

March 9, 2007

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Colombia: Increasing Violence Requires More Security, Humanitarian Services

Violence in Colombia is continuing and even escalating in various parts of the country, despite growing government rhetoric that it is gaining control over the internal conflict that has plagued the nation for the past four decades.

Refugees International (RI) teams visited Nariño and Chocó departments in June 2006 and February 2007 and found that security conditions have seriously worsened. As a result, increased civilian displacement in the coming months is likely and Government authorities are unprepared to respond adequately.

Growing Violence Increases Displacement

Civilians continue to flee their homes due to newly formed narco-paramilitary groups entering their lands and ordering people to leave. The displaced are also subject to violence upon return. Since the June 2006 displacement from the Remolino demonstration in Nariño (see:<http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/8952/>), and the subsequent return of these communities to areas north of the provincial capital, Pasto, 70 people have been assassinated and 17 have disappeared, confirming threats made by paramilitaries in the area to those accompanying the returning convoys. In February 2007, the RI team visited the municipality of Samaniego, south of Pasto, and found that 8 people had been killed over the course of one weekend. These deaths were attributed to a new paramilitary group, 80 members strong, who are in the process of establishing themselves in the town.

In addition to conflict due to resurgent paramilitary groups, fighting has intensified for control of strategic territory used for cultivating, harvesting, processing and transporting coca to international markets. Samaniego, Nariño is the site of fighting between two left-wing guerilla groups - the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Force of Colombia) and the ELN (National Liberation Army) over drug resources. The Bajo Baudó region of Chocó is the scene of drug-related fighting between the FARC and the ERG (Guevarista Revolutionary Army). Fighting for similar reasons is also occurring between the FARC and paramilitary groups throughout Nariño and Chocó. Multiple reports indicate that combatants are driving entire indigenous and Afro-descendant communities out of contested areas, a tactic that crowds nearby villages and towns. In these contested areas used for growing coca, the national army has also begun to bomb and fumigate as part of its eradication program. These actions are also causing displacement as farmers are driven from spoiled lands.

According to official figures, violent crimes increased 13% in Nariño in 2006 in comparison to 2005. Multiple officials reported to RI that these are very conservative figures, and they estimate that the real death toll could be up to six

times higher. Additionally, the alarming spread of new paramilitary groups seems to have benefited from army and police complacency, both of which are avoiding confrontation. Crimes committed by these new armed actors remain uninvestigated and the perpetrators impugned.

“A Time Bomb About to Explode”

Humanitarian aid workers in Colombia are now referring to multiple crises in the country as time bombs. Contrary to official government statements, multiple conflicts are raging throughout the country. The roots of these conflicts are expanding, and do not represent only battle between government forces and guerilla rebel groups. Rather, there is growing violence among left-wing guerilla groups, additional fighting between guerilla groups and resurgent paramilitary groups, and additional conflict involving the army. As a result, civilians are being caught between quickly changing actors – and being put at increasing risk as different armed groups enter and leave their communities.

In Nariño, 30 massive displacements [massive meaning displacement of more than 50 people] happened last year with additional 8 massive displacements in the first two months of 2007, bringing the total number of registered IDPs in the department to more than 54,000.

On February 15 fighting between FARC and ELN affected communities of around 2,000 people living in rural areas northwest of the municipality of Samaniego. “This is the second time we have been displaced this year. People are terrorized by the fighting and some 46 families have fled their homes to seek sanctuary in school buildings in a nearby town” said an indigenous leader. During their stay in schools, the local municipality and the church provided food and essential items. However, five days later, assistance from Acción Social, the government agency mandated to coordinate humanitarian response to the needs of displaced people, had not arrived, and reports indicated that many families had decided to return home for lack of assistance. These returnees found that landmines were laid down around their village and that fighting could erupt at any time. In the two weeks that preceded RI’s visit to Samaniego, 7 people had been injured or killed by a landmine or unexploded ordinance.

A similar situation of mounting tensions and violence also afflict communities in the San Juan and Baudó River Valleys, and along the tributaries of the Atrato River in the department of Chocó.

On April 6, 2006 more than 700 members of 5 Wounan indigenous communities from the Medio San Juan river basin fled their villages to seek security in the town of Istmina. The FARC accused 14 community leaders and teachers of being informants for the army and killed three people. The remaining people under threat, along with their families, were evacuated by United Nations agencies to Panama. In this instance, both local authorities and Acción Social failed to provide minimum levels of assistance, forcing the Church and international agencies to intervene in order to avert a humanitarian disaster. “Four children died during those two months because of epidemic diseases. We had to live crammed into four small makeshift shelters, and were forced to bathe in and cook with the polluted water of the river” said an indigenous leader. The group finally decided that living conditions were intolerable and opted to return to their villages. Since returning, the FARC has enforced tight social control over the group, and access to them has been cut off.

Throughout the month of February, more displacement to Istmina occurred from the Sipí river basin, caused by new paramilitary group activity, which has included multiple orders to villagers that they leave their houses within 8 hours. One family that was part of a group of more than 300 Afro-Colombians who arrived in Istmina on January 4, 2007 told RI: “We received some food, but only after 11 days, and it is not enough. No housing has been provided for us, and we don’t feel like we have access to medical services, education or any way to support ourselves.”

Based on solid evidence of increasing violence throughout Colombia, Refugees International recommends that:

The government of Colombia:

- ❑ Increase its efforts to protect civilians from attacks from, and displacement caused by, illegal armed groups. Its security forces should do so in full respect of international humanitarian law.

- ❑ Investigate the lack of criminal proceedings in Nariño and hold those who commit crimes against civilians accountable. Alleged links between the Colombian army, the police and paramilitary groups should be investigated immediately, and arrest and prosecution should follow where investigation warrant.
- ❑ Provide additional resources to departmental and municipal authorities to strengthen their capacity to respond to the housing, health and education needs of displaced families.

Acción Social:

- ❑ Preposition food and non-food items in the cities of Istmina and Pasto in order to allow for a quickly accessible supply of goods for newly displaced groups. Closely monitor the provision of basic services to beneficiaries by its partners and local authorities.

Departmental and municipal authorities:

- ❑ Prepare contingency plans to respond to new displacement. Plans should include the creation of dignified temporary housing, identification of cultivable lands for displaced households, and increase the response capability of local providers of basic services.
- ❑ Create safety networks for particularly vulnerable displaced households such as women-headed households, orphans and the elderly, including sustained psychological services.
- ❑ Allocate resources for the implementation of these plans and execute them when needed.

Advocates Sean Garcia and Andrea Lari just completed an assessment mission to Colombia.