

COLOMBIANS DISPLACED BY VIOLENCE NEED PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has recognized Colombia as the worst humanitarian crisis in the Western Hemisphere. Since 1985, over 2.8 million people have been internally displaced in Colombia.

Colombian civilians increasingly find themselves squarely in the middle of the conflict and forced from their homes by both guerrilla and paramilitary violence. In 2002, 412,000 people were displaced by violence – over 1000 men, women and children every day.



Displaced Colombians need assistance and protection. Accordingly, the Colombian government's response should pursue--and US policy should support—this two-pronged approach.

According to the Representative of the U.N. Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons, there is a gap between official standards of protection and the reality faced by most of Colombia's displaced. Assistance is too limited in time and scope, and does little to enable displaced families to support themselves. Years after their displacement, many displaced families continue to live in shanty towns in the belts of misery surrounding Colombia's biggest cities, without regular work or education for their children.

Particularly troubling is the Colombian government's failure to take adequate protective measures to prevent the human rights and humanitarian law violations that cause forced displacement.

Colombians fleeing the country in record numbers do not always find safe haven in neighboring countries. In Venezuela, they have faced attacks by armed groups and in Panama, Colombian refugees have been forcibly deported. Most Colombians who have sought refuge in the United States lack legal status and therefore are unprotected and at risk of deportation.

Recommendations

- Protection, including from displacement, and provision of adequate assistance must be pursued in tandem.
- Greater emphasis, accountability and funding must be dedicated to the prevention of displacement. This must include insistence that all parties, the Colombian Government, illegal armed actors and U.S. funded programs are held accountable to international humanitarian law, which expressly forbids forced displacement.
- The US must hold the Colombian government accountable for improved response to the US-funded early warning system that has failed to protect communities and prevent displacement. The US should insist on the development and application of indicators (including turn-around time to alerts,

the number of alerts compared to the number of response and increase/decrease of attacks) that could monitor the effectiveness of the early warning system in preventing massacres and displacement and improve Colombian performance in this important program.

■ The US Government should support and fund the recently announced UN humanitarian plan of action for Colombia, which seeks to engage all UN agencies in a coordinated response to the protection and assistance needs of displaced Colombians. The US government should see that emergency assistance is linked to durable solutions so that internally displaced persons do not remain in unstable and in vulnerable social and economic conditions long-term.

■ The US Congress should require the US Agency for International Development to evaluate its programs for internally displaced persons in Colombia and make their findings public.

■ The US should grant Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Colombians currently in the United States. The Colombian government, the UNHCR, US and Colombian non-governmental organizations and Catholic and Protestant leaders have repeatedly stated the need for this protected status.

■ The US should expand asylum and refugee resettlement opportunities for endangered Colombians. A priority one (P-1) designation should be considered for Colombian refugees in Costa Rica. In Ecuador structures should be established to facilitate direct referrals of P-1 cases from NGOs to the United States. In addition, at-risk Colombian refugees in Ecuador, such as human rights defenders and religious workers, should be resettled under a Priority 2 designation. Additionally, the United States should pursue different available options to assist persons who are at risk inside Colombia to seek refuge outside the country.

■ It is essential that the Colombian Government develop an effective and comprehensive response to the needs of the displaced, which should include return to their communities when possible and resettlement to areas of adequate security when it is not. Resettlement or return must be voluntary and only to areas where adequate security and socio-economic support for reestablishment exists. Such returns should be carried out in consultation with the displaced communities, UNHCR and the humanitarian agencies aiding them.

■ The US and Colombian governments should support expanded UNHCR field presence in or near zones declared “safe” for return and in special security zones to assess and monitor IDP protection concerns.

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**Latin American Working Group
Colombia Steering Committee
Working Group on Displacement:**

American Friends Service Committee, Catholic Relief Services, Colombia Human Rights Committee, Jesuit Refugee Service, Lutheran World Relief, Mennonite Central Committee, US Committee for Refugees, World Vision, *Peace Brigades International

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