

October 11, 2005

Contacts: Andrea Lari  
ri@refugeesinternational.org or  
202-828-0110

## Colombia: Alternatives to Coerced Returns Needed for Internally Displaced

Colombians who were forced to abandon their villages after being targeted by armed groups are still returning to unsafe areas with little support, leaving them under constant threat of new displacement.

The implementation of the Government of Colombia's democratic security policy is putting civilians in danger while civilian authorities in charge of accompanying returnees are failing to provide them with promised basic services. Due to the persistence of the internal conflict in areas of return, displaced groups should have the opportunity and support to either resettle or integrate in safe areas, whether rural or urban. Additionally, greater support should be provided to communities which are developing internal mechanisms to resist displacement and opt to relocate in safer areas within their own territory.

The Colombian Government considers return as the most preferable solution, particularly to recent displacements. But returns must be voluntary and implemented in full respect of the principles of safety and dignity. Lack of economic opportunities in urban settings, conditionality of receiving additional assistance, and excessive leadership of the army in the promotion and implementation of the returns are making returns a coerced process.

In September Refugees International visited several villages along the river Buey, a tributary of the river Atrato, in the Pacific Coast Department of Chocó. The residents had returned recently home after living three difficult months in the city of Quibdó. One villager told RI, "Before the displacement we were living well, we could hunt and cultivate our land freely. In Quibdó, we had no way to find money to survive, we did not know how to find a job in the city." He added, "We received food assistance for three months and

then they [the authorities] said we could only get more assistance and compensation for what we lost if we returned home."

The Colombian Army is taking a questionable leading role in the returns of the displaced, which were supposed to be led by the Social Solidarity Network, the governmental agency in charge of coordinating the response to forced displacement. A humanitarian official said to RI, "Returnees from Bellavista on the river Bojaya were loaded on military boats and taken back to the villages."

In many cases areas of return remain unsafe and communities are still susceptible to attacks and persecution from those engaged in the conflict: the left wing guerilla army FARC, the AUC paramilitary units and also the national army. "We are back at home but we have a lot of fear about what can happen. The FARC are still operating around us and they have already killed two people of the community deeming them informants for the Army. Army helicopters keep flying above us, and we have heard of an imminent operation against the FARC," a worried villager told RI. Upon return, indigenous communities located in the lower side of the river Atrato keep facing harassment and torture at the hands of the paramilitaries. An indigenous activist told RI, "The paramilitaries accuse the indigenous of being rebels. Two [community members] were tortured by having plastic bags with water and salt put around their heads." The army is also jeopardizing the security of returnees and has been accused of several wrongdoings against civilians.

Military posts are located close to houses and even schools. In the Bajo Calima basin, the army counterinsurgency strategy is conducted through frequent acts of intimidation and unlawful detentions, sometimes of entire villages, where for hours people are interrogated and subjected to degrading treatment.

The Social Solidarity Network has made progress in analyzing the return processes, including the preparation of the Return Manual. Among other provisions, the Manual explains that state institutions should guarantee integrated assistance comprising security, protection, humanitarian help, education, health, social welfare, housing, community infrastructures, income generating activities and strengthening the presence of the state judicial system. In reality, however, the Colombian authorities consider the presence of the army to be the most important condition to guarantee security. This strategy is not working and it brings more insecurity to the communities. All displaced people interviewed insisted that what they needed from the Government is the reestablishment of basic social services instead. But promises are not fulfilled. "We were told that school teachers would return to our village but it is not happening," mentioned a returnee of the river Buey. Another villager insisted "they assured us that regular visits of the medical brigade would take place. In one month, they were here for a couple of hours, bringing very few medicines and the doctor did not even leave the boat and wanted to visit the patients from there." Besides primary health and education, restarting economic activities and access to micro-credit programs were the most requested types of help expected by the returnees. In September the Constitutional Court also noted the failure of the government response to the needs of displaced people, stating that "the status of unconstitutionality of the government policies has yet to be overcome, the implementation has been slow and insufficient as the amount of resources allocated to that purpose."

Since returns in conflict affected areas are unsustainable, more attention should be focused on alternatives, such as resettlement in safe urban or rural areas and integration in areas of refuge, and on preventative measures to reduce the risk of displacement. Those who have been displaced for years and are living a life on the edge of destitution in poor urban neighborhoods nonetheless expressed no desire to return home. They are still afraid and guard their anonymity, choosing not to register with the authorities for fear of being targeted afterwards as suspected sympathizers or supporters of the FARC. RI interviewed a displaced person in Popayan, Cauca Department who said "I fled three years ago. Here I am selling fruits in the street since I have no

land to cultivate. I am not going back but I also do not want to be registered, I hope to find a new house to settle down." In Quibdó, a leader of the displaced insisted, "We fled from the lower Atrato few years ago and the paras [paramilitaries] have taken our land. We won't return. We are very bitter since we suffered so many atrocities and humiliations. Now we have three priorities: fight for decent housing, obtain loans to develop small size economic activities and continue the process to claim our lands back."

In terms of prevention, the measures so far used, such as the early warning system managed by Ministry of Interior and Justice or the placement of community ombudsmen, have not impeded displacement. While all the protection emphasis has been on ensuring the presence of the army, internally displaced persons interviewed by RI expressed instead that what they need is the presence of the state in its social, economic and judicial dimensions. "We never saw the state helping us out with services or economic incentives for our work. They always send the army." Moreover, since after being uprooted people see their possessions and land unlawfully occupied by others or "stolen," they are trying to resist displacement and move to less strategic areas within their own territory. This is particularly true in the Chocó Department where paramilitaries have extorted properties and thousands of hectares of land through murders and intimidations, turning small plots for subsistence agriculture into big African palm oil plantations.

#### REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ The Government of Colombia refrain from promoting returns to unsafe areas. When returns are undertaken, efforts and resources should be used to reestablish both physical and socio-economic security of the communities while respecting the civilian nature of the process.
- ❑ The Government of Colombia urgently extend its social and economic services to communities at risk of displacement. When displacement occurs and returns are not feasible it should provide alternative options such as resettlement to safe urban or rural areas.
- ❑ The Government of Colombia increase considerably funding for the resettlement process of internally displaced people, as recently recommended by the Constitutional Court. This includes provision of decent housing, promotion of vocational training courses and support for appropriate economic initiatives while making credit available.
- ❑ International donors support civil society groups and churches to increase their presence within returned communities and groups at risk of displacement. Accompaniment, when coupled with support to strengthen communities' structures and leadership, is crucial to help to develop mechanisms to respond to displacement threats.

*Andrea Lari spent three weeks in Colombia in September looking at the situation for internally displaced persons there.*