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Colombia: the right to live at home

"After 38 months building [peaceful] alternatives in the middle of the war (...) we keep advancing in our desire to return to our lands to be able to sustain ourselves with dignity." (San José de Apartadó Peace Community)

On 23 June 2000, 17 displaced families from the peace community of San José de Apartadó will return to the village of Arenas Altas, Urabá region, Antioquia department, after over three years' displacement. The first of the San José communities to return was La Unión in March 1998.

Efforts by communities in the northwest of Colombia to resist forced displacement, return to their abandoned lands or be resettled in safety represent a possible alternative to the plight of hundreds of thousands of displaced people in Colombia, Amnesty International said today releasing a report on displaced communities from the Urabá region of Antioquia and Chocó and the Medio Atrato.

"These initiatives are an exception in a situation where the vast majority of the displaced continue to live in misery and fear away from their lands," the organization added.

Since 1985, 1.5 million people -- the majority women and children -- have been forced to abandon their homes after finding themselves caught in the increasingly violent Colombian conflict.

"The right of these people to live on their lands without being drawn into the hostilities between the Colombian security forces, their paramilitary allies and the armed opposition must be respected," Amnesty International said.

"These communities -- some of which have declared themselves 'peace communities' -- are clearly indicating their non-combatant status and reclaiming their right not to be involved in the conflict."

The warring factions have never recognized this right. Rural communities have been routinely accused of being in turn guerrilla supporters or informers for the armed forces or the paramilitaries and thus exposed to violent attacks and systematic human rights violations.

"The stand made by many communities against forced displacement, or their requests to return safely or be resettled on alternative lands has increased their vulnerability to attacks from both sides of the confrontation which are intent on controlling the civilian population for strategic reasons," Amnesty International said.

"Despite their firm request for respect, both the communities and the human rights and humanitarian organizations accompanying them continue to be the target of threats and attacks," the organization noted.

Over 60 members of the community of San José de Apartadó have been killed by the security forces, their paramilitary auxiliaries or armed opposition groups since the community proclaimed itself a "peace community" in March 1997. Similarly several members of other communities have been killed during their forced displacement and as they embarked on their process of return.

"The security of returning communities depends on the parties to the conflict respecting their rights as civilians, and from a firm commitment by the Colombian authorities to this effect," Amnesty International said.

The organization is calling on the Colombian authorities to take all appropriate measures to ensure a secure return of the displaced communities. These include preventing all incursions by the armed forces, their paramilitary auxiliaries and guerrilla groups into community territories, publicly recognizing the legitimacy of the community's demand not to be drawn into the conflict and condemning all attacks against them and any statements by members of the security forces questioning such legitimacy.

"All parties to the conflict, including the armed opposition, should commit themselves to respecting the right to life of returning civilian population and to adhere at all times to international humanitarian law standards," Amnesty International said.

The organization is also calling on the international community to urge the Colombian Government to take decisive action to guarantee the safety of the displaced communities and to tackle the causes of forced displacement. Such action would require the full implementation of the United Nations' recommendations to end impunity for human rights violations, and to combat and dismantle paramilitary structures operating in alliance with the security forces.

"Only with strong action by the authorities and commitment by all actors in the conflict to respect civilian life, as well as with the adequate amount of international attention and pressure can displaced people return in safety to their homes," Amnesty International said.

Background

Mass displacement of rural communities has been a result of the counterinsurgency strategy applied by the Colombian armed forces and their paramilitary auxiliaries in the decades-long conflict against armed

opposition groups. In regions of economic relevance powerful economic interests have also played a crucial role in the displacement of the local population. For example, the paramilitary offensive that forced communities to abandon Chocó department in north western Colombia represented to a large extent an effort by economic sectors to secure possession of land in the region that had been identified as a possible site to construct an inter-oceanic canal as well as the area through which the Pan-American Highway must run to link Colombia to Panama. Armed opposition groups have also forced many civilian communities to abandon their homes. ENDS.../

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