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## COLOMBIA: IDP RESPONSE REQUIRES GREATER LOCAL ACTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The government of Colombia's response to the humanitarian needs of internally displaced people continues to show serious gaps despite increases in funding and planning at the central level. These advances have not translated into concrete results locally, and municipalities receiving high numbers of people fleeing violence and fighting are failing to prepare properly for expected displacements, provide adequate humanitarian assistance when they occur, and assist those displaced residing for years in their areas. The Colombian government needs to follow existing humanitarian response procedures with the active contribution of affected communities, and in close coordination with the United Nations and other non-governmental actors.

### *Local Structures, Strategic Planning and IDP Leadership*

The Colombian government must take better advantage of structures that were created expressly to respond to the needs of displaced people. It should redouble its work with the Territorial Committees for Comprehensive Attention to Displaced People, which are responsible for preparing departments and municipalities to provide humanitarian responses to recent and long-term displaced households. Too often, mayors fail to chair these committees, as required by law, and junior officials are tasked with this responsibility, a clear indication of the low priority of the displaced.

Refugees International has heard repeated reports that when sessions are held, IDP leaders often have difficulty ensuring that their concerns are incorporated into the agenda. Similarly, decisions undertaken during committee sessions are rarely implemented as agreed. These committees jump to respond during massive displacement crises (defined as more than 50 people at once), often in response to public pressure and their high international visibility. The response is reactive, however, and rarely the result of adequate contingency planning. These same committees often fail to plan for and adequately respond to the steady flow of less visible individual, single family, and intra-urban displacements – cases which represent the majority of displacement in Colombia.

Local officials are also required to prepare area plans that respond to the needs of the displaced. Single Integrated Plans are supposed to elaborate the needs of the displaced, and the appropriate response, as well as earmarking resources for implementation. While the development of such plans would seem to be a necessary first step in areas of heated conflict and high insecurity, they rarely exist. This has been the

### Policy Recommendations

1. Colombian local administrations improve the functioning of territorial committees for displaced people, prepare adequate contingency plans and set aside adequate resources for their implementation.
2. Local administrations prepare mid- and long-term development plans that include specific provisions to improve the social and economic conditions of displaced groups, and ultimately plan for their successful integration in host communities.
3. The Colombian government and international donors provide training and greater resources to strengthen IDP organizations in order to increase the effectiveness of their participation in policy making bodies and improve their capacity to defend and advocate for their rights.
4. The Colombian government and international donors, including USAID, should make accountability of contractors and implementers a policy priority, instituting an effective monitoring, evaluation, auditing and stake-holder surveying process.

case in the departments of Nariño and Chocó, where the last two years have been marked by a sequence of massive displacements in which thousands of Colombians have been forced to flee their villages.

The Territorial Plans for Development should detail new housing programs, the provision of basic social services, the restructuring of local economies and local investments. These also must take into account the specific needs and aspirations of the displaced population. Otherwise, hundreds of thousands of Colombians will remain excluded from and marginalized by the host community.

In many parts of the country the displaced have created Municipal Committees of the Displaced Communities to coordinate their self-help activities and advocacy actions. These committees potentially provide an effective way to engage authorities. Their contribution is essential in the formulation of Single Integrated Plans and Territorial Plans for Development as they have intimate knowledge of the needs and aspirations of their communities, but local authorities too often sideline or disregard the Municipal Committees. The committees themselves must be strengthened to increase their ability to successfully interact with government officials, and would benefit from improved organizational structure, project management training, and access to small operational grants.

At the local level, humanitarian organizations can facilitate dialogue between beneficiaries and the authorities regarding strategic planning. At the regional level, meetings of representatives of member agencies of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) have the potential to produce better coordination among humanitarian actors and closer collaboration with regional branches of Acción Social. Through the IASC, IDP leaders, IASC members and local Acción Social officials can engage mayors and the local administrations to ensure that they fulfill their mandated responsibilities.

### **Greater Accountability Needed**

*“Helping the internally displaced is good business in Colombia. It’s a shame that the displaced are often left out of the transaction.”*

*–Displaced person living in Medellín. December 2007*

In the past five years, the Colombian government has increased its budget for assistance to its internally displaced population four-fold. The Colombian agency responsible for attending to the displaced, Acción Social, has recently shown greater sophistication at national level for planning emergency responses to massive displacement, and in proposing solutions for the long-term integration of displaced people into the communities where they settle. Similarly, the US government has dedicated, on average, \$40 million per year for displaced people in Colombia since 2003.

While these gains are commendable, Refugees International has found that too few of these resources actually reach displaced people, a reality which creates anger and resentment over rampant corruption and the misuse of funds. In order to capitalize on the national-level gains, Colombia must now focus on providing effective monitoring, evaluation, and auditing of its programs for the displaced.

The build-up of resources in a relatively short time has spawned a network of contractors and sub-contractors to provide services to the displaced population. These implementing agencies are mainly comprised of local organizations of varying age, size, and sophistication, which implement grants from Acción Social and US-funded contractors, often at the same time. RI has seen excellent examples of local agencies effectively serving displaced communities, but the largest complaint RI receives directly from the displaced is that the services that were promised to them (and in some cases derived from Acción Social and USAID monies) were not delivered as promised, or never arrived at all. RI has documented claims of mismanagement, misuse of funds, and corruption in the management of IDP projects in all five territorial departments that RI staff visited in 2007.

The prevalence of complaints of malfeasance suggests that monitoring, evaluation, and auditing mechanisms are not adequate to identify problem partner agencies. In one particularly glaring case, the USAID contractor in Medellín was not aware that one of its sub-contractors was currently the subject of investigation by the Inspector General for alleged misuse of funds. While monitoring of financial records is standard, and evaluation of the efficacy of projects is common, RI was unable to identify any independently-led evaluation process that included stake-holder surveys. Given claims of falsification of documentation, coercion of beneficiaries, manipulation, and denial of services, beneficiaries must be independently consulted on a regular basis to ensure that they are receiving the services promised to them.

A three-tiered approach must be used provide effective oversight of Colombian implementing agencies. First, Acción Social must strengthen the capacity of its internal auditing offices to carry out effective monitoring, evaluation and auditing of all its contractors. Second, the Colombian government should strengthen the agencies of the Public Ministry, and especially the Investigator General’s office, to prosecute blatant cases of corruption and mismanagement of IDP-targeted funds. Third, international agencies which also use local contractors should improve their monitoring, evaluation, and auditing capacities in a systematic fashion to ensure the maximum return for their investments. In all cases, if internal investigations find evidence of legal malfeasance, the matter should be turned over to the Investigator General for further action.

*Sean Garcia and Andrea Lari assessed the internal displacement situation in Colombia in December 2007.*

## CASE STUDY: TUMACO, NARIÑO

Located at the southern end of Colombia's Pacific coast, the city of Tumaco is currently experiencing some of the worst violence in the country. As a port town, armed actors are fighting for control of this geographically strategic point, especially as a transport route for drug trafficking. Tumaco remains isolated from the rest of the country, and is seriously underdeveloped. Over 20,000 displaced people have sought refuge in Tumaco, fleeing intense fighting all along the Pacific Coast of Nariño.

- ❑ **Tumaco is the epicenter of violence in Nariño.** With a population of 160,000, Tumaco has one of the highest murder rates in Colombia – largely due to fighting between illegal armed groups. In 2007, Tumaco was poised to have a death rate approaching 200 murders/100,000 residents. The average murder rate across Colombia is 38 murders/100,000 people.  
The department of Nariño experienced at least 27 massive displacements in 2007, affecting over 15,000 people. Tumaco's displaced community continues to grow as a result.
- ❑ **Living conditions for the displaced are disastrous.** Tumaco is located on a series of islands that hug the Colombian coast. The islands are predominantly low-lying mangrove swamp, and are already densely populated. Displaced communities are pushed to the most undesirable land in tidal areas. Homes must be built on stilts to avoid regular flooding, but exceptional rains still cause frequent flooding. Homes are built from scrapwood that displaced people must scavenge or barter for. There are no sanitation systems, water systems or other basic services in these communities, and current living conditions in these areas represent a severe public health threat.
- ❑ **The international community has almost no presence in Tumaco.** The International Organization for Migration has one staff person present, but RI was not told of any other international NGO currently with a permanent presence in Tumaco. However, some organizations have minor operations remote controlled from Pasto, the department capital. Despite general acknowledgement that Tumaco needs help from many agencies RI spoke with, few had plans to actively address the growing crisis.
- ❑ **Local and national government structures are failing displaced people.** The outgoing mayor of Tumaco, had made repeated public statements that there is no displacement problem in his city. Rather, displaced people fleeing violence are considered as economic migrants looking for jobs. As a result, immediate emergency assistance (the responsibility of the host municipality) is not provided to IDPs. There is no indication what the position of the new mayor, Nectalí Correa, who took office on January 1, 2008, will be.  
Tumaco does not have a functioning UAO (Unidad de Atención y Orientación, or Center for Attention and Orientation), which is responsible for registering displaced people and connecting them with service providers. Currently, Tumaco officials, working out of the Casa de la Mujer building, only have the capacity to register four displaced people per day, ensuring that the vast majority of IDPs in Tumaco have no access to legally guaranteed services.  
Acción Social, the presidential agency responsible for providing services to displaced people only has one full time staff person based in Tumaco, who must cover not only Tumaco, but all 10 municipalities on the Pacific Coast of Nariño. IDPs report being treated badly or being denied services outright by Acción Social.  
The closest distribution center for emergency supplies to Tumaco is in Cali – over 500 kilometers over bad roads away. Food and other emergency supplies often arrive late, and there have been multiple reports of food spoiling before it can be distributed.

## CASE STUDY: MEDELLIN, ANTIOQUIA

Colombia's second-largest city, Medellín, is also home to at least 110,000 displaced people. In recent years, it has been looked to as a model of how to address the needs of displaced communities. Despite the creation of innovative systems by the local government, many of the displaced still report difficulty in accessing services. The fact that the metropolitan area is also divided between multiple municipalities also means that only residents of Medellín properly benefit from these progressive policies; residents of other municipalities, such as Bello, suffer from inattentive bureaucracies and mismanagement.

- ❑ **Medellín is using an integrated and publicly accessible model for working with IDPs.** The local UAO (*Unidad de Atención y Orientación*, or Center for Attention and Orientation), which is responsible for registering displaced people and connecting them with service providers, has representatives from a wide range of municipal and federal agencies on the premises, and conducts both orientations for the displaced as well as individual case interviews. They are then matched directly with relevant service providers during their first visit. The UAO also has mobile teams that go into the community to register individuals who would otherwise not visit the UAO's headquarter facilities. This model should be replicated throughout Colombia, and immediately expanded to other municipalities in the metropolitan area of Medellín.

Medellín has dedicated significant municipal budget resources to addressing IDP needs. At the time of Refugees International's visit, the Municipal Council had just approved a comprehensive policy document outlining strategies on prevention of displacement and protection and assistance for displaced people.

- ❑ **IDP leaders in Medellín feel isolated from governmental structures, and need support in developing organizational capacity.** Though the official committee to develop Single Integrated Plans include IDP leaders, a growing number are resigning or distancing themselves from the process, feeling that they are just rubber stamps. The Municipal IDP Committees, which are representative community-based organizations, receive scant funding or technical support in their attempts to document the needs of their communities.

IDP leaders have also received multiple death threats. New illegal armed groups have increased their presence in neighborhoods where the displaced congregate, aiming at social control through extortion and intimidation. Police presence is minimal and greater insecurity and targeting of IDP leadership have led to a sharp rise in secondary displacement within the city.

- ❑ **Conditions in IDP communities are poor.** Many IDP communities are marginalized at the fringes of the urban area, and live in precarious hillside shacks that are prone to mudslides. While some basic services reach these communities, such as electricity, education, and informal transportation, housing is still inadequate, and often lacks running water and sanitation. Alarming, conditions are only marginally better than those found in IDP communities in areas without resources, such as in Quibdó, Chocó.
- ❑ **Corruption and mismanagement mar the provision of services to the displaced.** Refugees International received constant complaints from displaced people that services such as job training and the provision of emergency services were poorly implemented. IDP leaders are able to identify multiple contractors, funded by both Acción Social and USAID contractors, that have misappropriated or otherwise abused resources destined for displaced people based on community surveys. Medellín's Inspector General was often aware of these claims, and has subpoenaed information from local contractors on multiple occasions. Despite the seriousness of these problems, neither Acción Social or USAID's local implementing partner had yet taken disciplinary measures at the time of RI's visit.