

IASC-WG Meeting, 17 September 1999

Colombia Background Paper

Please find attached a background paper on the IDP situation and related coordination challenges in Colombia, based on a country mission fielded by OCHA in May 1999.

The paper contains a number of suggestions and recommendations to enhance the UN's response to internal displacement in Colombia. The IASC-WG is encouraged to promote an in-depth discussion on the above mentioned issues and suggestions, in particular with regard to strengthening coordination arrangements.

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Preface

1. OCHA conducted an assessment of the situation of internal displacement in Colombia¹. This assessment has raised a number of issues that are being brought to the attention of the IASC-WG. OCHA encourages the IASC-WG to hold an in-depth inter-agency discussion on the proposed recommendations, in particular with regard to strengthening existing coordination mechanisms. (para. 19 to 27).

Background

2. Colombia is a country torn by 40 years of internal armed conflict. The conflict-fought among the national army, leftist guerrilla and right-wing paramilitaries- has been characterised by a blatant disregard for human rights and international humanitarian law. In the course of the last ten years, more than 35,000 lives have been lost in the conflict, of which 80% were non-combatant civilians. In 1998 alone, over 1,356 civilians died in 325 massacres and 2,388² abductions were reported. Yet, despite its magnitude and its longevity, the crisis in Colombia remains largely a silent crisis and one to which the response of the international community and in particular of the UN has been insufficient.

3. Since 1984, it is estimated that more than one million Colombians - one in every 40 - have been displaced due to the conflict.

Year	Population Displaced Per Year ³	Total IDP Population	% Increase
1995	89,510	675,771	15%
1996	181,000	856,771	26%
1997	257,000	1,113,771	30%
1998	308,000	1,421,771	28%

Source: CODHES

4. The data clearly shows a steady increase of displacement with over 300,000⁴ new IDPs in the past year alone. While the primary cause of displacement is undoubtedly the generalised situation of violence - IDPs are caught in the cross fire - displacement is also used as a war strategy in an effort on the part of all armed actors to control territory. Populations are displaced to eliminate grass-root support for one or the other party to the conflict.

5. Presumed responsibilities for internal displacement is estimated as follows:

¹ An OCHA representative visited Colombia from the 19-30 May, 1999, joining the Representative of the Secretary-General on IDPs, Dr. Francis Deng, in his official country visit. The mission visited Bogotá, Barrancabermeja, Sincelejo and Cartagena¹. The mission met with Government officials at central as well as at local level, including the President, the Vice-President and the High commissioner for Peace. Discussions were held with representatives of the UN Country Team, international organisations, national and international NGOs, church groups, human rights advocates as well as with internally displaced persons themselves.

² Defensoria del Pueblo (National Ombudsmen Office).

³ Sources: CODHES, Episcopal Conference of Colombia, SISDES

⁴ Source: CODHES

Year	Para-Militaries	Guerrillas	Armed Forces	Others
1985-1994	21%	32%	27%	20%
1995	35%	26%	19%	20%
1996	33%	28%	16%	23%
1997	54%	29%	6%	11%

Source: Cohdes

6. The data underscores the steady increase of violence on the part of the para-militaries, denoting a growing 'privatization' of the conflict, whereby the conflict is increasingly fought between the guerrilla and the para-military rather than the military.

7. The victims of displacement are mostly peasants living in areas of guerrilla or paramilitary influence. It is estimated that 58% of the people forced to leave their homes are female and 55% are under-18⁵. Other victims of displacement are those who are specifically targeted such as political leaders, leaders of political opposition movements, social leaders, in particular members of unions or human rights activists and members of local human rights and humanitarian NGOs.

8. The traditional pattern of displacement has been for the displaced to move individually or in small groups. Family units relocate in silence in neighbouring rural areas and from there to urban centres. It is estimated that individual displacement accounts for over 60% of all displacement. However, displacement *en masse* has been a growing phenomenon since 1996. The displaced will often blend into the poverty belts of large cities or live with family members. However, in some cases IDPs have been concentrated in a camp-like situation.

9. On various occasions, fleeing populations have sought refuge across international borders. At the end of 1996 and in early 1997, several hundred people fled to Panama only to be forcibly returned to Colombia by the Panamanian authorities. Again in June 1999, over 3,000 Colombians crossed over to Venezuela and were subsequently repatriated. Smaller cross border movements have also been reported in Ecuador and Panama in 1998 and 1999.

Protection and Assistance Needs

10. Although in Colombia there is no common assessment of the protection and assistance needs of IDPs, it is clear that for the most part they live in dire need and have little means to re-create their livelihoods.

⁵ Episcopal Conference of Colombia

11. Among the internally displaced population there is a general lack of adequate housing, temporary as well as longer-term. Malnutrition is also a serious problem among displaced children. With regard to education, only an estimated 15% of IDP children are enrolled in school. The lack of documentation - ID cards - further limits access to basic services. The lack of personal documentation is particularly acute in the case of IDP women, many of who are heads of household, as it affects their security, as well as access to aid, shelter and public services.

12. Notwithstanding the pressing assistance needs, protection or lack thereof seems to be the crucial problem facing the displaced population in Colombia. There are no safe havens for IDPs. Displaced or returnee communities have attempted to opt out of the war by declaring themselves "communities of peace". Community members pledge not to carry arms, not to participate directly or indirectly in the warfare, and not to provide information to any of the parties to the conflict. These communities have not been respected by the armed actors, who have continued carrying out incursions and attacks.

Assistance to IDPs

13. It is estimated that, in 1997, only 54% of those forcibly displaced received some form of assistance and in 40% of these cases the assistance consisted only of food aid. Around 20% received assistance with housing and health care, less than 15% received legal aid and just over 5% received some form of education. Among displaced children, 85% do not receive primary education and only 20% have access to medical assistance.

14. The Government of Colombia (GoC) foresees 90-day emergency assistance, extendible to another 90 days. Nevertheless, to be eligible for such aid the person has to go through a process of 'certification', that usually takes several months.

15. The following is a brief review of UN agency activity in support of IDPs. UNDP assists a number of national institutions in their work on behalf of IDPs, in particular it is supporting the development of a national early warning capacity. UNICEF activities on behalf of IDPs include a project for psychosocial support to displaced children and basic health assistance to some 5,000 IDP children and families. In April 1999, a joint FAO/WFP mission was fielded to Colombia to assess the situation of IDPs and to identify their immediate needs. As a result of this mission, FAO launched an Appeal for an intervention to enable 12,000 displaced families to grow their own food and to support the settlement of 2,000 returning families. The two-year project is complementary to WFP's Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation under preparation, which has as its basic objectives to foster food security and economic recovery for the IDPs. The HCHR has an office in Bogota mandated 'to prevent abuse and provide protection' through advocacy and monitoring.

16. UNHCR is *de facto* the UN focal point on IDPs. Its presence in the country derives from a formal request of the GoC. With the concurrence of the UN Secretary-General, a limited UNHCR presence was established in June 1998. In January 1999, a Memorandum of Intention (MOI) was signed between the GoC and UNHCR setting out the scope and content of UNHCR's support, including the provision of specialised expertise and technical cooperation in all phases of displacement, from prevention through to solutions, as well as the strengthening of international cooperation and coordination of international and national efforts in favour of IDPs.

17. ICRC is, by far, the most active international organisation working on behalf of IDPs; it is also the only organisation with a countrywide field presence. Furthermore, in the context of its mandate, the ICRC has permanent contact with all the parties to the conflict. ICRC's assistance to IDPs involves the provision of kits of 90-day emergency assistance, although assistance in some cases has been prolonged to over 18 months.

Durable Solutions

18. To date, the solutions option has focussed on return. However, the expansion of the conflict, the growing violence against civilians and the incapacity of the military to control the territory make return not always a viable option and requires a proper assessment of conditions. Moreover as the possession of land is at the heart of the displacement problem, resettlement is an option to be explored on a case-by-case basis.

Issues that Require Early Attention:

Strengthening Support to National Response

19. Notwithstanding the proliferation of laws, national programmes and responsible institutions, the national response to the problem of forced displacement has been consistently deficient. The main constraints are the lack of resources, capacity and coordination between institutions, minimal accountability of responsible institutions, the de-linking of activities at central and local level, and an unclear policy at national level. The Government places all hopes on the peace dialogue as the ultimate solution for the displacement problem. Yet, the issue of internal displacement has not been included in the peace agenda, and negotiations are not advancing easily.

The UN Country Team should be encouraged to strengthen their activities in support of the GoC, in particular through programmes of technical cooperation, training, advocacy, etc. Moreover, Agencies should increasingly target their capacity building activities to departmental and municipal officials.

Promote Greater Respect for Civilians

20. The conflict is characterised by a gross disregard for IHL, HR and humanitarian intervention. The lack of safe and unhindered access poses a great challenge to the provision of assistance and protection to IDPs. Furthermore, local human rights and humanitarian organisations have been declared military-objectives by the paramilitary.

The UN Country Team should take the lead in creating humanitarian space. The UN Agencies, with designated responsibilities in the field, should enter into dialogue with all parties to the conflict, on the basis of the principles of impartiality, humanity and neutrality, to promote greater respect of IHL and HR as well as to create viable conditions for humanitarian intervention. The GoC will accept such dialogue only if carried out in a transparent, coordinated and unified manner. The UN Country Team should collaborate in developing a unified and coordinated humanitarian advocacy strategy.

Need for a Comprehensive Approach/Response based on a Common Assessment

21. In Colombia, there is no common assessment of the protection and assistance needs of IDPs nor any proposed common strategy to address such needs. While there is a wealth of information at local level, the information remains disjointed and partial. There has been little effort on the part of the GoC and the UN organisations to carry out a comprehensive analysis of the situation, identifying the needs, the gaps in response, leading to a more effective division of responsibilities. The ICRC, in 1997, conducted a review of ‘who’s doing what’ with regard to humanitarian assistance. Any coordination effort to address the needs of the displaced must begin with an accurate assessment of the scope, character and condition of displacement in the country.

The UN Country Team in collaboration with the GoC and other relief agencies, should promote a comprehensive assessment of the problem. The ICRC review should be used as a base for such assessment.

Need to Enhance Preparedness

22. The current humanitarian response on the part of the Agencies is inadequate. While there are a number of early warning initiatives, these are ineffective without an early response.

The UN Country Team should support the GoC in developing and improving early response mechanisms. Moreover, the UN Country Team should enhance its own preparedness, ensuring that it is capable of meeting future needs.

Need for a Stronger Presence of International Organisations at Local Level

23. Most of the UN agencies have a presence in Colombia, yet their scope of activities is limited by the fact, for the most part, they are based exclusively in the capital city of Bogota’.

i. Agencies should enhance their field presence in a strategic and coordinated manner. The presence of international humanitarian workers ‘watching and listening’ would in turn enhance protection of IDPs.

Need for Longer-Term Assistance and for an Integrated Approach for Solutions

24. In most cases displacement is long-term. Accordingly, attention to IDPs should not only encompass emergency assistance, but also protection and developmental aid.

Agencies should enhance medium and long-term assistance i.e. through income generation activities, micro-credit, etc. Assistance also needs to be timely and punctual, reaching the displaced moving into the cities before they blend into the urban poor.

25. Despite evident difficulties in finding durable solutions in the midst of a growing conflict, interim solutions should be further explored, tailored to the needs of particular groups and following assessments of potentials for solutions under conditions of safety and dignity in specific locations.

Agencies should systematically pursue a search for alternative solutions that will go beyond care and maintenance in the direction of self-sustainability.

Need to Strengthen Coordination Mechanisms

26. In Colombia, the lack of strategic coordination is a major constraint to an effective humanitarian response. Within the UN a coordination strategy of multiple leadership '*liderazgo multiple*' has been established under the UN Resident Coordinator (RC). In the framework of such strategy, the RC has requested UNHCR, on an informal basis, to facilitate interaction between agencies of the UN system on IDP issues. UNHCR has also been designated as the official counterpart of the GoC on issues relating to internal displacement

27. Notwithstanding UNHCR's efforts to enhance coordination and foster a common approach, there are some shortfalls in the current coordination mechanism. This is also due to the fact that UNHCR's office in Bogotá has limited human resources to dedicate to coordination. There is also a lack of interface between the Government, the UN, international organisations and national NGOs:

- i. The IASC-WG may wish to endorse the decision of the RC to invite UNHCR to facilitate interaction between agencies of the UN System on IDP issues.
- ii. The IASC-WG may wish to acknowledge the need to enhance coordination of the activities related to internal displacement in Colombia.
- iii. The IASC-WG may wish to invite OCHA to explore with the RC, UNHCR and the Country Team ways in which UNHCR's capacity to fulfil its responsibilities regarding IDPs could be strengthened.
- iv. The IASC-WG may wish to invite UNHCR to use its coordination mechanisms to promote dialogue between government bodies, civil society organisations, victims of forced displacement and humanitarian organizations.

Conclusions

28. The situation in Colombia is steadily deteriorating. The past four years have been marked by a continuous growth in the number of IDPs and increasingly displacement is occurring *en masse* as opposed to individual displacement. Although a number of relief agencies are operating in Colombia, the needs of IDPs go largely unaddressed. It is estimated that only 54% of those forcibly displaced receive any form of assistance in the first 90 days of displacement and the figure drops radically following the 90-day period as there is virtually no planned medium or long-term assistance to IDPs.

29. It is clear that the current humanitarian response on the part of the Agencies and of the GoC to the displacement crisis in Colombia is insufficient *vis à vis* the intensification of the armed conflict and the growing numbers of displaced. Furthermore strategic coordination within the UN and among national institutions, international organisation and civil society is deficient, posing a major constraint to an effective humanitarian response.

30. The IASC-WG has been designated as the inter-agency forum for dealing with problems of internal displacement and, according to its terms of reference on IDPs, is tasked with developing global strategies for ensuring *inter alia* protection for and assistance to IDPs and recommending ways and means to address obstacles in the provision of assistance to and protection of IDPs.