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U.N. says Colombian Internal, External Refuges Among Higest Globally

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The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported in June that Colombia has the highest number of internally displaced persons of any country in the world, followed by Iraq. Colombia also has the highest number of external refugees of any country in the Americas, ranking below Iraq and Afghanistan worldwide. Combined, the estimated total of internally displaced Colombians and refugees reached 3.5 million.

The government of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe criticized the UNHCR numbers as "a distortion of reality." Estimated 3.5 million displaced The UNHCR Global Trends Report said that 2007 was the second consecutive year that the number of refugees worldwide increased, bringing the number to its highest since records began in 1951.

The 2006-2007 increase came after a five-year decline in world totals. Of those affected, 26 million were "internally displaced persons (IDP)," displaced by conflicts within their own countries, and 11.4 million were refugees. Much of the increase came from the Iraq war, while Colombia's numbers remain relatively similar to prior years (see NotiSur, 2006-03-03) or at least lack the drastic increases seen in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The report says that the Americas, of the regions the UNHCR monitors, has the smallest share of refugees, with Colombia providing the largest number within the hemisphere. The UNHCR says it now helps 13.7 million displaced people, which combines with the international refugees it helps to total an "unprecedented 25.1 million by year's end."

The worldwide total may rise because of new conflict-related emergencies, bad governance, climate change, and price increases, the UN warned. The group estimated that the world total of refugees is 37.4 million people.

The total of refugees and internally displaced people under UNHCR care has risen by 2.5 million. "After a five-year decline in the number of refugees between 2001 and 2005, we have now seen two years of increases, and that is a concern," High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres said in a statement.

**Conflict with FARC creates internal displacements**

Conflict with FARC creates internal displacements

Colombia had the highest number of internally displaced people, with about 3 million people uprooted, followed by Iraq. A conflict spanning more than four decades, has raged in Colombia involving the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), the country's largest rebel group, the smaller rebel group Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), and numerous paramilitary militias that fight either rebels or the government.
The UNHCR reported in 2007 that the numbers of displaced people were increasing as armed conflicts among the military, rebels, and paramilitaries caused people to flee. Spokesperson William Spindler said in February 2007 that it was "one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world" and that "indigenous people and Afro-Colombians are the most threatened groups." The 2007 Global Trends Report noted that it was difficult to accurately determine the number of displaced people in Colombia, saying, "The difficulties associated with accuracy in IDP statistics in Colombia have been highlighted in a landmark judgment by the Constitutional Court of that country, which pointed to serious discrepancies between the real magnitude of the situation and the figures of the national registration system."

**External refugees flee to neighboring countries**

Colombia's refugees distinct from its internally displaced population mostly reside in Ecuador and Venezuela. Ecuador, on Colombia's southwest border, houses about 250,000 refugees (see NotiSur, 2007-02-16 and 2007-08-10). Venezuela, sharing a huge and active land border 2,219 km in length with Colombia, houses about 200,000 Colombian refugees, according to UNHCR numbers.

The UNHCR said the rest of Colombia's external refugees live mainly in Brazil, Costa Rica, and Panama. Colombia's estimated 3.5 million displaced people was second worldwide only to Sudan, with 5.8 million refugees within and outside its borders. UN representative: refugees live in situation of "invisibility" The situation in Colombia has received a degree of invisibility both abroad and within the Colombian media as the years of armed conflict have dragged on.

John Fredrikson, the UNHCR representative in Venezuela, said in June that the Colombian situation "is complex, it is many years old, and people tend to normalize it." This "creates a situation of invisibility" for the displaced population, said Fredrikson to Spanish news wire service EFE.

"The conflict in Colombia has lasted many years, and there is still no security for the people to return to their homes; for that reason the numbers of refugees and displaced have gone on accumulating," Fredrikson said. He contrasted the Colombian situation with "other world emergencies," in which "there are a greater number of refugees, but they quickly return home because the conflicts are resolved."

Fredrikson said the Colombian refugees in Venezuela were able to settle in small communities and were received well by the native communities. "In Venezuela, we have the luck that there aren't refugee camps," said Fredrikson. He said the border communities of Venezuela "receive the refugees normally." He said the refugee situation was much worse in African nations like Congo or Chad, or in Middle Eastern countries like Syria and Jordan where massive numbers of Iraqi and Palestinian refugees stress local resources.

"Latin American states have a very long history of tending to refugees, there is a very important spirit of solidarity in this region, and there are capacities for attention at the state level that don't exist in other countries," Fredrikson added.

The UNHCR official said that collaboration between Colombia and Venezuela on refugee matters was "excellent," despite the recent diplomatic conflict caused by Colombia's military attack on a
FARC camp inside Ecuadoran territory (see NotiSur, 2008-03-07 and 2008-05-09). "Despite the recent difficulties, the governments [of Caracas and Bogota] put emphasis on humanitarian attention to the people. There are political disagreements, but at the level of humanitarian assistance all of Latin American continues to have very much solidarity with the refugees," the UN official said.

**Colombia calls UNHCR numbers distorted**

President Uribe's Foreign Relations Minister Fernando Araujo disputed the UNHCR report's accuracy on June 18. "We received these figures as indicators of a phenomenon, but we cannot take them as a precise, exact fact," said Araujo, adding that the figures on displacement in the country are uncertain and in many cases are inconsistent or disparate, depending on which entity is counting them. "What's more, these figures do not reflect the causes of displacement in Colombia and that creates confusion," said Araujo.

Gustavo Valdivieso, UNHCR spokesperson in Colombia, said the high placement of Colombia on the list showed the impact of the armed conflict. "One must take into account that, in the past year alone, authorities registered close to a quarter million people as newly displaced people and one must think about how that is the size of a city," said Valdivieso. He said the government has made efforts to address displacement, but there was still a lack of action to improve attention to displaced peoples' needs.

Valdivieso said numerous studies had shown displaced people were not getting access to land and those people could not remain in the places where they had fled since conditions did not exist for them to settle there. But Luis Alfonso Hoyos, head of Accion Social, a government unit overseen by the president, said he had figures showing the government had worked well for displaced people.

Hoyos claimed more than 2.5 million people had been registered by the government as displaced between 1997 and 2008, and, of those, more than half a million had returned to their places of origin and more than 1 million had definitively integrated into the places to which they had fled.

The Uribe government is not a disinterested party in the controversy regarding displacement and its relation to the armed conflict. President Uribe won office on a pledge to crush the armed groups and has launched a crackdown since he came to power in 2002. Putting the FARC on the defensive, reducing urban crime and violence, and demobilizing thousands of paramilitary fighters have been key factors in the widespread domestic popularity that Uribe enjoys.

In an essay titled Distorted Perceptions of Colombia's Conflict, in the June 2008 edition of Colombia Journal, Gary Leech argued that the Uribe government has an interest in minimizing the impact his militarist policies are having on the Colombian population.

Leech pointed to data from the Bogota-based think-tank Centro de Investigacion y Educacion Popular (CINEP), which showed government forces committing an increasing number and percentage of human rights crimes, including forced displacement. He also pointed to numbers from the human rights group Consultoria para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (CODHES) showing increasing levels of displacement.
Leech heavily criticized the media's overdependence on the Uribe government's characterization of the conflict, since independently getting into conflict areas is often difficult or impossible for reporters. Spokesperson for CODHES Jorge Rojas argues that the image of increased security that the Uribe government constantly promotes is at odds with the reality of the high numbers of displaced Colombians.

Rojas said Colombia has greater displacement than countries like Iraq because the problem has been "chronic, sustained, and prolonged." "There has been displacement in Colombia for the past 20 years and, in the last 10, the annual average has been 300,000," said Rojas. He also noted that his group has accounted for 113,000 displaced people in the first quarter of 2008, "bringing [the total] to levels like 2002." Rojas accused the government of saying it had ended paramilitarism and was finishing off guerrilla groups instead of acting adequately to help displaced populations.

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