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## Quadrupling of Displaced Persons in a Decade

by LADB Staff

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Colombia's continuing conflicts have created a displaced population of three million to four million people, according to reports from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR), the Catholic Church, and other groups. The displacement crisis has seen geometric growth under Plan Colombia, the US-funding program for military activities, and President Alvaro Uribe's "democratic security" and "Plan Patriota" policies of hard-line military action against rebel groups, according to statistical surveys.

### *Growing conflict makes millions refugees*

The number of people displaced from their communities because of the armed conflict quadrupled in the past decade, leading the Catholic Church and humanitarian organizations to estimate in February that almost three million Colombians lived in poverty-level conditions. The first report by the Catholic Church on displaced people in 1995 spoke of some 586,000 refugees. By 2005 the church had counted 2.9 million in a report titled *Challenges For Constructing the Nation: The Country Facing Displacement, Armed Conflict, and Humanitarian Crisis*. The nongovernmental organization Consultoria para los Derechos Humanos (CODHES) contributed data to the report, which concluded that "there is an expansion of displacement associated with the intensification of the conflict."

Maurizio Pontini, a Catholic priest and one of the study's authors, told The Associated Press that "displacement continues to be produced, it has not ended as people want it to be understood so much of the time."

Harvey Suarez, CODHES researcher and coauthor of the study, said, "In the 2005 map, there is a greater impact in the southern part of the country where there was a flare-up in confrontations caused by policies of territorial recuperation under Plan Patriota." Suarez said the military activity had strong repercussions because in those forested areas with low population density, a few families represented whole populations that, once they fled, left the areas vacant. Compared with 1995, when only 32 of the 1,098 municipalities of Colombia were considered "expellers" of population, in 2005 907 municipalities, or 87%, were in that category. As to the towns that would receive refugees, 799 municipalities were registered in 2004 and 675 in 2005. The principal armed actors who force displacement are guerrillas and paramilitary groups. Half the victims are less than 15 years old, the majority are women, and the ethnic groups most affected are people of African descent and indigenous people, according to the report.

"They live, as can be seen, in the shadows," begging, looking for any means to survive under precarious conditions, said Pontini, pointing out that less than 36% of refugees have work. "A humanitarian and human rights crisis that is chronic and sustained" persists, he said. The report said there had been positive advances in the past decade with the implementation of laws and

criminal sentencing that seek to protect refugees' human rights and a greater consciousness of the situation among the general population.

UNHCR placed blame for the increase in displacement on Plan Colombia, the US-funding package of mostly military aid that has funneled billions into Colombia since the second term of President Bill Clinton (1995-2001). UNHCR materials also reported on the role of state violence in displacement, in addition to illegal groups.

A 115-page report from UNHCR pointed to executions of civilians that had been attributed to the military, presented as guerrillas killed in combat. CODHES said in October that the third quarter of 2005 registered the highest level of displacement in the past 3 years, with about 99,338 people, or some 19,868 families, displaced by violence and insecure conditions. CODHES noted that almost one million people had been uprooted during Uribe's term, while during the administration of President Andres Pastrana (1998-2002), the number was 1.1 million.

### *Varying government figures*

The government figure of 1.7 million refugees was drastically lower than the Pontini-Suarez report for the Catholic Church, with the priest saying that the official criteria for estimating displaced people reduced the number of affected people included in government-support programs.

"The government does not accept that there may be people displaced by fumigation [of coca crops] (see NotiSur, 2005-04-08, 2004-04-02, 2005-08-26); they don't register that, but we see that as part of the conflict," said Pontini. Interior Minister Sabas Pretelt said, "Our responsibility is to work with the information we receive and dedicate some resources," and he said that resources were being sent to remedy the situation at levels higher than ever.

Government figures calculated under broader parameters even exceeded church estimates, with Luis Bernardo Florez, Colombian vice comptroller-general, saying in December that the number of people uprooted during recent years by civil war, narcotraffickers, paramilitary, and guerrilla groups was "more than 3.6 million Colombians, the world's highest figure for internal displacement." He cited government research and information from organizations like the World Bank that reveal that the lands abandoned by displaced people "could reach 4 million hectares, with all the devastating effects that implies for the economic, social, and political life of Colombia."

The greatest part of the removal of campesinos from their lands has occurred during the current administration of President Uribe when "rural poverty increased from 66% to 69% between 2003 and 2004," said Florez. Similarly, said the official, "Indigence increased dramatically from 24% to 28.3% in that brief period." He said the displacement "generates a massive process of concentrating rural property."

The vice comptroller also denounced that the Colombian government had only delivered lands to 1% of families displaced by drug traffickers and paramilitaries between 2000 and 2004. "Lamentably, the victims receive much less than the victimizers," he said, with paramilitaries who demobilize

receiving an average of 21.5 million pesos (about US\$10,000) per year under the Justicia y Paz program (see NotiSur, 2005-06-17, 2005-07-22), and displaced people who are victims of the paramilitaries receiving barely 2.3 million pesos (somewhat less than US\$1,000) per family per year. The number of displaced represents at least 13% of the country's rural population.

The lands stolen from them "are equivalent to 6% of those considered useful for agriculture and cattle raising in the country," said Florez. The lands stolen from them are much less than those that have been distributed by the Instituto de la Reforma Agraria since it was founded 42 years ago. Florez recommended that the government "expropriate from illegal groups who, in their time, have expropriated from campesinos and the rest of the agricultural producers. The government has to secure the return of usurped properties to their legitimate owners." It is highly doubtful that will happen, however, as paramilitary leaders make efforts to bring their influence even further into the political power centers of Colombia (see NotiSur, 2006-02-03) and the governments of Uribe and the US continue to press an expansive military push against resurgent guerrilla forces.

### *Ecuador receiving more refugees*

Ecuador has also seen an increase in the number of refugees fleeing across its borders, receiving 250,000 applications for asylum, with the UNHCR attending to some 25,000 of the refugees in Ecuador. UNHCR reported in November that hundreds were coming across the border and seeking assistance as conflicts flared up in southern Colombia. The government noted 1,000 refugees in San Lorenzo, Esmeraldas, on Nov. 14 and called on the Colombian government to send support for them. The strain on Ecuadoran resources was another blow to bilateral relations, as increased military activity has led to more chaos on the shared border, with Colombian military forces crossing into Ecuadoran territory and creating an international scandal.

While Ecuador objects strongly to military incursions, Colombia complains that rebel forces are launching attacks from inside Ecuadoran territory. Ecuador's refugee burden as a neighbor to Colombia is arguably the hardest, since it has the weakest economy relative to the number of refugees it must absorb. Venezuela has received 200,000 asylum requests, Panama 40,000, and Costa Rica 20,000.

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