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Colombia: More people forced to flee their homes because of the conflict

Amnesty International today denounced yet another dramatic increase in the number of Colombians forced to leave their homes because of the armed conflict and urged the warring parties to stop dragging civilians into the hostilities.

As many as 380,000 people were forced to flee their homes in 2008 alone – an increase of more than 24 percent from 2007. There are now between 3 to 4 million internally displaced people in Colombia-- the equivalent to the whole population of Uruguay -- making it one of the countries with the world's largest internally displaced populations. At least a further 500,000 are believed to have fled to neighbouring countries.

Most of the displaced are escaping violence arising from the 40-year-long internal armed conflict; many have been deliberately targeted by guerrilla groups, paramilitaries and the security forces as part of strategies designed to remove whole communities from areas of military, strategic or economic importance.

The great majority of those affected are Indigenous Peoples, Afro-Descendants and campesinos, many of whom live in areas of interest to the parties to the conflict.

“The dire humanitarian situation in Colombia is one of today’s most hidden tragedies, and belies claims by the Colombian government that the country has overcome its troubled past,” said Marcelo Pollack, Americas Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

“Until the Colombian authorities acknowledge the very real effects of the conflict, the human rights of millions of people have little chance of being protected,” said Marcelo Pollack.

Much of the wealth accumulated by the paramilitaries and their backers in politics and business has been based on the misappropriation of land through violence or the threat of violence. Some estimate that between 4 and 6 million hectares of land owned by thousands of campesinos, Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendants have been stolen this way.

Most displaced people have to flee their homes very suddenly, in situations where their lives were under imminent threat. Some become separated from their families or communities and are forced to leave taking only what they can carry. Most go on to face discrimination wherever they go and no prospect of ever being able to return home.

A displaced person said to an Amnesty International delegate in Colombia: “It was my turn to get out of the area. The violence had worn me down. The PM [paramilitaries], the army and the guerrillas are all there.

[One of these groups] sent me a note saying they were going to kill me. One night a guy with a weapon came to my house. He gave us a fright. It was 8 o'clock at night. He was up to no good. He was circling round the house with a weapon, none of the family saw him but a neighbour did. They told us, you'd better get out. I left with my family, including my eldest daughter and her son. There are seven of us altogether."

Amnesty International is urging the Colombian authorities to take effective measures to prevent forced displacement, improve the protection of civilians and to identify and return all stolen lands and other assets to their rightful owners or their families. The organization is also calling on all parties to the conflict to respect the right of civilians not to be dragged into the conflict.

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