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Ongoing Plight of Colombia's Internally Displaced and Refugees

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The displacement of nearly 4 million people by the four-decade internal conflict that has battered Colombia since 1964 returned to the headlines with the release of two reports attesting to the harrowing reality. One report showed that in 2010 alone at least 280,000 people (800 per day, 33 per hour), mostly campesinos and indigenous, abandoned their lands and fled to the cities or to neighboring countries. The other indicated that Colombia consolidated its place as the number-one country of origin of refugees in the Western Hemisphere and competes globally with countries ravaged by the most cruel wars or famine, including Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia.

Both the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (CODHES) and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) agree on the basic data and highlight a stark irony: Colombia has the most advanced Constitution and body of laws in the world regarding protecting displaced persons, but the government is incapable of putting the norms into practice.

In mid-2010, the forced migrants' reality was the number-one issue in the television debates among the leading candidates in the last presidential campaign. But after President Juan Manuel Santos took office in August 2010 (NotiSur, July 2, 2010), the issue disappeared from the government agenda and that of the major political parties.

Nevertheless, the internal migrations are caused by three absolutely inescapable and ever-present factors that have branded the life of the civilian population in recent decades: a very active guerrilla force that even controls part of the national territory, paramilitary commandos tied to drug trafficking, and a powerful regular Army that in the heat of battle is not characterized by careful aim.

The drama of the displaced is also intimately tied to the issue of human rights and to a phenomenon that Colombians call the parapolítica. The term refers to an alliance of the conservative political leadership with the ultraright paramilitaries. Recently, that criminal connection took a new dimension when the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) sentenced to prison former senator Mario Uribe, cousin of former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) and leader of the pro-government legislative bloc during part of President Uribe's presidency (NotiSur, May 16, 2008) and (Sept. 12, 2008).

Links between displaced and paramilitaries

Jorge Rojas, director of CODHES, said that 32.7% of the 280,000 displaced—91,499 people—lived in 17 of the 32 departments into which Colombia is divided. The detail is not arbitrary; it deals with the exact areas of greatest current activity by the paramilitaries and the regular Army, which carries out a program that provides social assistance along with a very high military presence. Those areas were dominated by the guerrillas until recently.

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"The most noteworthy fact is that those persons who left their lands came from towns where the Plan Nacional de Consolidación Territorial was supposed to be applied, to which the government says that it directs a good part of US economic assistance," said Rojas.

That plan was implemented in 14 areas that encompass 86 municipios in the 17 critical departments. An integrated action plan by the state should have been developed to emphasize overcoming forced displacement, protecting human rights, seeking reconciliation, overcoming poverty, and consolidating development. But the state continues to be absent.

The agency said, "Paramilitarism, represented by the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), remains a regrettable reality," even though Uribe negotiated a supposed demobilization with them that included reduced sentences or even a pardon for crimes committed.

Rojas said that CODHES still lacks the final data regarding which groups were responsible for the displacements in 2010, but he said that preliminary information indicates that the responsibility fell, first, on the paramilitaries, and then on the guerrillas and the public forces.

However, Rojas said that the tendency to displace the population is part of the paramilitaries' routine strategy to thus deprive the former inhabitants of their lands and other possessions.

An Associated Press story said that "after more than 30,000 paramilitaries turned in their weapons (NotiSur, Dec. 19, 2003) and (July 22, 2005) as part of a negotiation with the government [in 2003], many rearmed and continue committing crimes because they are not going to easily let go of the spoils taken in the dirty war of the 1990s."

They formed new commandos with names such as Los Uruabeños, Los Paisas, Los Rastrojos, and Las Águilas, among others.

The government admits the reality, but its number regarding the displaced is less than that of CODHES, whose calculations are all based on its own information and, occasionally, that of UNHCR and groups linked to the Catholic Church.

**Few refugees recognized as such**

In a report released Feb. 16 in Bogotá, CODHES also said that 389,753 Colombians are scattered throughout the world, but the majority have been unable to acquire refugee status.

"Despite their lack of visibility and the little known about their conditions, Colombian refugees throughout the world represent 11.7% of all Colombians living abroad; thus for every 10 Colombians outside the country, at least one is a refugee or is living in conditions similar to those of a refugee," said the agency.

The document cites a UNHCR statistic to show that only 29% of the total (some 115,000 people) have the benefits of refugee status. Some 46% of those recognized as refugees live in neighboring Ecuador, and the remaining 54% live in the US, Canada, Costa Rica, Argentina, Panama, and Venezuela. In recent weeks, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and New Zealand also opened their doors to refugees.

The case of Ecuador points to a troublesome consequence. Counting Costa Rica, Argentina, and Panama, 80% of Colombians who emigrate go to other underdeveloped countries scarcely prepared...
to receive them and where they generate an overload of needs that cannot be met, especially in work, health, education, and housing.

In the past two months, UNHCR did a survey of the situation of the internally displaced (in Medellín, the second-most-populous city in Colombia, and in Soacha, a barrio on the outskirts of Bogotá) and of those who emigrated to Ecuador. António Guterres, former prime minister of Portugal and current UN high commissioner, said they had come away with "important lessons" from those visits.

Many displaced Colombian indigenous said that they lost not only their homes and their lands when they fled but also their culture, their language, and their wisdom, acquired through thousands of years of living with nature. The UNHCR Web site includes the moving testimony, a powerful metaphor, of an indigenous woman who now barely survives in Medellín. "If a woodcutter is looking for wood in the forest and his leg is trapped under a tree, he has two options—either cut off his leg or die there. He chooses the first. That is our experience as displaced people: in fleeing, a part of oneself remains behind," said the woman.

"After fleeing from the conflict, the displaced find everything except security in Medellín. The barrios are controlled by armed bands, and the level of violence, including in supposedly safe places, such as schools, is very high. Many women and girls are victims of sexual violence or have to sell their bodies to survive," said a researcher from the University of New South Wales, Australia, and a UNHCR collaborator in the rounds of the Diálogo Regional sobre Mujeres y Niñas organized by the UN agency.

In Ecuador, after verifying that an average of 50 Colombians a day are crossing into the country—doubling the number of displaced in the past two years—Guterres promised some economic assistance from the agency to help in resettling the refugees. But he did not pass up the opportunity to remind President Santos, "Don't expect everything from this border population who show a great solidarity and even share their land and their few possessions with the refugees."

After celebrating that at the end of February the situation eased with the departure from Ecuador of 1,000 Colombians who will be accepted by the US, Canada, New Zealand, Brazil, and Chile, the high commissioner addressed the Bogotá government directly and harshly. "UNHCR expects that Colombia also do something, that it offer safe and dignified conditions for the return of its refugees, but I must say that at least thus far, regrettably, a plan oriented toward return is practically nonexistent."

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