Colombia

The Displaced and the Forgotten

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Introduction1

“My grandmother was born during the Thousand Days. Her name was My Grandmother. She was born in the midst of a conflict. When I was born, at the beginning of the 1960s, the guerrilla army was in the process of rearming itself. But even the oldest people in Colombia know what it means to live in peace. There have always been killings of peasants, displacement, and war. In Colombia, violence has always been a way of life. Changing this reality is very difficult.”2

The person who said this, a Colombian working for an international NGO, was neither a pessimist, nor an exception among the humanitarian actors working in the worst and longest humanitarian crisis in Latin America. The crisis in Colombia is a complex conflict, in which improvements, if any, are very slow.

Indeed, since the HRF field visit to Colombia in 2007, little has changed.3 The government remains unwilling to acknowledge that there is a humanitarian crisis in the country, and in the absence of a clear articulation of the crisis, donors seem more and more reticent to fund humanitarian activities, creating huge obstacles for humanitarian agencies who are trying to respond to the needs of millions of people.

If anything, one change has been an oversimplification of the conflict in the media, which undermines the work of humanitarian agencies trying to raise awareness of the crisis. Judging by international (and national) media coverage, one would think that the conflict is simply a battle between the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas and the state, a battle which has forced the terrorists to the brink of military defeat. The impression is also given that, trapped in the middle, are approximately 3,000 kidnapped people, awaiting liberation by the Army or through humanitarian arrangements (exchanges often negotiated through the ICRC), which their families vocally demand. In other words, Colombia is made to look like the typical story of heroes and villains.

What is hidden behind the news reports is the largely untold story of a humanitarian crisis of massive proportions, a story of millions of people displaced by the conflict, torn from their lands, and languishing in poverty awaiting assistance. While the media focused on kidnappings and the diplomatic disputes between Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador, very few media outlets have mentioned the key fact that makes the

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The crisis

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The humanitarian response

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Country data (2006 figures, unless otherwise noted):

• 2007 Human Development Index: ranked 75th of 177 countries
• Population: 45.56 million
• Under five infant mortality rate: 17 per 1,000 live births
• 2007 Corruption Perception Index: ranked 68th out of 179 countries
• Population living on less than US$2 a day (1990–2005): 17.8 percent
• 54.2 percent of displaced expelled from rural areas; 69.2 percent do not wish or have been unable to return while 76.4 percent wish to remain where they live now;
• 28 of the country’s 32 departments suffered floods in May and December 2007, affecting 1,500,000.

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The Humanitarian Response Index 2008

AT A GLANCE

Colombia

• US is the main donor: US$750.5 million in bilateral assistance in 2007, of which US$145.7 million dedicated to economic and social needs, the remainder (US$604.7 million), destined for military and police assistance;
• OCHA reports 14 other donors contributed US$44.4 million in 2007; EC second largest donor (US$14.6 million); Norway (US$7.6 million); Netherlands (US$6.9 million); Germany (US$5.2 million);
• CEPF contributed US$4 million in 2007 in flood assistance.

Sources: OCHA; CODHES; Acción Social.

• Second largest number of IDPs in the world, second only to Sudan; OCHA estimates over 270,496 persons newly displaced in 2007; CODHES estimates 305,966 displaced in 2007, compared to 221,638 in 2006;
• Acción Social registered 100,000 displaced for assistance; CODHES claims only 40 to 60 percent of displaced received official recognition or consequently state aid;
• 250,000 Colombian refugees in Ecuador; 200,000 in Venezuela, 17,000 in Brazil, 13,500 in Panama, 6,000 in Costa Rica;
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The conflict in Colombia can be traced back several decades and has undergone numerous changes, including various peace processes and the development of a lucrative war economy based on the illegal drug trade. Today, the principal actors are the state, the leftist guerrilla group FARC, and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), as well as new armed groups, which have not engaged in the recent, state-sponsored demobilisation process.

Since coming to power in 2002, President Álvaro Uribe has promoted the doctrine of Domestic Security, “the real possibility for any citizen to enjoy, peacefully and without disruption, his or her right to life, to dignity, to physical and spiritual freedom.” More specifically, the objectives of Domestic Security are:

- consolidation of state control over Colombian territory;
- protection of the population;
- elimination of illegal drug trafficking in Colombia;
- maintenance of a military deterrent capacity;
- protection of land, sea and river borders;
- efficient and transparent reporting of security issues.

Uribe’s approach is closely linked to that of the United States and its support for Plan Colombia, which aims to eradicate cocaine production, eliminate the guerrilla strongholds, and consolidate the central government, while simultaneously promoting economic liberalisation and the free trade agreement between the two countries. This strong security and economic emphasis has coloured the evolution of the humanitarian crisis in the past five years.

The principal characteristic of the Uribe presidency has been to emphasise the positive at the expense of acknowledging that there is a serious humanitarian crisis. In fact, some analysts suggest that Uribe’s policies use the civilian population as a means to achieve security aims. By “involving the civilian population, particularly IDPs, in the confrontation, the state denies the principle of distinction between military and civilian actors” and in fact reaches the level of obligatory cooperation, as there is no alternative behaviour other than supporting government policy against the terrorists. In this way, meeting the needs of the population is not the objective of the state but the means through which to impose itself on its adversaries […] the processes of return for the displaced population are just one more strategy in the Domestic Security policy.”

While there has been a continuous decrease in the number of armed incidents since the election of President Uribe and, in turn, a weakening of the FARC, the government reports that, despite efforts to demobilise paramilitary groups, 1,070 military incidents were registered in 2007, an increase of more than 30 per cent from the previous year.11 In fact, there is evidence of the emergence of so-called colombianised armed groups with “the same structures, the same composition and the same motivations as the former paramilitary groups.”

Although there is no conclusive figure, the Organization of American States believes the number of these groups is on the increase.12 Legislation passed in 2005, called The Justice and Peace Law and Decree 128,13 was supposed to work towards national truth and reconciliation and to provide compensation to the victims of paramilitary violence. But two years after the law came into force, the reality is that the first 3,000 ex-paramilitaries charged have not faced serious penalties, and the vast majority have received virtually no compensation (on average about US$37 each), and less than 6 per cent have seen their cases dealt with by the Public Prosecutor’s Office. At this rate, said one critical jurist, “it will take 1,217 years to complete the Justice and Peace ‘judicial process’ for all of the victims to have their cases heard by the justice system and receive compensation.”

Similarly, although there has been progress in recent years regarding respect for human rights and international humanitarian law, as recognised by UNHCR, according to data from the CINEP, the Colombian state is responsible for more than half of the violations of human rights, compared to one-third by the paramilitary groups and 10 per cent by FARC.14 Nearly 1,000 extrajudicial killings of civilians by the army were documented between 2002 and 2007, representing a 65 per cent increase over the previous period.

Apart from recent military gains, the period of Democratic Security has resulted in more than half the total number of internal displacements registered since 1999. Once again, the reality is that military operations against guerrilla groups, in particular in the south-east of the country, have not been accompanied by the necessary assistance to the affected population.

Nevertheless, according to several sources, the government is determined to implement a public relations campaign to present Colombia to the world as a prosperous country that is safe for foreign investment.15 This image does not fit with the fact that it is the country with the second highest number of internally displaced people, the highest number of victims due to anti-personal mines, the apparent impunity for armed groups, and frequent unfavourable reports regarding human rights.

The humanitarian crisis: Civilian displacement as a tactic of war

As reported in the 2007 HRI report on Colombia, the interaction between the security objectives of the government and the interests of economic security of the guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and drug cartels, has led to the forced displacement of thousands of people each year and the expropriation and theft of land and possessions. The fluid nature of the conflict means that displacements continue at an alarming pace. OCHA estimates that over 270,496 persons were newly displaced in 2007, adding to the already staggering number of 4 million IDPs in a country with only 45.5 million people.

The figures are even higher according to the Colombian NGO COODHEC,16 which estimates that there were 305,966 people displaced in 2007 compared to 221,638 in 2006, confirming a rising trend over the past three years. In 14 departments of the country, the number of displaced people exceeded 10,000, and in two of them, Narino and Antioquia, the figures are closer to 30,000.17 Narino, the department with the highest number of displaced people, has almost all the fundamental elements of the conflict: massive deployment by the Army; the presence of paramilitary and guerrilla groups, coca cultivation, fumigations, and drug and weapons smuggling. Furthermore, Narino has a high percentage of the most vulnerable indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations, and very high levels of poverty and social marginalisation.

The areas where displacement occurs illustrate the land appropriation and population control strategies employed by the armed actors. Common strategies in the conflict include the control of territory where coca is cultivated – either for exploitation or eradication – the fight for control of drug transportation routes, and the use of landmines by the guerrillas to control the advance of the Army or the confinement of the population as a military strategy. This has become one more strategic factor and target in the fighting: 54.2 per cent of those displaced were expelled from rural areas – where they were the land owners, tenants, or simply waged labourers – of whom 23.7 per cent came from village areas and 22 percent from municipal capitals, 69.2 per cent do not wish or have been unable to return, due to the persistence of the difficulties which forced them to leave.

According to COODHEC, displacements in 2007 were characterised by “the intensification of the recruitment of youth, even en masa, by armed groups;” “thousands of families of peasants, settlers, indigenous people, and Afro-Colombian communities facing a situation in which the guerrillas, paramilitary, and drug-traffickers impose the cultivation of coca and poppies on their land, which, in turn, are an objective of eradication within the framework of military operations;” “the use of anti-personnel mines, particularly by guerrilla groups;” and the “false identification of civilians as terrorists or part of the guerrillas.”18 The strategy of forcing the civilian population to return, due to the persistence of the difficulties which forced them to leave.

The movement of the combat frontlines from the centre of the country to its borders, in particular towards the south, has caused the flight of several hundred thousand Colombians to neighbouring countries over the past decade. At present, and according to figures from UNHCR, there are some 250,000 Colombian refugees in Ecuador, 200,000 in Venezuela, 17,000 in Brazil, 13,500 in Panama, and 6,000 in Costa Rica. Of
The neighbouring countries, Ecuador has proven to be the most active in addressing the humanitarian needs of Colombian refugees. In 2007, the Government of Rafael Correa announced Plan Ecuador, “a response for peace and development to the bilateral, violent Plan Colombia,” with which it intends to meet the needs of refugees and of the Ecuadorian population in the north of the country. On the other hand, UNHCR, with three offices in Ecuador, claimed that of the more than two-thirds of Colombian refugees living below the poverty line, only 10 percent have access to decent housing and one-third are working.

Clear, one of the key issues in the Colombian situation, as in any other armed conflict, is the protection of the civilian population (Principle 3 of the GHR). However, neither the advance and seizure of territory by the Army, nor the available resources and capacity of the army itself seem to effectively guarantee this protection. In fact, the two main governmental initiatives for protection: the Threatened Person Protection programme and the Communities at Risk programme are clearly insufficient to address the problem. And none of the humanitarian actors interviewed highlighted any international donor engagement or concern with this critical issue.

The displaced are threatened not only by insecurity, but also by the risks of volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, floods, and landslides, all of which severely test not only the endurance of the affected population, but also the response of the Colombian authorities and the national and international humanitarian system. The displacement of the population has been exacerbated by the border conflict, which has led to the separation of families and the displacement of individuals. UNHCR estimates that in December 2007, approximately 1,500,000 Colombians had been displaced, with 100,000 persons displaced in the past month.

The complexity of the conflict in Colombia and the presence of a strong state have combined to create an international response largely determined by non-humanitarian factors. According to many of the agencies and organisations interviewed, there is wide recognition that although the Uribe government has, indeed, taken the lead role in providing aid, and “has proven it has the financial resources to assist the displaced,” the general view is that the government agencies responsible for humanitarian aid are “overwhelmed and under-qualified,” and “only interested in concealing the conflict and its consequences.” Some suggested that the agencies are “overfunded” and “has great external support and a very low level of requirements,” suggesting that this is perhaps because “no donor dares to criticise Uribe. Not because they trust him, but because they are afraid of (Hugo) Chávez (President of Venezuela) and wish to clip his wings.” Nevertheless, according to the same sources, the government “wishes to conceal the humanitarian crisis” and in order to do so, it must either discredit the humanitarian actors out of the country in the medium term, or, at the very least, control their activities.

There is no UN Consolidated Appeal Process for Colombia, partly due to the Colombian government to any indication of the existence of a humanitarian crisis. Nevertheless, OCHA has had an office in Colombia since 2003, to which three field offices and three satellite offices were later added. Their humanitarian coordination mission, mainly via the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), is conditioned directly by the Colombian government’s
attitude of denying and concealing the humanitarian crisis. This is a situation that ineffectively affects most of the humanitarian actors in the country, among which are UNHCR, UNICEF and UNFEM, and some 40 international NGOs, the ICRC, and several national Red Cross societies.

It is in this highly politicised context that donors find themselves making decisions about how to allocate funds for the crisis. On the one hand, the state has demonstrated that it has a degree of response capacity and resources, but refuses to acknowledge the extent of humanitarian needs, and face serious obstacles in their work. In some cases, donors have focused on longer-term development assistance, which tends to favour the consolidation the state and macro-economic issues at the expense of humanitarian assistance. Several donors are now considering directly financing the Colombian state via budgetary support, creating a scenario of ‘greater political influence of donors, but less independence for humanitarian actors.’

There is also evidence of donor fatigue, as donor and humanitarian agencies are finding it difficult to justify a continued presence and funding in a middle-income country, one which apparently has sufficient capacity and resources to meet the needs of its population. The fatigue is exacerbated by the political pressure exerted by Uribe government on the United Nations and donor countries, and the slow pace of change.

Overall, the insufficiency and impartiality of the humanitarian response, as enshrined in Principle 2 of Good Humanitarian Donorship, appears to be seriously compromised in Colombia. Despite a few grey areas in which there is movement in the international response, the majority of the humanitarian actors interviewed question the real reasons for decisions taken by donor countries, particularly the United States, with regard to their presence in Colombia.

Conclusion

The magnitude and characteristics of the humanitarian crisis in Colombia should be sufficient reason for the international community to give priority to the humanitarian response. The reality is different, both in terms of the amount of funds contributed and the media coverage of the country. The bulk of reports by different actors and the information collected by the HRAs in the field (in both 2007 and 2008) suggest that the Colombian crisis is being deliberately concealed from the eyes of the world, in part to satisfy the government’s own domestic priorities, and to present the image of a strong, competent state.

There is no doubt that Colombia shows laudable signs of being capable of progress, and this is reflected in the impressive figures regarding economic growth. However, it is even more important to consider the future of millions of Colombians who each year die, are forced to leave their homes, live under threat, are deprived of the most basic rights, or are used as weapons of war by all armed actors, without exception.

Perhaps the key to the future international response regarding the humanitarian crisis in Colombia lies in this statement by a local worker of an international NGO: “A lot is rotten, but no one says anything. There is a great deal of international support, but very few demands are made of the government. The partners should be more critical.” The Colombian state has proven that it has the financial resources to meet the needs of the displaced population, but there is still a long way to go before it proves its real commitment to assist the most vulnerable populations and ensures the effective protection of human rights. Donor countries can play a constructive role in supporting the government, but at the same time, must demand better support for the millions of people affected by the crisis.

Notes

1. The HR team, composed of Fernando Espada, Myriam Rachovsky and Nacho Willems, visited Colombia in April 2006. The opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of IAPA.
2. HR field interviews.
11. HR field interviews.

References


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