

SURVIVING ALONE



IMPROVING
ASSISTANCE
TO COLOMBIA'S
FLOOD VICTIMS

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ABOUT REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises. Based on its field-based knowledge of key humanitarian emergencies, RI successfully challenges policy makers and aid agencies to improve the lives of displaced people. The Ken & Darcy Bacon Center for the Study of Climate Displacement was established at Refugees International in August 2009 thanks to a generous financial contribution made by Ken & Darcy Bacon just before Mr. Bacon's death. Refugees International is a Washington, DC-based nonprofit organization that was established in 1979 and receives no government or UN funding.

*Cover photo:
A boy in Atlántico
walks through
his flooded town
after torrential
rains in December
2010. The unprec-
edented flooding
affected some three
million people in
Colombia.*

*Credit:
UN Office for the
Coordination of
Humanitarian
Affairs Colombia*

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The findings in this report are based on information collected by Refugees International (RI) during a three week mission to Colombia in March 2011. The team spent several days in Bogotá and then traveled to flood-affected areas in Córdoba, Sucre, Bolívar, Magdalena and Atlántico Departments. RI interviewed government officials, UN officials, representatives of international and local non-government organizations, the Red Cross, church groups, environmental experts and individuals affected by the flooding.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past year, persistent and unprecedented rains have resulted in massive flooding in Colombia that has affected close to 3 million people. In March 2011, Refugees International sent a team to assess the situation.

This report describes significant shortcomings in the Colombian government's and international agencies' response to the disaster. While Colombia has spent decades building a disaster management framework, the severity of the emergency exposed serious flaws in the system — most notably the lack of local implementation and capacity. In light of expert projections that climate change is likely to increase the frequency and force of floods, storms and other climate-related events in Colombia, the report outlines steps to ensure Colombia is better prepared to address this threat.

At the time of RI's visit, significant numbers of people were still not receiving basic humanitarian assistance including food and water. Tragically, RI found that it was the poorest and most vulnerable sectors of society, including victims of Colombia's decades-long internal armed conflict and poor populations living in remote rural areas, who received the least amount of aid. Thousands of children had not yet returned to school. The construction of transitional shelters was abysmally slow and conditions in many shelters were appalling.

The problem was not lack of funds. The Colombian government had mobilized close to US\$500 million for emergency care, recovery and rehabilitation through *Colombia Humanitaria*, a newly created funding mechanism. But setting up this new, parallel system with a new set of actors ultimately slowed the response, leaving thousands of desperate and vulnerable people to survive on their own. The new scheme also largely ignored existing institutions responsible for responding to conflict-induced humanitarian emergencies that may have safeguarded the rights of those affected by the floods.

The response from the UN Humanitarian Country Team was also disappointing. While the Colombian government refused to allow the UN to appeal for funds to implement a more

comprehensive flood response plan, the Team's initial response was nonetheless sluggish and the commitment by various UN agencies appeared uneven. For example, no information had been collected on the number or needs of conflict-displaced people who were affected or displaced again by the floods.

The humanitarian emergency in Colombia is not yet over. Ongoing rains are expected to last through June 2011. Going forward, the Colombian government must immediately address the administrative barriers under *Colombia Humanitaria* that are hindering the prompt distribution of flood relief, and allow UN agencies with expertise in the provision of emergency humanitarian assistance to more fully support and facilitate the flood response. In addition, norms and procedures must be included in the response framework that allow victims to exercise their rights by voicing needs and participating in decisions affecting them.

Colombia's vulnerability to natural hazards — and the high probability that climate change will magnify these risks — requires both humanitarian and development actors to adapt their programs to prepare for future disasters. UN agencies should negotiate with the Colombian government to implement protection activities for people displaced by natural disasters and set aside dedicated and realistic funding.

The United States and other donor governments must also acknowledge the threat that climate change presents to an array of development priorities from economic growth to environmental sustainability to human security — not only in Colombia, but other climate-vulnerable countries as well. Development programs must therefore seek to build resilience to climate vulnerability by strengthening local capacity for disaster prevention and response, enabling greater community participation and oversight, and protecting the rights of affected groups.

MASSIVE FLOODING AND COLOMBIA'S CLIMATE VULNERABILITY

According to the World Meteorological Organization, the 2010-11 La Niña episode in the tropical Pacific Ocean¹ was one of the strongest of the last century, with disastrous effects extending from Australia to Brazil.² In Colombia, repeated heavy rains started last June and persisted through the normally dry months, depriving soil and communities of the opportunity to recover. By December there were ongoing floods and landslides in 28 of 32 departments.³ On December 7, 2010 President Santos declared a state of emergency.

The 2010-2011 flooding was one of the worst natural disasters in Colombia's history. As of April 2011, 352 people had died and more than 2.7 million people had been affected. While there are no estimates on numbers of people displaced, over 12,000 homes have been destroyed and an additional 356,000 reported damaged.⁴ In addition, more than 1.3 million hectares of crops have been ruined, more than 370,000 heads of livestock have perished and over 800 roads have been damaged.⁵ The rains also overwhelmed the existing water management infrastructure, particularly the Dique Canal, which breached in several places flooding numerous areas along the Caribbean Coast. Worse yet, at the time this report was written, the second rainy season was getting underway with rains expected to last through June 2011.

The Colombian terrain is highly prone to flooding, mudslides and an array of other natural hazards including storms, earthquakes and volcanoes.⁶ Forecasters project that climate change is expected to increase the country's vulnerability to floods and other hydro-meteorological hazards.⁷ For example, a recent report by the Center for Global Development ranked Colombia among the top 20 most vulnerable countries in the world to extreme weather in 2015.⁸ The increase in the frequency and intensity of climate-related events over the past several decades bears this out. The UN International Strategy on Disaster Reduction (ISDR) 2009 Global Assessment Report found that small and medium-scale hazards in Colombia, most of which are hydro-meteorological, have increased over the last 40 years, especially in the last decade.⁹ Over the past year alone,

rainfall levels were the highest in recorded history and river levels increased by up to 60% in the Magdalena-Cauca basins and some Caribbean-Pacific areas.¹⁰ During March 2011, recorded rainfall in certain regions exceeded 400% the annual average.¹¹

Exacerbated by man-made factors including deforestation, mining, the construction of illegal barriers along rivers and swamps, and the conversion of wetland for cattle rearing, climate-related events are having a far broader impact on Colombia's economy and people. The country's second highest recorded level of rainfall occurred in 2008 and affected 1.5 million people.¹² The 2010-2011 floods have affected more than 2.7 million people, almost twice that amount. In January 2011, President Santos declared that the economic losses from the 2010-2011 floods were about ten billion pesos (US\$5.3 billion), the equivalent of 2% of the country's GDP.¹³ With the rainy season not yet over, the costs are likely to be much higher.



Poor flood-affected families like this one living in Córdoba Department received little to no government assistance in the aftermath of the floods.

Credit: Refugees International

Three months since the height of the floods, this town in Atlántico remains flooded.

Credit: Refugees International



THE HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY PERSISTS

At the time of Refugee International's visit in mid-March, a humanitarian emergency still persisted in many parts of the country. Despite an outpouring of assistance from a wide variety of public and private sources at the height of the floods, significant needs remained unmet. By late February, public interest had started to fade and relief tapered off.

More than three months into the disaster, Refugees International (RI) met with dozens of communities that were not receiving basic humanitarian aid such as food and clean drinking water. While most of the affected had received some kind of food assistance on at least one occasion, none had received more than two food packages. A survey of 452 flood affected households conducted by the UN World Food Programme (WFP) similarly found that food assistance to most families lasted for a month or less.¹⁴ Having lost crops, fruit trees and livestock, many people were having trouble feeding their families. They were also concerned for the future as many were either without seeds for the next planting season or afraid to plant for fear of further flooding. In nearly all of the municipalities RI visited, flood victims appeared hopeless and despondent.

Water, sanitation and shelter were the greatest concerns. In Atlántico Department, for example, one desperate mother told RI that water rations of 25 liters per family per day were not sufficient to bathe her infant and provide sufficient clean water for the other four members of her family. (The 2011 Sphere Guidelines call for 15 liters per day *per person* for drinking, food, hygiene and cooking.)¹⁵ As more people returned to her village, the water rations had decreased as the government had not provided any additional water for the new families in need. Fights had broken out among people standing in line to receive water. Some communities reported not receiving any water shipments, and were forced to buy drinking water for their families from local vendors in plastic bags every few days. In several areas, RI witnessed children bathing in polluted, stagnant flood waters. Moreover, water systems destroyed by the floods are not likely to be restored anytime soon, especially in areas that are still flooded and require costly pumping operations.

LACK OF SHELTER AND NOWHERE TO GO

RI was deeply concerned by the failure to provide flood victims with safe and adequate temporary shelter. While no data has been collected on the total number of people displaced by the floods, as of February 22, close to 125,000 people (including 3,757 girls under the age of five years old) were still residing in shelters, including 316 schools.¹⁶ Shelter management was minimal at best, and numerous people described the horrendous conditions including overcrowding, lack of proper sanitation and insufficient supplies of food, water, mattresses, stoves and other provisions. The sub-human conditions in shelters meant that those who could return home did so as soon as possible. Many returned to damaged and/or destroyed homes, mold and insect infestation, and a lack of food, clean water and sanitation.

Children residing in shelters were particularly at risk. They suffered not only from food insecurity and infections/illnesses, but also were at risk of abuse, desertion and absenteeism from school.¹⁷ What was worse, the situation had been allowed to continue despite the fact that non-government organizations (NGOs) had been warning of the situation for months. In early April, the Colombian Family Welfare Institution reported that 20% of children in shelters in Córdoba and 13% of children in shelters in Atlántico were at risk for malnutrition.¹⁸

Tens of thousands of children were also affected by delays in the rehabilitation of schools and the implementation of emergency education programs. RI met with one community outside of Ayapel in Sucre Department in which children just recently started classes after having not been in school since June 2010. As late as April 2011, the Ministry of Education reported that 4,728 children and youth had not yet returned to school. Furthermore, 51% of the total schools considered in The Ministry of Education's Action Plan for Emergency Education Response had not received proper food assistance for their students.¹⁹

In order to allow schools to reopen, there were increasing instances of forced evictions from educational facilities as the crisis wore on. In parts of Atlántico Department where flood-



Having been evicted from the local school, families who lost their homes in the floods build make-shift shelters along the road.

Credit: Refugees International

waters from the breach of the Dique Canal had not yet receded (and are unlikely to do so without pumping), families who had been forced to leave local schools were residing in makeshift shelters at the side of the road. In one municipality, RI spoke with a representative of a group of 27 families who were still residing in the school but were being threatened by other members of the community who wanted the school to reopen. "They've told us that if we don't leave by the day after tomorrow, they'll come with sticks and stones. But we won't leave because we don't have anywhere else to go." The following day the police were called in to patrol the area during the day but the displaced families still feared they would be attacked, especially at night.

The construction of transitional shelters has been abysmally slow and insufficient to house those being turned out of schools and other temporary facilities. By late February 2011, none of the 3,160 planned single-family shelters in Atlántico Department had been built, (although one multi-family shelter had been completed with funds from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), not the Colombian government). Moreover, the government had not yet approved the operator proposed by the Governor's office for the distribution of rent subsidies, and there were reports that people were being evicted from temporary places of residence because they were unable to pay. Escalating rental prices and lack of available rental housing were contributing to the problem, resulting in more people returning to their damaged homes because they had no other options.²⁰

In several communities RI visited, local government plans to relocate displaced families who had been living in flood-prone areas appeared to be going nowhere. For example, in one municipality in Bolívar Department, families who lived along the river and lost their homes in the floods had relocated to empty land on the outskirts of the village. They had built new homes with wood, sticks and plastic sheeting, and staked out areas to grow trees. The mayor, however, was proposing a plan to relocate them to a plot of land several miles outside of town. The displaced families were refusing to go because the relocation site was located too far away, the soil was not arable and the proposed houses were too small and would be unbearably hot in summer months.

In another example, RI met with members of an Afro-Colombian community living in flood-prone areas along the Dique Canal who had been asking the government for years to relocate them to nearby land without redress. When the floods came, 98% of the village was displaced. With the government continuing to ignore the problem, the community was divided about what to do.

MAN-MADE CONFLICT EXACERBATES FLOOD IMPACTS

The Colombian government's inability to effectively respond to the floods must be seen in the context of Colombia's long-running internal armed conflict and the persistence of illegal armed groups in parts of the country. Decades of fighting between paramilitaries, guerilla groups (such as Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia or FARC) and the Colombian army has displaced millions of people. According to the Colombian government, there are 3.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country (although NGOs put the number far higher), with 108,000 people having been recognized by the government as newly displaced in 2010. As the Colombian government continues to pursue an aggressive counterinsurgent and counternarcotics policy, illegal armed groups assert control over territories and communities to conduct illicit activities and engage in acts of terror.



A man and his pregnant wife who lost their crops in the floods worry how they will feed their family.

Credit: Refugees International

Among those most vulnerable to natural hazards are Colombia's conflict-induced IDPs who lack access to the basic necessities for life and are far more insecure than the rest of the population. According to a 2010 government assessment, the vast majority of IDPs live below the poverty line, with only 15% having access to secure housing, and only 17% having access to emergency support (shelter, food and healthcare). Half of the IDPs remain food insecure.²¹ When a natural disaster hits, they are far more likely to be unable to access assistance or to recover.

Problematically, the floods affected many of the same areas that have been subject to ongoing armed conflict and violence. According to the national Ombudsman's office, those displaced by violence were more susceptible to the floods to begin with because the armed conflict had driven them to otherwise undesirable land in high-risk areas.²² RI met with IDPs in Córdoba, Bolívar and Atlántico Departments who had been doubly affected by man-made conflict and flooding. Among IDPs affected by the floods were indigenous groups for whom relocation is particularly difficult given their close ties to their land and culture. For example, in Bolívar Department, RI met with representatives of an indigenous community who had settled along the banks of the Dique Canal 10 years ago after having fled violence in Antioquia, Córdoba and Sucre. When the levees burst and the canal overflowed, many lost homes, belongings and crops. Their most important priority since having first been displaced by violence has been to find a place to live where they can preserve their lifestyle and cultural practices, but their numerous appeals to the government have been rebuffed.

In addition, the continued presence of illegal armed groups has hindered flood relief in parts of the country. In Southern Córdoba, the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) stopped providing humanitarian and food relief to flood victims when the presence of armed groups prevented safe access to rural areas. One NGO told RI that three trucks carrying aid for flood victims in the area had recently been hijacked by a paramilitary group.

A DUPLICATIVE BUREAUCRACY HINDERS EMERGENCY RELIEF

Given its significant vulnerability to natural hazards, Colombia has made disaster risk management (DRM) a national development priority. Over the past twenty years it has instituted a policy and legal framework that supports a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach to disaster preparedness and response. The National System for Disaster Management and Prevention (SNPAD) includes both public and private agencies with responsibilities for risk mitigation and prevention as well as emergency response and rehabilitation. The system is decentralized with regional committees presided over by the departmental governors (known as CREPADS) and local committees (known as CLOPADs) presided over by mayors.²³

The 2010-2011 floods revealed seriously flaws in Colombia's DRM system. After months of intense and relentless rain, the severity and extent of the disaster overwhelmed the existing capacity of government agencies. The central response authority, the Risk Management Directorate (*Dirección de Gestión del Riesgo* or DGR), was significantly under-staffed and under-resourced. On the local level, RI observed a serious lack of capacity and inconsistent implementation of the DRM system. While local disaster response authorities in some areas proved successful in preparing for the floods (e.g., Zambrano in Bolívar Department), RI visited numerous municipalities where citizens complained that the CLOPAD either did not exist or did not know what it was doing.

Recognizing the existing system did not have the necessary technical and human capacity — and mistrustful of local governments — the central government stepped in. In November the government launched *Colombia Humanitaria*, a campaign aimed at mobilizing resources from government sources, the private sector, foreign donor governments and civil society to respond to the flooding. By January, the government had successfully raised close to US\$500 million and decided to set up a new system to distribute the money for relief and reconstruction. Under the new system, instituted through a series of Presidential decrees, flood aid is distributed directly to affected populations by

designated “operators” in four areas of assistance — food aid, temporary shelter, rent subsidies and home repair. Operators include a variety of organizations such as the Colombian Red Cross, the local chambers of commerce, employee cooperatives (e.g., *Confamiliar*) and private foundations (e.g., the Mario Santo Domingo Fund).

The Colombian government and the Colombian people deserve recognition for the generous outpouring of aid in response to the floods. And there are numerous aspects of the *Colombia Humanitaria* framework that are likely to prove successful. For example, the new system creates national ownership and leverages private resources. The system also includes numerous accountability mechanisms to reduce the risk of fraud or corruption.²⁴

Unfortunately, however, implementation has proven incredibly slow and been wrought with challenges. The most pressing problems are a lack of coordination among the confusing array of actors now involved in the response, a lack of information on the specific needs of millions of flood victims, contractual delays and a substantial lack of capacity to effectively implement emergency humanitarian assistance in a timely manner. As one *Colombia Humanitaria* official admitted to RI: “We are flying a 747 full of passengers while trying to fix the engine in mid-air.” In the meantime, thousands of flood victims across the country have been left for months to manage on their own.

Rather than use its substantial financial resources to bolster the capacity of the existing disaster response framework, *Colombia Humanitaria* largely sought to replace it. While many agreed that the existing system was weak, they nonetheless felt that the government attempt to craft an entirely new system involving new actors (e.g., the designation of “operators” to provide relief) ultimately slowed the response. Moreover, the new scheme largely ignored existing institutions, frameworks and approaches not only for responding to natural disasters but also for recognizing the rights of those affected.

One of the primary problems was the lack of data on who was affected and how. *Colombia Humanitaria* instituted a lengthy

process for collecting and verifying data on the specific needs of affected populations. Under the new system, departmental governments had to collect and verify data from municipalities on the specific needs of affected populations before it released funds. According to several international and local NGOs with whom RI spoke, the governors’ offices in some departments lacked the capacity to quickly collect and verify data provided by municipalities as there was no appropriate referencing system. At the municipal level, there was confusion over what the process was at all. As a result, aid was slow to come through. In short, the focus had shifted away from the need to provide



A man in Bolívar Department uses sticks, wood and plastic to construct a new home on empty land. The mayor’s attempt to relocate him and other members of the community to a new location have been unsuccessful.

Credit: Refugees International

	<p>emergency humanitarian relief to flood victims, and instead to assessing and verifying damages. According to one DGR official, “even with all the difficulties under the prior system, relief was reaching victims.”</p> <p>Exacerbating the delays was the fact that <i>Colombia Humanitaria</i> brought in a whole new set of actors. Departmental governments had to identify “operators” to provide flood relief in each of the four designated categories (i.e., food aid, temporary shelter, rent subsidies and home repair), obtain approval from <i>Colombia Humanitaria</i> for the chosen operators and negotiate contracts with them. Identifying and entering into contracts with operators in some departments took months. Further, many operators (e.g., the local chamber of commerce) had no experience with or understanding of what is required for the provision of emergency humanitarian assistance. “The people involved do not seem to understand the difference between 24 hours and 3 weeks,” lamented one NGO working on water and sanitation in Atlántico Department. The system also lacked standards and protocols. For example, there was no standardization of food aid in terms of what types of food were in the food packages, how long they were intended to last or how to ensure that the most important food staples reached the maximum number of people.</p> <p>In short, in its role as “guardian of reconstruction” (as one UN official described it), <i>Colombia Humanitaria</i> not only deprioritized emergency relief but also effectively hindered it by putting in place an excessive and duplicative bureaucracy. According to a recent report by the General Accountability Office, only 53% of the flood response money has been allocated and disbursed, reflecting a very weak execution of the aid and rehabilitation programs in the affected regions.²⁵ While <i>Colombia Humanitaria</i>’s concern over potential corruption in the distribution of millions of dollars in flood relief is no doubt legitimate, a flood response system that subordinates the basic humanitarian needs of thousands of desperate and vulnerable people clearly is not.</p>
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<p>LACK OF A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO DISASTER RESPONSE</p> <p>Notably absent from <i>Colombia Humanitaria</i>’s new system is any recognition of the rights of flood victims who were left without food, water and adequate shelter, basic protections afforded under the <i>UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement</i> (UN Guiding Principles). This is largely due to the fact that Colombia has built up two entirely separate legal and institutional frameworks for responding to people displaced or impacted by natural disasters and conflict.</p> <p>In 1997, Colombia enacted Law 387 on internal displacement, which entitles those displaced by conflict to specific rights emanating from their situation of vulnerability. The law requires the Colombian government to take actions to prevent displacement and assist and protect those who flee. It also guarantees durable solutions through the return, resettlement or socio-economic re-establishment of affected populations, including specific protective provisions for property and land ownership. It defines who is a displaced person and his or her rights and outlines the responsibilities of the state through the National System of Comprehensive Assistance to the Displaced Population (SNAIPD). SNAIPD is chaired by the Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation (<i>Acción Social</i>), which is in charge of coordinating the government response to the humanitarian needs of IDPs.²⁶</p> <p>Individuals displaced by natural disasters are not included in the law. As the Norwegian Refugee Council has pointed out, while protection of people internally displaced by conflict has gradually been informed by international human rights standards, “those affected by natural disasters continue to be viewed as objects of care rather than rights-holders.”²⁷</p> <p>Walter Kälin, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, noted in his 2007 report that the category of persons who can register as IDPs in Colombia is too narrow to capture the complex causes of displacement. It is distinctly narrower than the one in the UN Guiding Principles because it excludes displacement as a result of natural disasters, which are frequent in</p>	
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Colombia. In light of the persistent and multiple causes of displacement, he recommended that the Colombian government include displacement caused by natural disasters within the framework for persons displaced by conflict in order to avoid differing humanitarian and structural responses.²⁸ There has been significant debate in Colombia regarding whether the law should be revised and the status of conflict IDPs conflated with that of natural disaster victims. Clearly, the issue requires further discussion in order to better meet the needs of current flood victims as well as those who will be affected by future natural disasters.

The flood response should be viewed as an opportunity to institute mechanisms and procedures that would realize a rights-based approach to disaster risk management and response. As a first step, the immediate threats to the human rights of flood victims must be identified. The Ombudsman's Office should conduct a comprehensive human rights assessment of those affected by the floods and recommend actions to address on-going violations that have resulted from both the floods themselves and the weak government response.

Going forward, the Colombian government should revise the DRM framework by instituting norms and procedures that acknowledge the fundamental rights of those affected by natural



A distraught family tells RI: "Because we are poor and live far away, the government has forgotten us."

Credit: Refugees International

disasters using the *IASC Operational Guidelines on the Protection of Persons in Natural Disasters*²⁹ as guidance. For example, with respect to the right to shelter, the DGR and department and municipal disaster response authorities must put in place procedures and protocols to ensure better management of shelters during times of crisis, especially for women, children and other vulnerable groups who require special protection. In addition, plans should be quickly implemented for the immediate provision of adequate and safe transitional shelter in order to avoid the prolonged use of education facilities as shelters.

Moreover, the Colombian government must implement mechanisms to allow victims to exercise those rights, for example, by extending the mandate of the Ombudsman's Office to include those displaced by natural disasters and allowing affected populations to voice needs and participate in decisions affecting them. In implementing a rights-based approach to disaster response, the government should draw on the expertise and knowledge of institutions responsible for protecting the rights of those displaced by conflict, including *Acción Social*. The Office of Inspector General should enhance its oversight of those institutions and agencies responsible for preparing for and responding to natural disasters to safeguard the rights of affected groups.

An important area of attention is the need to implement procedures and protocols for community-led relocation plans for vulnerable populations living in disaster-prone areas that expose them to serious risk, particularly areas susceptible to mudslides. (The majority of the 352 people killed in the disaster died in mudslides, not from the flooding.) Many poor and vulnerable people, including significant numbers of people displaced by the conflict, live in high-risk areas along rivers and steep hillsides because they do not have any other choice.

Finally, as rehabilitation and reconstruction get underway, the Colombian government — with the support of foreign donors — should ensure that money for reconstruction prioritizes the needs of the most vulnerable populations including IDPs, Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups, and women and children, rather than landowners and large infrastructure projects.

SHORTCOMINGS IN THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

The UN Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) faced significant limitations in its ability to respond to the disaster. It lacked the financial and human capacity to provide assistance and the Colombian government refused to allow the UN to appeal for international funds. Nonetheless, in light of the alarming humanitarian conditions that persisted on the ground, the response was disappointing and could have been more robust.

During the height of the flood emergency, the international community mobilized US \$14.7 million in emergency aid from the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), the UN Emergency Response Fund for Colombia (ERF) and donor governments. Significant efforts were made by many agencies, particularly WFP, to mobilize and stretch limited resources to provide flood relief. In addition, the UN provided technical assistance to the Colombian government including a UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) mission to strengthen the DGR's humanitarian response mechanisms and a mission by the UN Development Programme's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Response (BCPR) on early recovery. In mid-February, the HCT released an inter-agency response plan for more than US\$60 million which was presented to the government and donors.

Unfortunately, the Colombian government refused to allow the UN to launch an appeal and to implement the plan. Moreover, according to UN officials, *Colombia Humanitaria* was hesitant to accept more extensive offers of technical assistance that would likely have expedited humanitarian relief. With limited resources and a disaster that was “not within their mandate,” many UN agencies and international NGOs felt there was little they could do.

Yet, there were notable shortcomings in the HCT's response — especially given the severity of the crisis. In the first instance, the slowly evolving nature of the disaster appears to have caught the HCT off guard. As one UN official admitted, “we were not prepared for such protracted flooding.” From the onset there was also a serious lack of coordination leadership. While an inter-agency contingency plan had been developed and dissemi-

nated, it was never activated. The Inter-agency Flood Response Plan was not released until mid-February, months into the disaster. The floods also coincided with absences or turnover in key positions at several agencies. While a Humanitarian Situation Room was set up in January to share information and coordinate responses, at the time of RI's visit the process apparently had failed to catalyze action on the emergency humanitarian crisis that persisted in many areas of the country.

Moreover, with the exception of eleven rapid needs assessments carried out by WFP on food security, there appeared to be serious gaps in information regarding the humanitarian needs in most sectors. The mechanisms usually used by the UN Emergency Technical Team (UNETE) for rapid assessments were not activated in a timely manner leaving agencies to rely largely on incomplete and inaccurate information provided by local governments. In addition, the information collected and reflected in the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian



Communities in Atlántico Department that still lack access to clean water use dirty water from the Dique Canal.

Credit: Refugees International

	<p>Affairs (OCHA) Situation Reports appeared neither complete nor up-to-date. One UN staff member responsible for reporting on needs at the department level admitted not having time to do so regularly. In general, the commitment of various agencies to a coordinated response seemed uneven. Agency staff in Bogotá and other department capitals appeared not to be fully aware of the reality in the field.</p> <p>RI was also concerned that although most international actors in Colombia have programs focused on the needs and protection of conflict IDPs, there was no information available on how many IDPs had been affected by the floods. As mentioned above, the floods affected many of the same areas that have been subject to ongoing conflict and violence, and RI met with IDPs in communities in Córdoba, Bolívar and Atlántico Departments who had been again displaced by the floods. Yet no mapping had been undertaken to identify IDPs who were vulnerable to secondary displacement from natural hazards, despite their specific vulnerabilities.³⁰</p> <p>RI was also concerned at the failure of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to do more to address the protection needs of those displaced by the floods, including conflict IDPs and the numerous instances of forced secondary displacement of flood victims from shelters. Although UNHCR faces significant financial and staff limitations as a result of recent budget cuts, it failed to raise the alarm on the need to protect thousands of people who were facing protracted and/or forced secondary displacement in the aftermath of the floods.</p> <p>Part of the problem may stem from the fact that most UN agencies and international NGOs in Colombia are not operational and provide only technical assistance. Even in cases of forced displacement from conflict, the UN and other international actors are not the first responders — local governments followed by <i>Acción Social</i> are.³¹ For example, one ICRC staff member told RI that flood response was new for ICRC, and that the organization usually only deals with conflict-affected populations although they were likely to build flood response into their programming in the future. Other international actors</p>
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<p>who usually focus on development also found they lacked proper staff training on natural disaster response. The mission head of one international NGO told RI that while the organization had been able to pull together resources to implement a flood relief program, none of his staff had training or experience in emergency relief provision. He noted the “complete lack of culture in responding to an emergency” among not only government agencies but also many international NGOs involved in the response. In fact, at one point the organization did an internal evaluation to determine whether they should have taken the program away from local staff but had decided against it.</p> <p>Colombia’s vulnerability to natural hazards — and the high probability that climate change will magnify these risks — requires both humanitarian and development actors to rethink and adapt their programs and response. Assistance programs should seek to build the resilience of vulnerable populations not only to conflict but to climate variability as well, with a focus on prevention, protection and durable solutions that provide people with livelihoods and secure property rights. In several communities RI found that relatively inexpensive programs aimed at improving community organization and coordination had proven successful in helping flood victims cope despite the protracted nature of the disaster and the lack of assistance. In these communities, people were better prepared for the floods and had organized food, sanitation and health committees that allowed them to work together in the face of the crisis.</p> <p>In the future, the HCT should take steps to better prepare for natural disaster-related emergencies. As a first step, the HCT should conduct mapping of IDPs and other vulnerable communities who are also vulnerable to natural disasters. Second, the HCT should prepare and regularly update contingency plans that include natural disasters and be prepared to implement them in a timely manner. The HCT should also implement stand-by arrangements for key operational responses when natural disasters occur.</p> <p>UN agencies — and UNHCR in particular — should negotiate with the Colombian government to implement protection activities for people displaced by natural disasters. For example,</p>	
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during the recent floods there appeared to be a greater willingness from departmental governments to accept technical assistance from UN agencies through assigning UN staff to work in government offices or conducting protection workshops for government officials involved in the response. In the future, UN agencies should look for opportunities to provide technical and operational assistance to departmental and municipal governments for disaster preparedness and response. Agencies and international NGOs must set aside dedicated and realistic funding to respond to natural disasters.

Recognizing that the humanitarian emergency is not yet over, the United States and other donor governments should continue to provide financial support to help flood victims through both emergency humanitarian aid and recovery assistance. Moreover, the United States must ensure that the Government of Colombia has an effective national disaster response strategy before providing humanitarian assistance. Such a strategy must: 1) incorporate the protection concerns of vulnerable populations; 2) ensure the unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid; 3) strengthen local disaster preparedness and response capabilities; and 4) allow for public participation and oversight.

On a broader level, the United States must recognize the wide-ranging impacts that natural disasters and climate change will have on Colombia. Climate change is a cross-cutting issue that undermines a range of development priorities from economic growth to environmental sustainability to human security. As such, USAID must incorporate into development programs activities that build the resilience of vulnerable populations to climate variability. Priorities should include strengthening local capacity for disaster prevention and response, greater community participation and oversight, and protecting the rights of affected groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Government of Colombia must:

- **Immediately address the administrative barriers under Colombia Humanitaria that are hindering the prompt distribution of flood relief, and ensure that the flood response bolsters the existing disaster response system rather than replaces it.** Further, the government must immediately improve mechanisms to monitor the distribution of aid by instituting local oversight through such options as the Ombudsman's offices, local non-governmental organizations and church groups.
- **Permit the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator to appoint an independent humanitarian coordinator** to work with the Colombian government to coordinate an effective response and to assess the performance of the UN Humanitarian Country Team.
- **Allow UN agencies with expertise and experience in the provision of emergency humanitarian aid to assist in the flood response** by facilitating their participation in flood relief operations. This includes allowing the UN to provide technical experts to Colombian departmental and local governments to help conduct needs assessments, manage information and coordinate the response.
- **Develop and implement an early recovery plan to address priority needs of those affected** in coordination with the UN Humanitarian Country Team. This includes the construction of suitable transitional shelters, the distribution of seeds to allow farmers to plant crops on time, and the provision of education for the thousands of children who have not attended school for months.
- **Strengthen local disaster preparedness and response capabilities** by building the disaster risk management capacity at the departmental, municipal and community levels including through the temporary deployment of external technical experts.

- **Devise and implement a rights-based approach to the current flood response and to all future natural disasters.** As a first step, the Ombudsman’s Office should conduct a comprehensive human rights assessment of those affected by the floods and recommend actions to address ongoing violations that have resulted from both the floods themselves and the weak government response. The Colombian government must also revise the disaster risk management framework to incorporate these recommendations and develop oversight and accountability mechanisms for the protection of human rights in cases of natural disasters. This process should be coordinated together with the Office of Inspector General and the Ombudsman’s Office, and should draw on the existing expertise of *Acción Social*.

The United Nations:

- **The UN Emergency Relief Coordinator must seek the deployment of a high-level team of deputy-level staff to Colombia** to work with the Colombian government and UN agencies to devise a coordinated strategy for responding to the floods.
- **The UN Humanitarian Country Team should take steps to better prepare for natural disaster-related emergencies.** Measures should include mapping of IDPs and other vulnerable populations that are also at risk from natural disasters, and preparing, updating and promptly implementing natural disaster contingency plans.
- **The UN Humanitarian Country Team should negotiate with the Colombian government to incorporate a protection role for people displaced by natural disasters** and set aside dedicated and realistic funding for natural disaster assistance in UN agency budgets.
- **OCHA headquarters must prepare for future natural disasters** by developing stand-by arrangements for operational responses in at-risk countries. **OCHA should maintain a list of senior humanitarian coordinators who can quickly deploy to an emerging natural disaster to conduct an independent assessment** and work with the national and local government on implementing a timely and effective response.

U.S. Government:

- **U.S. development programs in Colombia must incorporate activities that build the resilience of vulnerable populations to climate variability.** Priorities should include strengthening local capacity for disaster prevention and response, greater community participation and oversight, and protecting the rights of affected groups.
- **The U.S. must ensure that future humanitarian assistance to the Government of Colombia for natural disasters requires a national disaster response strategy that:**
 - Incorporates the protection concerns of vulnerable populations;
 - Ensures the unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid;
 - Strengthens local disaster preparedness and response capabilities; and
 - Allows for public participation and oversight.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is an interactive system between the Pacific Equatorial Ocean and the atmosphere that transforms tropical rainfall and the atmospheric circulation patterns causing extreme weather (such as floods and droughts) in many regions of the world. The cycle usually takes place every two to seven years. The two variations are coupled: the warm oceanic phase, El Niño, accompanies high air surface pressure in the western Pacific, while the cold phase, La Niña, accompanies low air surface pressure in the western Pacific. See U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration El Niño webpage, available at <http://www.elnino.noaa.gov>
- ² World Meteorological Organization, El Niño/La Niña Update, Jan. 25, 2011, available at http://www.wmo.int/pages/prog/wcp/wcasp/documents/El-Niño_Jan11_Eng.pdf
- ³ Colombia is a unitary republic comprised of 32 separate regions known as departments.
- ⁴ UN OCHA, *Colombia Floods 2010-11, Situation Report No. 24*, April 6th, 2011 (hereafter “OCHA Situation Report No. 24”), available at http://www.colombiassh.org/site/IMG/pdf/Sit_Rep_24_Colombia_Floods.pdf
- ⁵ UN OCHA, *Colombia Floods 2010-11, Situation Report No. 19*, Feb. 23, 2011 (hereafter “OCHA Situation Report No. 19”), available at http://www.colombiassh.org/site/IMG/pdf/OCHA_Colombia_SitRep_19_-_Floods_final_v2.pdf
- ⁶ With the vast majority of its population, infrastructure and assets located in at-risk areas, the World Bank has identified Colombia as a natural disaster hotspot with the tenth highest economic risk to three or more hazards in the world. World Bank, *Natural Disaster Hotspots, A Global Risk Analysis* (Washington, DC: Disaster Risk Management Series, 2005), table 7.2.
- ⁷ Weather events like storms, floods and droughts are linked to the transfer of water and energy between the land surface and the lower atmosphere. Climate change will be associated with extreme meteorological events such as floods, mudslides, windstorms, heat waves and serious droughts. UNDP, “Ficha Cambio Climático –Colombia,” July 2009.
- ⁸ David Wheeler, “Quantifying Vulnerability to Climate Change: Implications for Adaptation Assistance – Working Paper 240,” Center for Global Development, January 2011, available at <http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/1424759>
- ⁹ ISDR 2009 Global Assessment Report, Annex 4, *Manifestaciones del Riesgo Intensivo y Extensivo en Colombia*, Sept. 2008.
- ¹⁰ IDEAM y Ministerio de Ambiente, Vivienda y Desarrollo Territorial, *Estudio Nacional del Agua 2010*, (2011) at 291.
- ¹¹ Editorial, Nation section, “No Parará de Llover, IDEAM,” *El Tiempo*, 29 Mar 2011.
- ¹² RI interview with official from Colombia’s Instituto de Hidrología, Meteorología y Estudios Ambientales (IDEAM).
- ¹³ Business editorial, “El Costo del Invierno en Colombia,” *El Espectador*, 11 Abril 2011.
- ¹⁴ According to the WFP survey, the situation was particularly dire in rural areas where many farming communities reported that they were now fully dependent on food assistance and non-traditional, temporary and unstable sources of income to purchase food. OCHA Situation Report No. 24.
- ¹⁵ The Sphere Standards Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response, 2011 Edition, at 98.

- ¹⁶ In the past, municipalities have allowed people displaced by flooding to temporarily reside in schools during the rainy season, which in most years corresponds with the school summer and winter breaks.
- ¹⁷ OCHA Situation Report No. 19.
- ¹⁸ OCHA Situation Report No. 24.
- ¹⁹ UN OCHA, *Inundaciones, Informe de Situación No. 25*, 14 de Abril 2011, available at http://www.colombiassh.org/site/IMG/pdf/Sit_Rep_25_Inundaciones_Colombia.pdf
- ²⁰ OCHA Situation Report No. 19.
- ²¹ Norwegian Refugees Council, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, “Colombia Government response improves but still fails to meet needs of growing IDP population,” Dec. 10, 2010.
- ²² RI interview with representative from National Ombudsman’s Office.
- ²³ World Bank, Global Facility for Disaster Risk Reduction (GFDRR), *Disaster Risk Management in Latin America and the Caribbean Region: GFDRR Country Notes Colombia*, at 35.
- ²⁴ Corruption is no doubt a significant problem. At the time of RI’s visit, allegations of fraud and collusion by the Córdoba government and food providers prevented the distribution of 44,179 food kits and 26,844 personal hygiene kits that remained in a warehouse. Norbey Quevedo, “El Avivato de la Ola Invernal,” *El Espectador*, 19 Mar 2011. Moreover, with local elections scheduled for November, there was a high risk of political corruption. In fact, in almost all of the municipalities RI visited, community members claimed that whatever aid had been distributed by the mayor’s office had been used by local politicians to garner political support from constituents.
- ²⁵ Norbey Quevedo, “Caos en manejo de invierno,” *El Espectador*, 18 Abril 2011.
- ²⁶ See A. Lari, “Striving for Better Days: Improving the Lives of Internally Displaced People in Colombia,” Refugees International, December 2007, at 9.
- ²⁷ Sebastián Albuja & Isabel Cavelier-Adarve, “Protecting people displaced by disasters in the context of climate change: Challenges from a mixed conflict/disaster context,”²⁴ *Tulane Environmental Law Journal* (2011) (forthcoming) (hereinafter “Albuja”).
- ²⁸ *Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General on the human rights of internally displaced persons*, Walter Kälin - Mission to Colombia, Jan. 24, 2007, A/HRC/4/38/Add.3, ¶ 31, 76, 77.
- ²⁹ Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, *UN IASC Operational Guidelines on the Protection of Persons in Situations of Natural Disasters*, January 2011.
- ³⁰ *Acción Social*, for example, estimates that 93% percent of conflict IDPs in towns and cities reside in areas exposed to risk resulting from precarious infrastructure, making them more vulnerable to floods. See Albuja.
- ³¹ In instances of conflict-induced massive displacement (defined as more than 50 people or 10 families at one time) the municipalities are responsible for responding within the first 72 hours. Thereafter, *Acción Social* should step in with food and non-food items assistance. In case *Acción Social* determines that the displaced group does not meet the restrictive requirements for forced displacement in the 1997 Law, the International Committee of the Red Cross, after an independent evaluation, generally provides the assistance. See Lari.

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