheless, the area became embroiled in armed conflict in the 1990s when the violence between paramilitaries and the army against the guerrilla reached unprecedented levels.

Don Pedro intersperses his story with amusing anecdotes about what he and his brother got up to when they were younger. He talks of how they came up to claim abandoned land, taking part in *invasiones* (land invasions). They saw that the land was rich and could be made productive. Yet he had to abandon the lands he had fought so hard to obtain and move to the urban dwelling of San José de Apartadó in 1996 to take refuge. This is a man who has suffered several forced displacements in his life. In April 2005, he was forced to leave his home again as inhabitants of the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó moved en masse to the farmland of La Holandita. The move was precipitated by the arrival of the police force that came to the urban settlement to establish a police station. The establishment of a police station in San José de Apartadó has been seen as a direct violation of the community's position to not support or

collaborate with any armed group or allow the entrance of weapons⁴. Importantly, it contravenes the provisional measures issued by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which were reinforced by the Colombian Constitutional Court in Ruling T1025, which states that the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó and the State have to agree mutually on the means by which they are protected. Establishing a police station in the urban centre of San José has been widely criticised by human rights groups since it places the civilian population at risk as guerrilla groups have been known to target these places directly⁵.

Twelve years later

The community of San José de Apartadó continues to be harassed by threats of further displacement and accusations of being guerrilla sympathisers twelve years after declaring itself a peace community⁶. The number of community members who have been killed at the hands of State security forces⁷, right-wing paramilitaries and left-wing guerrilla groups now surpasses a hundred-and-eighty⁸. Yet the community's spirit of resistance



Isabel Negreira and Sylvain Lefebvre (PBI) during an accompaniment in the peace community.

to involvement in the armed conflict still continues, as does the struggle to seek justice for the more than 750 crimes against humanity that have been denounced⁹. Indeed, for one twenty-three year old community member the sacrifice of those leaders who have been killed has inspired him to work for the community. Remembering the difficult experiences that he has lived through in his young life, Orlando states that, «I've had to witness so many violations. Many families that used to live here no longer exist... I've had to see people, thrown to the ground dead by bullets. The longer I live, I witness more things. The war goes on».

The continuation of the conflict in Urabá is not something that is immediately physically evident as one travels up the road that links Apartadó to San José. This is a road that has seen so many deaths committed by all factions. Yet alongside the road, which has been greatly improved over the past seven years, one sees new houses that have been built and improvements to old houses as either families who once fled the conflict

move back, or new families resettle in the area. Yet appearances can be deceptive, as inhabitants of the area a few hours walk above the urban settlement of San José de Apartadó report of fighting between the army and the guerrilla including bombs exploding in the vicinity of hamlets¹⁰. In the meantime, the increased military presence in the area does not necessarily re-assure the local population. It is evident that daily life has been increasingly militarized.

Militarisation of the area

The Peace Community of San José de Apartadó criticizes the militarisation

of the area which it argues is part of the present Colombian government's policy of «democratic security» which goes hand in hand with «development projects» for the region. Community member, Beatriz talks of «drop-by-drop» displacement as families leave their homes due to the bombings and increased presence of mobile troops, as well as the continuation of right-wing paramilitary activity in the area. She argues that all of this is linked to the desire to implement large-scale development projects in the region such as carbon mines and palm oil production. Speaking about how the local authorities

Urabá

Urabá is a region made up of three sub-regions including parts of the departments of Antioquia, Chocó and Córdoba. Urabá is considered to be one of the last agricultural frontiers to be populated and developed in Colombia. Migration to the area principally took place between the 1950s and 1970s when migrant worker families arrived to find work and land in the area. The region is exploited by small agriculturalists (colonos) who have cleared the land, large-scale banana plantations, and other agro-industries, such as African palm plantations. The area is populated by African-Colombians, indigenous groups, and «mestizos» (people of mixed race). ●

THE PEOPLE OF SAN JOSÉ DE APARTADÓ CONTINUE TO BE HARASSED BY THREATS OF FURTHER DISPLACEMENT AND ACCUSATIONS OF BEING GUERRILLA SYMPATHISERS TWELVE YEARS AFTER DECLARING ITSELF A PEACE COMMUNITY

in the area boast that they are bringing development and progress to San José de Apartadó she retorts, «What development are they talking about? They've built two buildings [including] a police station in the place where we had a memorial to the people [of the community] that had been murdered. With these new social programmes they are dividing the campesinos, taking away our autonomy. Telling us what to do. Or they imply the peasants are linked to the guerrillas, that they are the same».

The community is not alone in being concerned by recent developments in the area. One international aid worker, who is very familiar with the area, claims that there is, «a charity-based approach where money is given

to certain groups but not others. [It] divides civil society. It is also creating dependency on the State and ending the small farmers' own means of being independent. [...] We are now in a different stage of the conflict in Urabá. Before, it was a phase of massive displacement, and big military-paramilitary operations. Now there is still displacement and selective killings, but it is drip-by-drip and goes largely un-reported. Fear has already been sown amongst the population. Because before, there was so much violence the population has now become de-sensitized. What is happening now doesn't seem such a big deal. Now it's a phase where big multinational companies are coming into the area. For example, 17 mining contracts have been granted for the area. Ecopetrol is also going to begin exploration».

In response to these new threats, the community has adopted a strategy of expansion to include other hamlets in the area. It sees that working collectively; information can be disseminated about what is going on with relation to security threats posed by armed groups, and proposed development plans in the region. In this way the community hopes to encourage social cohesion and the autonomy of the small farmers that live in the area. As Beatriz states her desire for the community, «We want to become larger so that the community cannot be so easily destroyed. We want the restitution of justice so that future generations can really live in a climate of peace; so that we can stop the cycles of violence».

Collective power

Beatriz, a 43-year-old mother strongly believes in the power of the collective in the face of violence. When asked what motivates her to be a leader in her community she states in a very simple fashion, «I wanted to work for others. Not think in just "me" but to think of other generations that will come later, to work as part of a collective. So, our society can be more civilized». Although she admits that being a woman leader has not always been easy as *machismo* (sexism) is still difficult to overcome. However, she recognizes



Lunch in La Holandita, 2005.



Villages in San José de Apartadó.

that there is now more awareness in the community that women can take on leadership roles. «The war has made us unite much more. [...] The war has been our "class-room". Because of our experiences we have become more conscious of our rights. We have had to learn how to treat others better too [...] about the importance of dialogue. We are more united now. We feel like we are human beings. We have rights and values. [...] We have learnt to demand our rights».

Beatriz's work for the community has led her to travel outside of Colombia, something she never imagined she would do when she was younger. Travelling to Europe, she has recognised the importance that organisations such as Peace Brigades International (PBI)

play in highlighting what is going on in Colombia. «PBI has accompanied us since 2000, when the first massacre took place in San José. The national government feels pressured by the international presence here. International organisations monitor each process and provide us with security. Their political support outside of Colombia has also supported our community a lot. It has given us credibility. [...] It reinforces our work».

PBI has seen many changes in the community over the years. It first accompanied the community in the urban settlement of San José de Apartadó, and then moved with the community to La Holandita. PBI now also occasionally accompanies when requested in the

other small villages which form part of the community. Its volunteers have been witness to the various human rights abuses that the community has suffered. Its accompaniment of the community has included difficult emotional processes such as the exhumation of Luis Eduardo Guerra Guerra, his family and others massacred by Colombian soldiers in 2005. Whilst community members recognise the importance of PBI's presence, stating that if it were not for the presence of PBI it is doubtful that the community would still be in existence; PBI volunteers also speak of their respect and admiration for the community. One PBI volunteer from France states, «I wanted to work with campesinos. I wanted to learn about the conflict and when I heard about the position that the community holds I was really keen to work here. They seem really organised. And, it's really pleasant working with them, they are very warm people. [...] I've learnt about the capacity to re-create what has been destroyed, and to become stronger. This has given me a real belief in humanity. I think it's important that outside of Colombia people realise that the campesinos here want another way of life, or project, that isn't all about how much they have to produce or materialistic [things]»¹¹. ●

THE COMMUNITY'S DETERMINATION TO RESIST INVOLVEMENT IN THE ARMED CONFLICT REMAINS STRONG, AS DOES ITS STRUGGLE TO SEEK JUSTICE FOR THE MORE THAN 750 CASES OF CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY THAT IT HAS DENOUNCED

«These twelve years have been a hope built on solid bases, on real and alternative life projects that have been obstructed by the terror of the murderers. This is why the memory of 185 people from our community murdered is kept more alive than ever because we all believe in justice. These 12 years have allowed us to re-assert ourselves against impunity so that justice may be brought about for more than 750 human rights violations that have been committed against our [community], we are a clear example of the annihilation that has been committed, and continues against civil resistance communities in our country. Despite all these actions of terror, lies, legal processes, deaths, rapes, destruction of harvests, and threats, we have high hope because they are not twelve years of solitude. They are twelve years of the human warmth of many people who believe in a new humanity. We have not been left alone; on the contrary, [these people] walk day by day with us»¹². ●



A peasant chopping wood in San José de Apartadó.

1 In order to protect the members of San José de Apartadó's peace community the real names of those cited in this article have not been used.

2 «Urabá: Región, Actores y Conflicto 1960-1990», García, Clara Inés, Bogotá, CEREC, 1996

3 «San José de Apartadó: Caminos de Resistencia: Alternativas de la Población Civil en Medio del Conflicto», Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, Department for International Development (DFID) & OXFAM Colombia

4 «San Josesito de Apartadó: La Otra Versión», CINEP, Human Rights Databank, Noche y Niebla Caso Tipo No.6, 2005

5 «Colombia: Justice is the only way forward for the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó», Amnesty International, AMR 23/04/2005, Press Release

6 «Threats of displacement against San José de Apartadó Peace Community», PBI Focos de Interés, November 2009

7 According to the peace community, State security forces are responsible for more than 90 percent of the cases.

8 Right to Petition No. 17 to President Álvaro Uribe on the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, Javier Giraldo

9 «Massacres, forced disappearances, extortion, mass forced displacement, sexual abuse, destruction of housing and crops, bombardments against civilian population, creation of paramilitary structures, unfounded criminal proceedings and other crimes» in letter of response by Father Javier Giraldo to Anastasia O'Grady on 17 December 2009

10 «Shameless Contempt», Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, 21 October 2009, http://www.pbi-colombia.org/field-projects/pbi-colombia/hr-news-from-colombia/news/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=1606&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=28&cHash=09f30d066f

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•«Identidades Políticas y Exterminio Reciproco: Masacres y Guerra en Urabá 1991-2001», Suárez, Andrés Fernando, Medellín, 2007, Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Relaciones Internacionales (IEPRI), Universidad Nacional de Colombia & La Carreta Editores E.U.

12 «Doce años en construcción de la esperanza», Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, March 2009

The search for autonomy and dignity

«Self-determination: we and no one else will construct the history we must live. Life: we will respect our life and nature. Dignity: all of us are subjects of a history where we shall be acknowledged»¹.

Photo: Elizabeth Kerr



Women washing clothes on the riverbank, Cacarica.

By Elizabeth Kerr

Sitting on plastic chairs, swatting mosquitoes in the approaching dark of the night in the settlement of Nueva Esperanza in the Cacarica River Basin, in Colombia's north-western department of Chocó, we listen intently to a «campesino» speaking of the impact of political decisions made in the far-away capital of Bogotá. «What we are facing now are new strategies on the part of the government. The President says that “peace“ has been achieved. They are no longer using violence but other strategies. Financial capital is now taking control over the territory. In press articles and on the radio we hear about agreements advancing between Colombia and Panama regarding the Pan-American Highway, electricity projects. How are we going to organise ourselves in the face of this? It's not just a problem for [our community]

but for everyone. The highway is going to pass through our lands, an hour and a half away. The social impact of the highway has not been studied. [...] What's going to happen to our community?».

According to members of CAVIDA (Cacarica Communities for Self-Determination, Life and Dignity), it is precisely these economic development plans that were behind their forced displacement in 1997. Close to 10.000 individuals were forcibly displaced from the region in a military operation carried out by the Army's 17th Brigade to reclaim control from the FARC. The military operation, called «Operation Genesis»², was characterised by forced disappearances and massacres carried out by right-wing paramilitary groups. Those who had to flee their homes went to

Turbo, Apartadó, Quibdó, Medellín, and the Atlantic and Pacific coasts and even to Panama³. Members of the community assert that they were not displaced because they were guerrilla or because they were thought to be guerrilla. As one community member says, «The government was interested in our lands for investments. They said that they wanted to free the area of the guerrilla».

Returning and African palm

However, some of the inhabitants of Cacarica returned in 2001, and when they did so they found that much of the ancestral rainforest in the region had been cut down to make way for African palm plantations. Those responsible for this forced displacement did not expect the area's residents to return to their lands years later with the will to stay and

recover their land. As another individual from the community states, «We know that we have been an ‘inconvenience’ since we returned. Those who displaced us never thought we would come back to our lands».

Since the mid-1960s, when African palm was first planted in Colombia for commercial purposes in the department of Magdalena, the country has become the largest palm oil producer in the Americas and fourth producer worldwide (after Indonesia, Malaysia and Nigeria)⁴. Land dedicated to cultivating African palm has increased from 18.000 hectares in the mid-1960s to 188.000 hectares in 2003, then to 300.000 hectares in 2007⁵. The rapid growth in production of African palm has been denounced by Colombian and international organisations for having possible links to drug money-laundering operations and for being part of a paramilitary mechanism to forcefully remove the population from resource-rich areas⁶. Nevertheless, the encroachment of the African palm oil industry is only one of Cacarica’s concerns. Since the mid-1990s there has been increasing interest in the potential mineral and oil resources that the region may hold as well as its strategic geographical location –close to the Panama Canal at the juncture of South and Central America with both Pacific and Caribbean coastlines.

In response to the possible damage that such development projects pose to the collective lands of the community, which are used to grow subsistence crops, the community of Cacarica proposes to coordinate with other inhabitants of the region to resist these projects. CAVIDA is seen by its inhabitants to be a strategy of civil resistance, an alternative project for living in the midst of an armed conflict, where they may be able to regain their autonomy. However, the vision that the community has goes beyond the lives of the 150 families living in the two settlements of Nueva Vida and Nueva Esperanza, which make up the community. By declaring the area as an area of «biodiversity» the community claims that they are guardians of a site of worldwide environmental importance, a patrimony that they view as crucial to keep unspoilt.

Since 1998, Peace Brigades International (PBI) has accompanied members of CAVIDA and the Colombian non-governmental organisation, Inter-

Photo: Elizabeth Kerr



Learning letters in Cacarica.

Cacarica river basin

- The Cacarica river basin belongs to the municipality of Riosucio, on the Lower Atrato in the department of Chocó. It is situated in the Darien jungle area of the Pacific. Towards the north lies the Los Katios National Park, declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.
- Before 1997 Cacarica was made up of 23 communities where African-Colombians, ‘mestizos’ and indigenous people lived together.
- In 1993 the Colombian state decreed the right to collective entitlement of lands (Law 70) for African-Colombian communities.
- End of 1996 military operation «Operation Genesis» is launched by State security forces to gain military control of the area from the FARC.
- In 1997 approximately 3.500 people from Cacarica flee to Turbo, Bocas del Atrato, the Atlantic and Pacific coasts and Panama.
- In 1997 the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) grants precautionary measures to protect those displaced in Turbo from further violence. PBI volunteers accompany those displaced in Turbo’s sports stadium.
- In 1998 1.500 displaced persons from Cacarica join together to form CAVIDA.
- From 2000 to 2001 the inhabitants return to Cacarica to establish themselves in two temporary settlements after having negotiated the conditions of their return with the Andrés Pastrana government.
- In 2002 CAVIDA decides to establish humanitarian zones, based on the right under international humanitarian law to be considered as a civilian population.
- CAVIDA establishes itself on five basic principles: truth, liberty, justice, solidarity and fraternity.

Church Justice and Peace Commission, which has provided on the ground facilitation and capacity building when the families were first displaced in Turbo and Bahía Cupica. Over the ten years or so that PBI has accompanied the community it has seen a number of changes. Those who as children were living in cramped and inhumane conditions when they were displaced have, since re-settling in Cacarica, gone on to be educated and have their own families. Some are now keeping alive the history of their community either through teaching or cultural activities. As one young community leader says, «We have to work together. We have to seek strategies to live in the midst of war. We have to take on for ourselves this civil struggle».

The role that PBI plays in Cacarica is important in helping keep the possibility open for such a project. In addition, the community⁷ and other organisations have also denounced the continued presence of paramilitaries and insurgent groups in the area⁸. However, as a member of Justice and Peace states, it is other «social projects» which are increasingly worrisome such as the controversial governmental «guardabosques» (forest-warden families) scheme where civilians are armed and expected to act as informants against guerrilla groups. This scheme has been criticised for failing to provide long-term solutions to rural poverty, and for contravening international humanitarian law which states that civilians must not be directly involved in the conflict⁹.

It is within this context that the accompaniment of PBI and other international and national organisations is greatly valued by the community. As one community member states, «International support has helped us to build up our strength in resisting as we live on our land. If we hadn't had this support we would either have been displaced again or dead».

Whilst it is still unclear what the future may hold for the community in terms of the impact of development projects in the region, what is clear is that the community intends to continue resisting for a peaceful way of life that respects not only their dignity but also that of the planet¹⁰. ●

African-descendant populations displaced "

According to information from CODHES, Afro-Colombians represent the largest ethnic minority among internally displaced people in Colombia.

-In all, 12.3% of the Afro-Colombians are in situations of forced displacement (CODHES 2008).

-Information demonstrates that the internally displaced African-descendant population is in worse conditions than other internally displaced groups. For instance, 30% of the Afro-Colombians in this situation did not have funds to eat at least one day a week and 69% did not attend any educational institution (Racial Discrimination Observatory using data from the 2005 census). ●

1 «Somos tierra de esta tierra», 2002: 250

2 «Operation Genesis» was carried out along the Cacarica and Salaquí Rivers from 24 to 27 February 1997. It included bombardments and land-based attacks, which forced the displacement of 10,000 people from the Lower Atrato. This operation was directed by the Colombian army and was supported by paramilitary structures.

3 «Operation Genesis: Ten Years Later», ColomPbia, Quarterly Informative Bulletin, Peace Brigades International, No.2, February 2007

4 See: Colombian African Palm Growers Union (Fedepalma), www.fedepalma.org

5 «Colombia's Palm Oil Biodiesel Push», Avendaño, Tatiana Roa, 2 February 2007, <http://americas.irc-online.org/am/3962>

6 «Colombia orders return of Stolen Farmland», Washington Post, 23 March 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/22/AR2009032202029.html>

7 «Asesinado afrodescendiente por paramilitares en territorio colectivo del Cacarica», Constancia, Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission, 9 September 2003, <http://www.justiciapazcolombia.com/Asesinado-afrodescendiente-por>

8 «Defensorías del Chocó denuncian agudizamiento en desplazamientos y confinamientos en el Pacífico», El Tiempo, 2 June 2009, <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-5328908>

9 Under this programme selected families receive about US\$265 per month simply to keep their land free of illegal crops. In exchange, the families must participate in training programmes, and some get assistance starting sustainable productive projects. See the organisation CIPCOL for more information: <http://www.cipcol.org/?p=600>

10 Sources and references:

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«Informe Especial sobre Chocó», Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia, December 2001, <http://www.disaster-info.net/desplazados/informes/rut/chococ/index.html>

11 «El Desplazamiento AFRO», César Rodríguez Garavito, Tatiana Alfonso Sierra, Isabel Cavalier Adarve, Universidad de los Andes, April 2009



Prayers for life in Cacarica.

Return to hope

By Elizabeth Kerr

Nestled between majestic green mountains covered with pine trees, the hamlet of Promisión in the district of Angelópolis, lacking in electricity and running water, seems a lifetime away from the nearby modern city of Medellín. The beautiful landscape hides a story of loss and hope within a context of material hardship. The first settlers were landless *campesinos* (small-holders) who came to the hamlet in 1986 with expectations of providing a livelihood for themselves and their families. The land they came to was considered unused land, part of an abandoned farm where coffee had been grown previously. The land was cleared and made productive through the hard work and organization of the inhabitants, so much so that it was recognised as the most productive hamlet in the district. Yet in 1997 the *campesinos* living there experienced their first forced displacement brought about by right-wing paramilitaries, who accused them of collaborating with the ELN insurgent group¹, causing many families to live in exile in Medellín and its surrounding areas.

Photo: Elizabeth Kerr



Andrea Zaengle (PBI) with a small farmer from Angelópolis, Antioquia.

More than 10 years later some of the inhabitants decided to move back to their lands with help from the Small Farmer Association of Antioquia (ACA), a Colombian organisation accompanied by Peace Brigades International (PBI)

since 2004. These families have returned to live under basic conditions with limited support from state and non-state agencies because they wanted a way out of the marginalisation and poverty they experienced living in urban areas.

ACA has a long history of working with the community of Promisión since its foundation in 1994 by a group of landless small farmers (*campesinos*). Before the increased violence of the mid 1990s, ACA had worked with

communities such as Promisión in technical capacity building; training and assisting landless farmers recover unused land. However, after the murder of several campesino leaders, which led to massive displacement in the department of Antioquia, it was obliged to assist the displaced population in Medellín and its surrounding areas³.

Conditions for a dignified return

During the 2000s, ACA worked with forty-five *asentamientos* (settlements) of displaced people in and around Medellín. Whilst continuing to work with this population in the capital of Antioquia, the socio-political situation in the department has meant that the organisation has been able to resume work in rural areas. As such, ACA is now working hard to make it possible for more small farmers to return to their lands, as well as for others to be able to gain access to agricultural land and be provided with a sustainable livelihood⁴. To do this ACA believes

that it is fundamental that the displaced population participate in consultative processes on return and re-settlement. They are currently lobbying for the establishment of a working group on returns and resettlements to be set up at departmental level.

Nevertheless, Colombia's current political and socio-economic situation continues to feed the armed conflict, which does not yet have an end in sight. In this respect, the Colombian State fails to provide favourable conditions for a «return» with dignity and security. As Fernando Madrigal, the lawyer for ACA states the «return» of the families is still in progress. «We are proud of this return process, but this return wasn't as if the State gave a gift. [It was] a process of 2 years, constant struggle [...] so that they would guarantee a return process to these families [...]. [The State] guaranteed new housing for all the families, productive projects, food supplies, tools; it guaranteed them security and other things that it hasn't

«At a national or departmental level, we have not seen a clear, well-focused and intentional policy, by the government or State to guarantee the population's right to return. We have strong criticisms of this and we need direct participation in the design and principles for return processes». ●

Nicolas Castrillón from ACA

been able to provide yet. But it hasn't been a return which has guaranteed their full rights [...] because neither the health centre nor the new school have been built yet [...]. It should be stressed that this constant struggle and these families pressuring came about because they were going to be victimized again by the State, because the State was going to steal their lands. Aside that they had to abandon their lands, the State was going to [...] hand over their lands to a Canadian company for logging»⁵.

Photo: Elizabeth Kerr



Angelópolis.

PBI and the ACA

PBI believes the work carried out by ACA is legal and legitimate. The vision that ACA has for the people they work with, which highlights the importance of promoting sustainable livelihoods in rural areas over the long-term, as well as improving conditions for those displaced in the cities, is unique. ACA does this work under circumstances where the risk is always there, as political and economic interests that have expressed themselves through violence in the past are still present in the region. As one PBI volunteer states: «Those of us in PBI have seen how organisations such as ACA play an important role in re-building the social fabric which helps campesinos deal with the fear and trauma that they have lived and continue to live with, which has made them lose their voice. This is why it's important the role that ACA and PBI play in this. The role of PBI is not just to respond to threats but to protect the work space of these and other Colombian organisations, encouraging prevention and aiding the resumption of organisational work which has been lost previously».

As a volunteer from Germany, he states that he is motivated by seeing how human rights organisations support communities, in a way that goes beyond immediate humanitarian assistance to include a vision of hope for building a future for the region, bringing hope under difficult circumstances such as those faced by Angelópolis.



«Between 1997 and 2007 Antioquia was the department with the highest expulsion of population in the country»².

Through providing protective accompaniment for ACA, PBI is also able to provide support and solidarity for the campesinos. This accompaniment is much appreciated by the campesinos. As one of the community members of Promisión states, «One of the positive aspects of our «return» process has been the accompaniment and visits we have received. The presence of international groups has meant that we are no longer isolated, they have been very present. Thanks to the work of ACA and their accompaniers we haven't had any new visits from armed groups».

The families that have gone back to live in Promisión have been keen to share their experiences with other campesinos from Antioquia. In July this year ACA organized a meeting in Promisión with inhabitants from the district of San Francisco in Eastern Antioquia who were also forcibly displaced from their homes. In the two days in which they met, both groups learnt from each others' experiences of displacement and attempts at returning to their lands. At the end of this meeting both groups agreed that the visit had been an important event. As one woman from San Francisco said, «It has been great to meet each other»⁶. ●

The recent history of Promisión

- In 1997 38 families from the hamlet of Promisión are displaced by right-wing paramilitary forces.
- 3 months later members of the community decide to leave Medellín and return to their lands.
- 2 months after their return paramilitaries kill four campesinos provoking another mass displacement.
- In 2006 ACA begins a process to facilitate the return of 22 families.
- On 6 September 2007, 15 members of the community return to their lands with the help of the local civilian and non-civilian authorities, INCODER (Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform), the Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation, the Peasant Farmer Association of Antioquia (ACA), and international organisations. ●

1 «Desplazados de Angelópolis debieron aplazar retorno a sus parcelas», Popular Training Institute, 9 October 2007
2 «Desplazamiento forzado (por expulsión) 1996-2007», Social Action, 2007, Vice-President of the Republic's Human Rights Observatory. Cited in «Guerreros y Campesinos: El despojo de la tierra en Colombia», A. Reyes Posada, Bogotá, 2009, Grupo Editorial Norma, p. 221
3 «Desplazados: Refugiados Internos o excluidos?», ACA, Medellín, 2003, Impresos Kroma
4 «Hacia la Recuperación y Apropiación de la Tierra y el Territorio Vía Autogestión Comunitaria», ACA, 2009, p. 21
5 Interview with Fernando Madrigal
6 Sources and References:
*«Letter from the Field: A Voice from Promisión - "We already lost everything"», Mayra Moreno, Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), October 2007
*«Desplazamiento y retorno no. 1. Balance de una política. Evaluación de la política de retorno del gobierno de Álvaro Uribe», Caicedo et al., Latin American Institute for Legal Services (ILSA), Bogotá, 2006

The forced recruitment of children obliges indigenous people to leave their land

By Marie-Hélène Verney, UNHCR

In a distant corner of Colombia along the border with Brazil, the department of Vaupés is home to 27 different indigenous groups, each one with a distinct culture and language. Nonetheless, many are at risk of not surviving due to the conflict and forced displacement.

Photo: M.H. Verney / UNHCR



Indigenous children in the school in Bocas de Yi, a community drastically affected by forced recruitment of children.

This remote region of Vaupés has a total area of 50.000 square kilometres of rivers and jungle. There are only 16 kilometres of paved road surrounding the small city of Mitú, which is connected to the capital of the country, Bogotá, by only two flights a week. The Vaupés River is the only other means of transportation to the outside world.

The region is also one of the bastions for the largest irregular armed group in Colombia, which controls

the rural areas, while the State armed forces struggle to maintain a presence in the areas surrounding the city. Many communities along the river live in forced isolation and virtual confinement. Due to the security situation, the only option often left for people is to flee.

«Over the last two years, the principal cause of forced displacement has been the forced recruitment of indigenous children by illegal armed groups», a Mitú public

servant stated to UNHCR. In 2008, some 500 families fled from their homes, most of whom because their children were about to be recruited by illegal groups.

Children as young as 13 years old have been recruited and both boys and girls are at risk. The Vaupés Regional Indigenous Council (CRIVA) is particularly concerned about the recruitment of members of indigenous groups that are in risk of extinction. One of the most urgent cases is the

Pizamira community, which has a population of less than 50 persons. Three children from this community were recruited last year.

«Many parents have gone into the woods to look for their children, but they have not been able to bring them back», a CRIVA member told UNHCR.

According to CRIVA, some 42 indigenous minors were forced to join illegal groups since the beginning of 2008. Eleven of them were boarding students from Bocas de Yi, an indigenous community located on the Vaupés River, which provides refuge for the children from this river basin and gives them the chance to study.

The Bocas de Yi residents live in complete isolation without access to basic services. Some 200 inhabitants share the few available resources with 160 children that study at the school. The boarding school does not have water, electricity or bathrooms. Some

of the children sleep in hammocks, others on the floor.

«Most of the children are here the whole year because it is too far away or too dangerous to travel to their homes. The conditions here are harsh year after year», according to a professor. «These children do not have any real hope and this makes them terribly vulnerable to other options that unscrupulous persons offer them», he added.

Forced recruitment is not always carried out violently. One of the most common methods is to make the youth «fall in love» —as the locals say— through indoctrination and promises of a better life. According to international humanitarian law, all recruitment of minors by illegal armed groups is defined as forced recruitment, no matter if the child wants or does not want to join.

Instead of taking the risk of losing their children, many families prefer

to flee. Close to 3.000 people —1% of the population of Vaupés— have abandoned their homes.

UNHCR is working with the military in Vaupés as part of a national training initiative to improve knowledge about the rights of the internally displaced population. «In Colombia, military personnel are often the first or only State presence in communities at risk», said Roberto Mignone, UNHCR deputy representative in Colombia. «The armed forces play an important role in the protection and prevention of forced displacement».

Due to their strong cultural, social and economic ties to the land, forced displacement especially harms the indigenous population and may lead to the disappearance of entire groups. According to the Colombian Constitutional Court, a third of the 90 distinct ethnic groups in Colombia are at risk. ●

ecuador

Ecuador's northern border: the documentation process reaches the jungle

By Sonia Aguilar, UNHCR

After more than two decades in Ecuador, Nely —a Colombian woman about fifty years old— has finally received a refugee visa. It only took her a day to receive the document that will allow her to achieve her most coveted dream: visiting her twenty-year-old son who —after a motorcycle accident— suffers loss of mobility and lives in the small city of Lago Agrio.

Lago Agrio is the biggest city in the Amazon region of Ecuador and is some 200 kilometres from where Nely lives farther in the Amazon. Arriving there exceeds her budget —she earns 35 dollars a month—, but her main problem to date has been the fact she did not have the documents that legally accredit her with refugee status.

«The closest road to my house is a three-hour walk by foot through the jungle», she explained in the

documentation centre in Puerto El Carmen. «From there I would have to pay 20 dollars to reach Lago Agrio. But without a refugee visa I would not have been able to get through the military checkpoints».

There are thousands of Colombians who —like Nely— find themselves in an incomparable situation of being refugees along the border but without documents. In an unprecedented initiative, the Ecuadorian government —with technical and financial support from UNHCR— has

begun a project to carry out an extensive registration process.

With local campaigns in some of the remotest areas of Ecuador, the registration project attempts to offer quick access to refugee status to persons in need of international protection by certifying their status and providing them with identification documents. Its goal is to document close to 130.000 people throughout the country who to date have not had access to the State asylum system.



Puerto El Carmen, Sucumbios province (Ecuador, August 2009). Nely, with her youngest daughter, shows her refugee visa provided by the registration office. After residing for years in Ecuador, the document will allow her to travel to the city where her son currently lives.

More than 11,000 refugees were registered in the western province of Esmeraldas from the months of March to June 2009. Now the project has moved to the Amazon province of Sucumbios, along the border with Colombia, a remote area that lacks access to basic services where thousands of Colombians live in a situation similar to that of refugees.

Both Ecuadorian public servants and UNHCR staff have travelled the difficult jungle roads and rivers with heavy and often delicate electronic equipment and computers to arrive to these distant places. Over the first days, the brigades were able to register close

to 2,000 persons and hope to register several thousand more over the next three months.

«The province is just along the border with Colombia and receives many Colombians who have fled the conflict in their land», explains Luis Varese, UNHCR deputy representative in Ecuador. «The security situation is tense and the major impact caused by the Colombian conflict is discernible. The Ecuadorian government's process of granting visas reinforces the presence of the State in the area, which contributes to the protection of the refugees».

Moreover, «now refugees may travel freely and reach health centres, schools, and other services. The documentation process truly presumes a difference in the real life of thousands of refugees», adds Mr. Varese.

The smile has returned to Nely's face. Despite the harsh life this woman has had to face since she abandoned her home in the department of Caquetá in southern Colombia, now she is smiling. She bids farewell waving her new identification card as she leaves the documentation centre to go to the Puerto El Carmen bus station to visit her son in Lago Agrio after not seeing each other for years. ●

MORE THAN 11.000 REFUGEES WERE REGISTERED IN THE WESTERN PROVINCE OF ESMERALDAS FROM THE MONTHS OF MARCH TO JUNE 2009

Barrancabermeja and its displaced population

The city of Barrancabermeja in the department of Santander grew in the second half of the twentieth century due to the migration of people from the nearby municipalities who came to find work in the new industry arising from the discovery of «black gold».

Today, Barrancabermeja continues to be a city that receives population from the geographic region known as the Magdalena Medio. In this respect, inhabitants come from the rural areas of Southern Bolívar, the Cimitarra River Valley, Antioquia, North-Eastern Antioquia or Cesar. Some of these people continue to arrive to find work, often determined by the contract mafia¹. Many others are internally displaced people who flee their homes to hide in the city. There, they try to go unnoticed to leave behind what forced them to abandon their homes.

The area of the Magdalena Medio is a region rich in natural resources (e.g. petroleum, gold, coal and uranium) and with very fertile land suitable for growing African palm or rubber crops. These conditions are coveted by transnational development projects, which force the peasant population to sell or abandon their land. The different illegal armed actors are present in this territory and try to recruit the population through different kinds of threats. Armed confrontations also takes place between these groups and State security forces².

Chemical aerial spraying is another issue that provokes displacement in the rural areas. Over the last two years, these fumigations have encouraged the expulsion of at least 30.000 people. «Aerial spraying does not only eliminate coca plants, it also destroys licit subsistence crops and poisons animals, land, river water, and even the peasants», states María Socorro, president of Asodesamuba. The population is not able to stay living in these areas because they can no longer grow crops and without crops there is nothing to eat.

According to the local human rights liaison in Barrancabermeja, Leonardo Gómez Acevedo, 53.000 forcibly displaced people live in the city³. According to information from the mayor's office, as of 10 November 2009,



María Socorro Abril (Asodesamuba) and María Teresa Palop Torelló (PBI).

47.889 people lived in this situation⁴. This represents a very high percentage in a city with nearly 250.000 inhabitants. In addition to these figures, thousands of people who are not recognised as internally displaced should be added since, as stated by María Socorro, «some people do not declare their situation out of fear and others are not recognised due to bureaucratic delays».

A city that displaces

However, in Barrancabermeja the opposite also takes place as people are also expelled. It is difficult to know the exact number of people who are forced to abandon the city as they are also forced to remain anonymous in their places of

arrival, which normally are cities like Bucaramanga, Girón or Piedecuesta.

According to the State agency Social Action, Barrancabermeja received 40.830 displaced people from 2002 to 2009, while at the same, 22.720 people have been expelled from the city⁵. This forced displacement is much more selective than the displacement in rural areas and is caused by direct threats, social cleansing pamphlets, persecution, and attempted recruitment. These actions are carried out by illegal armed actors that operate in the city, which at times act in complicity with State security forces⁶. This was the case of Arlet Vásquez, a member of the Regional Association of Victims of

CHEMICAL AERIAL SPRAYING HAS CAUSED THE DISPLACEMENT OF AT LEAST 30.000 PEOPLE OVER THE LAST TWO YEARS



Colombia Images and Realities: the forgotten ones of the Magdalena Medio.

State Crimes in the Magdalena Medio (ASORVIM) and a family member of one of the victims of the massacre of 16 May 1998 in the city of Barrancabermeja. On 21 October 2009, Arlet Vásquez reported an attempt on his life, though no investigation was carried out to clarify the case. Three days after this incident, four men dressed in civilian clothes went by the house of Mr. Vásquez's romantic partner and left a message threatening her not to return there «or you already know what will happen». In the end, the couple was able to leave the city⁷.

Problems and difficulties

In their new destinations, people have the same difficulties. On the one hand, they try to be recognised as forcibly displaced persons, something which is not all together easy. Registration in the Unified Registration System (SUR) is an indispensable requirement to access most of the programmes for Emergency Humanitarian Assistance and socio-economic subsidies. In order to access SUR, the internally displaced families must provide a statement before an institution belonging to the Public Ministry. However, if the person receiving the statement records the

A MINOR IS UNABLE TO PRESENT A DISPLACEMENT APPLICATION, EVEN IF THEIR PARENTS HAVE BEEN ASSASSINATED, AND THAT THIS WAS THE REASON FOR DISPLACEMENT

information incorrectly or fails to provide all the information—which frequently occurs due to inexperience, according to María Socorro—, the application is rejected. If the reason for the forced displacement is fumigation, this person or family is not considered to be forcibly displaced. A minor may also not present the application, even if their mother or father has been murdered and this is why they were forcibly displaced⁸.

On the other hand, there are also a series of problems which in some way forces them into their situation of marginalisation and discrimination, such

as prostitution, drugs, forced recruitment—also by State security forces—, violence, poverty, overcrowding, poor education, unemployment, lack of housing, difficult access to health services, sexual abuse or intra-family violence encouraged by the new role taken on by members of the families—especially women—in the city. These conditions often force them to be newly displaced. This is the situation of Hernando Jesús Cuellar Montero who first was forcibly displaced to Barrancabermeja with his mother from the rural area of Yondó and then, years later, was forced to flee again to another neighbourhood of the city after his mother's murder. ●

80% of those who have been displaced once will be so once, twice or three times more in search of the peaceful home that was seized from them in midst of the conflict⁹. ●

Each forced displacement is different, personal and particular case

Hernando Jesús Cuellar Montero is 27 years old, internally displaced, and an orphan, in addition to having a physical disability. He was forcibly displaced with his mother from the rural area of Yondó to Barrancabermeja. They lived in Neighbourhood 16 from March 2002 until 23 November 2009 when his mother was dragged from their house and shot four times. Hernando received support from Asodesamuba, the organisation that presented his case before the International Court of Justice (principal judicial body of the United Nations). Now he lives alone in the Palmira neighbourhood and works as an assistant in an auto-service. Hernando says that «the situation in Barranca is tough; people are killed and nothing happens».

Lina Rosa Quiroz lived in the Las Parmas rural community in Cimitarra. In 2000 she was forcibly displaced to Barrancabermeja. Previously, her husband had been murdered. «The situation in Las Parmas was difficult. The Self-Defence Forces came in and you had to leave. The guerrilla was also there. It was an area with a lot of violence». Lina explains that her sugar cane mill was stolen and, since she could no longer support her family, had to flee with her six children. «As a single mother I could not live in the countryside». Now she lives in Kennedy, a neighbourhood in which 80% of the population has been forcibly displaced, mostly from Antioquia and Southern Bolívar. Lina explains that the neighbourhood had quite a reputation, but now it has improved and is ironically called «Holy Mountain». Lina participates in the Seed Plan Programme and has received 1.600.000 pesos and groceries. It has helped her survive, though she has not received support in housing or rent.

Flor Soto was affected by intra-urban displacement in Barrancabermeja. She has experienced the murder of three of her children, while another is in jail and one more is looking for work. Flor is under constant threat and on several occasions has been forced to leave Barrancabermeja, though she has been able to return later. Despite these threats, she continues to resist in the Kennedy neighbourhood. ●

1 These are organised groups that work for the companies to fill job vacancies. The goal is to make sure the people who are given positions do not cause «trouble».

2 Interview with María Socorro Abril, president of Asodesamuba, on Sunday 6 December 2009 in the neighbourhood of Kennedy, District 6, Barrancabermeja. Asodesamuba (Association of Internally Displaced People in the Municipality of Barrancabermeja) was established on 26 August 1999 as the result of an organising effort carried out for over a year by 100 forcibly displaced families from the Magdalena Medio in order to support those who had lost everything. The organisation defends the rights of the internally displaced population by trying to reconstruct their life projects, improving their human conditions and family unit, and providing the members with the required support through community economic initiatives and solidarity work. Other IDP organisations in Barrancabermeja are Asodev or Asdepovud.

3 «En Barrancabermeja hay 53 mil desplazados», Vanguardia Liberal, 22 November 2009

4 Webpage of the mayor's office in Barrancabermeja, <http://www.barrancabermeja-santander.gov.co/pagvemosicias.php?bid=378>

5 «Perfil Municipal Barrancabermeja», Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations in Colombia, <http://colombiassh.org/info>

6 Ibid.

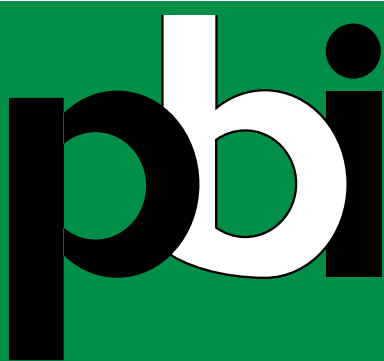
7 «Intento de asesinato contra mototaxista miembro de Asorvim en Barrancabermeja», Prensa Rural, 26 October 2009

8 Ibid. 4



Photo: Christian Escobar Mora / Fundación Dos Mundos-UNHCR

Colombia Images and Realities: a young girl in a raft.



Protecting human rights defenders in Colombia since 1994

www.pbi-colombia.org



Many communities are struggling to return to the lands from which they were violently displaced. PBI accompanies a number of return processes, in order to ensure minimum conditions of security and dignity. Photo of a return process in the Chocó department.

Pace Brigades International (PBI) is a non-governmental organisation recognised by the United Nations, which has maintained a team of international observers/accompaniers in Colombia on an ongoing basis since 1994. PBI's mission is to protect the working environment of human rights defenders, who face repression due to their non-violent human rights activities.

PBI Colombia teams remain in the field, at the request of local organisations, accompanying persons and organisations under threat. This fieldwork is complemented by significant dialogue and advocacy with civilian and military authorities, as well as with NGOs, the Church, multilateral bodies, and the diplomatic corp, in order to

promote human rights and disseminate information on the human rights situation in Colombia.

If you believe PBI's presence helps protect persons who carry out human rights work, you may do the following:

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PBI International Delegation

Development House

56-64 Leonard St., London EC2A 4JX, UK

Tel. (+44) 20 4065 0775

admin@peacebrigades.org

PBI Colombia Project

Rue de la Linière, 11

1060 Brussels (Belgium)

Tel. (+32) 2609 4400

info@pbicolombia.org

PBI Delegation in Colombia

Apartado aéreo 36157

Bogotá (Colombia)

Tel. (+57) 1287 0403

info@pbicolombia.org