

## Victims, the floor is yours!

With UNHCR's help their voices are heard in the peace process



Colombian IDP. Photo: J. Samaniego/UNHCR

When the cylinder bomb went off, 120 men, women and children were hiding in a church in Bojayá (Chocó department). They all died on the spot while the battle raged between FARC rebels and another irregular armed group in 2002. Twelve years later, Juan Sánchez,\* a leader of this community, sits at a table with FARC members. He conveys the untold suffering and grief they went through. And he describes the displacement that followed the murderous attack.

Sánchez is a representative of the families that survived and returned to Bojayá, one of some 2800 victims from different regions around the country - journalists, political leaders, peasants, Afro-Colombians, indigenous people - who participated in fora at the explicit request of the Colombian Government and the FARC to convey the plight of the victims. Both parties to the conflict sought recommendations from them on how best to ensure respect and guarantee of their rights.

In June 2014, the parties asked the UN and the National University in Bogotá for help. UNHCR actively supported the idea of allowing victims to be heard in several ways. It facilitated teleconferences with refugees and exiles from over 20 countries so that they could give their testimonies and proposals to the negotiators. The huge number of victims, officially over six million, the many human rights violations and the varied group of perpetrators made the identification of participants to the fora a complex endeavour. UNHCR, with its decades-long experience and extensive field presence, enabled the organization of regional fora in the cities of Villavicencio, Barrancabermeja and Barranquilla. The results were presented at a National Forum on Victims in Cali and were officially delivered to the peace talks in Havana, Cuba, in September.

UNHCR staff also accompanied 42 victims to Havana, where they recalled their tragedies but also felt a sense of restored dignity through courageous and moving face-to-face encounters with their victimizers.

María Zabala was one of the 42, a displaced woman who witnessed the assassination of her husband and son in Tumaco (Nariño Department), buried them with her own hands to protect their corpses from vultures, and escaped with her other children to Bogotá, leaving behind her

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home, community and the sea breeze she loved so much. In Cuba, Zabala and other victims asked that a tree be planted as a symbol of pain endured and the hope for peace. “Hope is what we never lose,” she said.

Peace dialogue discussions in Havana on the restoration of victims’ rights have been an important step in what many believe will be the start of a difficult national reconciliation process.

Adriana Buchelli & Manuel Oviedo

\*Name changed for confidentiality reasons



With seed capital, this Colombian asylum seeker in the outskirts of Panama City started his own business to support himself and his family. Photo: R. Schönbauer/UNHCR

## Fresh start

### Microcredit and seed capital help refugees rebuild their lives

On a good day they make USD 400: Colombian refugees Cristóbal López Isaza and Stela Sánchez Aldana are successful in Panama’s tourism industry – she is a tourist guide, her husband shows small groups of visitors around Panama City or the Canal in his own van.

But it wasn’t always like that. A few years ago, they were forced to leave everything behind and fled Colombia with their son. They weren’t able to bring anything with them. In Panama, they urgently needed something to live on. So they tried lasagna – Stela Sánchez prepared it, Cristóbal López sold it in internet cafés. And they barely got by with the small profits. “One day,” she clearly remembers, their lives took a turn for the better. “I saw an advertisement looking for people who spoke English and French. And I spoke both.” So she became a freelance guide for bus tours.

Her husband, a former car salesman, did occasional maintenance work until one day, a client from the U.S.A. gave him his old limousine. This unexpected present allowed him to earn a living by providing limousine service with a driver-guide - López developed his own business model. Even though this improved their economic situation, to do business with tour operators López needed to buy a van, but he didn’t have the money.

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Fortunately, a microcredit scheme made possible through an agreement between UNHCR and the Panamanian Red Cross was the solution. “This support requires a sound business idea and is meant to help refugees to help themselves,” explains UNHCR’s Senior Regional Protection Officer Eva Camps. *Microserfin*, the company that administers revolving funds (a total of USD 35,000 starting in 2008), gave López a first credit of USD 500 and subsequent ones of up to USD 1,500 at very low interest rates. In combination with a small commercial credit, he managed to buy the van he needed and began to do business with the most prestigious tour operators in the city. Later, he went a step further and founded his own tour operator. “I called it ‘Vive Panamá’ in gratitude to Panama. And I am grateful to UNHCR for opening a door to a different life for me.”

UNHCR has significant experience using microcredits to promote refugee integration. In Costa Rica, 877 persons received a total of 1,523 micro-credits since 2002. In this period, the initial capital was reused 3.5 times. The programme, in partnership with the Development Professionals Association, benefits mainly Colombians with business plans, services or small industry. On average, a project creates two jobs.



Microcredit helped Cristóbal López become a successful entrepreneur in the booming tourism industry at the world-famous canal in Panama. Photo: R. Schönbauer/UNHCR

Microcredit helped give Cristóbal López and his family a fresh start in Panama. But microcredits are not the best fit for all people in flight. When basic needs are unmet, one cannot expect the person to be able to pay back credit. Such was the case for Alberto Jiménez,\* who, like López, used to sell cars in Colombia before he was forced to flee three years ago.

Jimenez who hopes that he and his wife Marta Molero\* will be granted refugee status soon, recalls how they had no choice but to sleep on the floor when they arrived. Left without belongings, they, too, started to prepare food for sale on the streets, remembers Jiménez. “Yes,” giggles his wife Marta Molero, “but the first tortilla that you made was horrible!” Stuffed potatoes or empanadas were more promising dishes to make a decent living, but they needed a grill. Fortunately, seed capital provided through UNHCR’s partner, the Red Cross, allowed them to buy a grill and to get back on their feet. “I thank God who used you to give us humanitarian help,” says Jiménez with a bright smile to welcome visitors of both organizations who have come to follow-up on the results of their small business. “Little by little,” says the asylum-seeker, gesturing at a humble rented dwelling on the outskirts of Panama City, “we managed to buy a bed and a fridge.”

Roland Schönbauer

\*Name changed for protection reasons

## Searching for freedom in three continents

**Human Inside:** Via Venezuela, a young Afghan woman finds a new home in Sweden



Sold at the age of 14 for USD 20, Farida decided to take control of her own life, finally finding freedom through resettlement. Foto: A. Marcellan/UNHCR

The story of Farida Hangama\* a 24-year-old Afghan woman, starts in Iran. Born in a camp to Afghan refugees she could not be enrolled in school because her family was too poor. Her childhood memories include the severe beatings that her mother suffered from her opium-addicted father. When Farida was just 14, her father sold her into marriage to a young Afghan refugee for USD 20.

A few years later, she is a mother of three boys but the family was torn apart. Her husband left Iran since they did not have access to employment or education. He made his way alone to Venezuela where he was recognized as a refugee in 2010. Meanwhile, his wife was sewing clothes and cleaning houses to support her sons, her widowed mother and four siblings.

In December 2012, her husband went back to Iran to take the family with him to Venezuela. To do this, they crossed back into Afghanistan. Then, they fled from Kabul to Venezuela via Dubai, Moscow and Havana.

Although the UN Refugee Agency facilitated the enrollment of the boys in school, it was not easy for the uprooted Afghans to integrate into the Venezuelan society. Language meant a huge barrier for them. One day, using sign language and with the help of an interpreter, Farida Hangama approached the UNHCR Office to reveal that her husband was physically abusing her.

In light of her serious situation, with no perspective for integration and continued risk at home for her and the three under-aged children, UNHCR assisted her to seek resettlement in a third country. One year after their suffering had started in South America, a Northern European country accepted this family for resettlement. In Sweden they found freedom from violence. In January 2014, Farida Hangama and her boys began adapting to a new culture. Asked about her plans, she said: "I would like to share my story. Girls should remain girls and not be forced to become women before the time is right. My wish is that no other girl has to endure the ordeal that I went through."

Madeleine Labbiento & Alba Marcellan

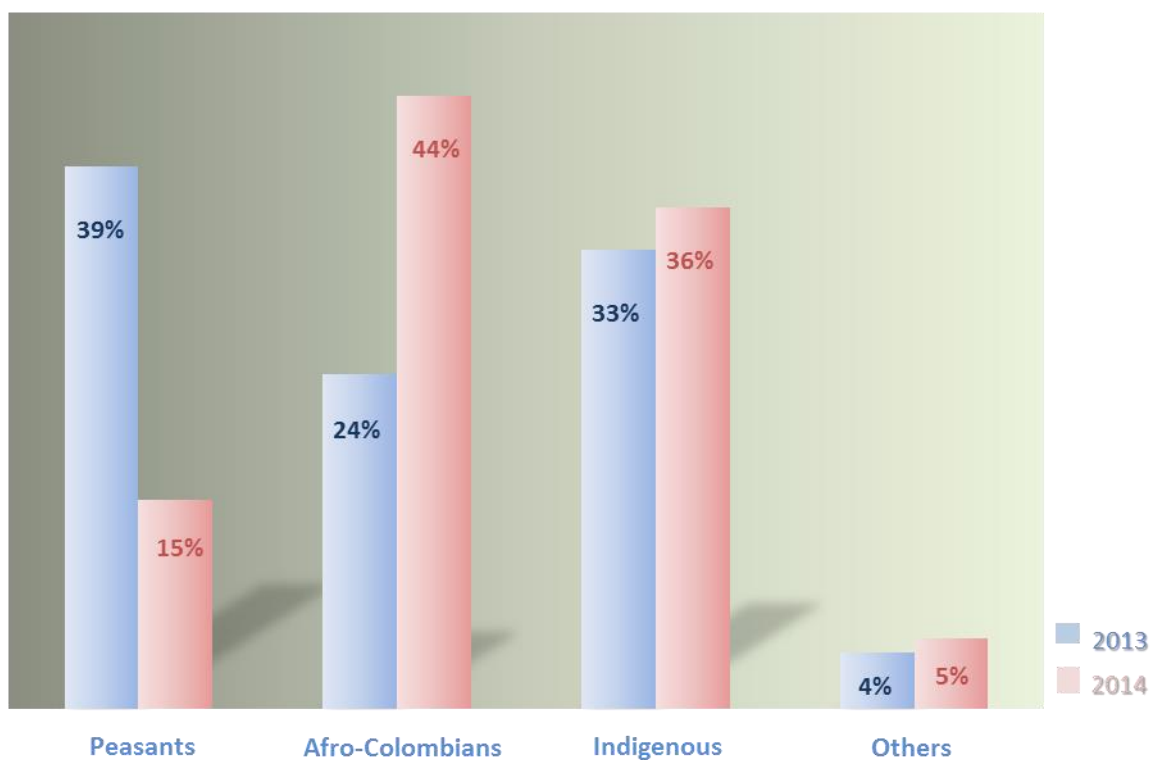
\*Name changed for privacy reasons

**Note the quote**

“All parties to the conflict have to respect the collective rights of the indigenous peoples.”  
 UN Resident Coordinator in Colombia, Fabrizio Hochschild, condemning the killing of two leaders of the Nasa people in the Cauca Department by FARC rebels. Source: UN press release, 6 November, 2014.

**Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups are disproportionately affected by displacement**

Fewer mass displacement events in the first ten months of 2014 (55 compared to 83 in 2013)



Sources: UNHCR Field Offices, media, authorities

Note: Mass displacement events are considered as such when involving more than fifty persons

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