

# Colombia

## AT A GLANCE



### Country data *(2005 figures, unless otherwise noted)*

- 2006 Human Development Index: 0.790, ranked 70 of 177 countries
- Population (2006): 45.6 million
- GNI per capita Atlas method (2006, current US\$): 2,740
- Life expectancy: 72.8
- Under five infant mortality rate: 21.4 per 1,000
- Population undernourished (2001–2003): 14 percent
- Population with sustainable access to improved water source (2004): 93 percent
- Primary education completion rate: 96.9 percent
- Gender-related development index (2006): 0.78, ranked 55 of 177 countries
- Official development assistance (ODA): 511.1 million
- 2006 Corruption Perception Index: 3.9, ranked 59 of 163 countries

Sources: World Bank, 2006; UNDP, 2006; Transparency International, 2006.

### The crisis

- From 1990 to 2000, the conflict claimed 27,000 civilian and 2,887 military casualties;
- Over 4,000 people are kidnapped annually;
- Colombia has the highest number of anti-personnel mine-related deaths and injuries: 1,110 casualties in 2005;
- After Sudan, Colombia has the highest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world (3.8 million in the last 20 years), 1.2 million since 2002, and more than 215,000 in 2006 alone;
- In 2006, an average of 602 persons were displaced every day in Colombia;
- Afro-Colombians and indigenous people—the country's poorest, representing 30 percent of the population—account for 40 percent of IDPs;
- In 2006, 200 persons died and some 685,000 were affected by landslides, floods, avalanches, and storms.

Sources: Council for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES), 2007; Land Mine Monitor; Colombian Red Cross, 2006.

### The humanitarian response

- There is no UN Consolidated Appeal for Colombia;
- OECD-DAC donors committed over US\$36 million in humanitarian assistance in 2006; the largest donors were: the EC/ECHO (US\$12,356,614 or 33.8 percent), Norway (US\$5,286,663 or 14.5 percent), Netherlands (US\$3,468,054 or 9.5 percent), Switzerland (US\$3,445,904 or 9.4 percent) and Germany (US\$3,444,157 or 9.4 percent);
- Colombia has increased its financial response to the crisis; in 2006, the Colombian Congress approved a budget of US\$365 million to assist IDPs;
- Plan Colombia has strong military components, both social and developmental; in 2006, the United States provided US\$138.52 million for development, and US\$641.15 million (82.2 percent) in military and police aid.

Sources: UNHCR, 2007; Centre for International Policy (CIP), 2007; OCHA, Financial Tracking Service.

# Colombia

## A Crisis Concealed

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The inclusion of Colombia in the 2007 Humanitarian Response Index (HRI) may surprise some, especially Colombians. Indeed, Colombia takes pride in its well established democracy, strong economic growth, and high levels of human development. However, these achievements mask a humanitarian crisis brought on by continued armed conflict. Because the government is unwilling to recognise the crisis—for both political reasons and out of anxiety to avoid the application of international humanitarian law—there is ineffective state presence in many parts of the country. As a consequence, whole segments of the population face a protracted humanitarian crisis in which thousands die and tens of

thousands are displaced every year. The effects of the conflict are exacerbated by poverty and inequality.

What began as an uprising over inequality and poverty has become an endless war among guerrillas, paramilitaries, and state forces. The lucrative drug trade is deeply emmeshed in the violence, which invades rural villages and isolated indigenous communities, creates urban slums, and leaves many Colombians living with pervasive fear. The international response is conditioned by the government's reluctant approach to the conflict and humanitarian situation, as well as donors' political interests, in particular, the drug trade. The discrepancy between official figures and those of implementing agencies makes it difficult to justify an adequate response. Aid personnel working in Colombia consistently claim

that the crisis is underfunded, when compared to the needs and to past responses to other crises.

### **Causes and dynamics of the crisis: An impasse fuelled by profit**

After more than 40 years of internal armed conflict and several failed attempts at negotiating peace, Colombia remains engulfed in violence. The main actors are the state security forces, two rival leftist guerrilla organisations—the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)<sup>2</sup> and Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)<sup>3</sup>—and the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC),<sup>4</sup> formed in 1997 by several right-wing paramilitary groups. The civilian population is caught in the middle and in the course of the violence all sides have been accused of gross human rights violations.

FARC, the largest armed group, with up to 18,000 members, is one of the richest and most powerful guerrilla armies in the world and operates across half of Colombia. The ELN, operating mainly in the northeast, has some 4,000 members. Although both the FARC and ELN emerged as independent forces in the 1960s, their roots can be traced to violent political struggles in the 1950s, revolving around social inequalities, poverty, land control, injustice, corruption, and impunity, as well as the development of the state and internal colonisation of the country.<sup>5</sup>

By the 1980s, illegal drug trade expansion changed the nature and contours of the conflict. Paramilitary groups such as the group Muerte a Secuestradores (MAS),<sup>6</sup> linked to wealthy landowners, drug cartels, and segments of the Colombian military, emerged to combat the guerrillas and non-violent leftwing movements. Paramilitary forces have assassinated members of the ELN and FARC, as well as leftwing politicians, activists, trade unionists, and numerous civilians. Violence became so widespread that state institutions were virtually paralysed, as members of the paramilitary organisations continued to engage in kidnapping, drug trafficking, and attacking civilians. Control of the drug trade, kidnapping, and extortion became part of the rationale and means for illegal armed groups to fund the conflict, with military and economic objectives overriding political and social ones. The FARC and paramilitaries are reportedly responsible for 80 percent of the world's cocaine trade.<sup>7</sup> Throughout 2006, paramilitary leaders were on the US wanted list for drug trafficking.

Despite numerous negotiation processes throughout the 1980s and 1990s and the disbanding of smaller armed groups, the conflict continues to rage. In 2006, President Álvaro Uribe Vélez was re-elected on a pledge to strengthen state authority, improve security, and combat armed groups. His government struggled militarily against FARC, but for the time being, efforts to find a negotiated settlement with the ELN have failed. While the government convinced many paramilitaries to disarm, demobilisation has neither ended the influence of the AUC nor dismantled its criminal and drug-trafficking operations, but merely left a void readily filled by others. In fact, at the time of the DARA mission in May 2007, revelations were made linking outlawed right-wing paramilitary groups with top government officials, including the Vice President and the former Foreign Minister. Despite a significant counter-narcotics strategy, Colombia's role in the drug trade has actually increased.

The government has adopted a military, law-and-order approach to the conflict, portraying it as a struggle against narco-guerrillas and terrorists, part of the global anti-narcotics campaign and the “war against terror.” At the same time, it has played down the humanitarian crisis, and sought to control the language used by international agencies, sending instructions to foreign ambassadors and representatives of international agencies in June 2005 discouraging the use of such terms as “armed conflict,” “non-state actors,” “civil protection,” “peace communities,” “peace territories,” or “humanitarian space.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Humanitarian impact of the crisis: Civilian targets and forced displacement**

Violence against civilians and forced displacement are not an unintended consequence of the conflict; rather, they are a strategic objective, aimed at forcing them from their homes and lands. In fact, the conflict has been described by all humanitarian organisations, academics, and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) as a war against civilians, nearly 27,000 of whom were victims of the conflict from 1990 to 2000. In contrast, there were 12,887 “military” fatalities during that period.<sup>9</sup> Forced displacement allows agricultural land to be seized from peasants and small farmers, among the poorest and most vulnerable of Colombia's people. As part of Plan Colombia, aerial chemical spraying by the government of areas of coca cultivation has forced thousands to flee their homes, particularly in the guerrilla-controlled regions.

Almost 4 million of the country's 40 million people were displaced by violence between 1985 and 2007, with an estimated 500,000 now refugees in neighbouring countries. More than 215,000 were displaced in 2006 alone. Since 2002, 1.2 million people have been displaced, among them a disproportionate number of Afro-Colombians and indigenous people, among the country's poorest.<sup>10</sup> Many NGOs argue that the real figure is much higher, as the numbers do not account for the growing number of besieged communities, under-registration due to fear, people displaced by anti-narcotics fumigations, and intra-urban displacement. The majority of these live in precarious conditions without access to water or sanitation, or effective protection, and at risk of being displaced several times. Because of their IDP status, they are often suspected of collaboration with the armed groups and risk being targeted. Many lack formal title to their land, have no identity papers, documentation, or benefits.

Afro-Colombian or indigenous IDPs are subject to greater discrimination. Although the indigenous peoples represent only one percent of the population,<sup>11</sup> all indigenous groups in Colombia—more than 80—have experienced displacement, in part, because of their location in isolated and marginalised areas where the armed groups operate and where drug crops are grown. Tribes such as the Wounaan and the Nukaks, forced from their ancestral lands by armed incursions in 2006, now face extinction.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to displacement, civilians in Colombia are victims of violence, kidnapping, robbery, confinement, and persecution. Over 4,000 people are abducted annually, the majority by the ELN.<sup>13</sup> In addition to outright massacre, violent attacks, and intimidation, most committed by the armed paramilitary groups, Colombia has become one of the hemisphere's major suppliers of women and girls for international sex trafficking, with IDPs among the most vulnerable. Colombia ranks highest for anti-personnel and mine-related deaths and injuries, which claimed 1,110 casualties in 2005.<sup>14</sup>

Confinement is defined as "the arbitrary obstruction by armed actors of civilians' free movement and access to goods essential to survival," and has grown in frequency and intensity.<sup>15</sup> The combination of land mines, confinement, and blockades of goods and persons, targeting primarily civilians, exacerbated poverty and social instability, and prevented access to basic necessities, such as food and medicine.

Despite its rank of 70 out of 177 countries in the UNDP Human Development Index in 2006, Colombia

is considered a middle-income country. However, vast swathes of the country are affected by the conflict and beyond the control and provision of state social services. Economic inequality in Colombia is among Latin America's highest: the country's top quintile possesses 60 percent of the national income, and 3 percent of landowners own 70 percent of arable land.<sup>16</sup>

Colombians, especially the displaced living in poverty belts around major urban cities, are also exposed to many natural hazards. At the time of the HRI mission, heavy rains caused landslides in the outskirts of Medellin, seriously affecting displaced people.

### **The international donor response: Compensating for an insufficient national response**

The international response to the crisis in Colombia is distinct from that of other interventions largely because of three of its main features:

First, the fact that Colombia is not considered a failed state, but, rather, a middle-income country, has implications for international donors. The Colombian government has resources, strong institutions, and services in Acción Social, the government department primarily responsible for those who have been displaced, and important social programmes, such as Familias en Acción.<sup>17</sup> Both of these state agencies address humanitarian needs. The strategy of the international community has been to encourage the state to take greater responsibility for the provision of assistance to IDPs. In the case of UNDP, Colombian funding outweighs international funding 11 to 1.<sup>18</sup> International organisations and NGOs are constantly explaining to IDPs and residents their rights under Colombian legislation.<sup>19</sup> The Colombian Congress approved a budget of US\$365 million for assistance to IDPs in 2006.<sup>20</sup> And even if the Colombian government is legally obliged to ensure that IDPs have access to services such as health care, this is far from being the case in reality.<sup>21</sup> Thus, a major issue continued to be the lack of protection and assistance for those not officially registered as IDPs. In January 2005, OCHA recommended that the registration standards be redefined to include, for example, those who flee within the same municipality, or as a result of the aerial spraying of coca plantations with toxic herbicides.<sup>22</sup>

Second, a genuine UN Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) for Colombia does not exist. The UN devised a Humanitarian Plan of Action for 2003, requesting US\$62 million. The main objective was "to

promote respect for, access to, and enjoyment of the human rights and basic humanitarian principles by the population affected by the humanitarian crisis caused by the armed conflict.”<sup>23</sup> However, the Plan was rejected by the Colombian authorities, who resisted prioritising human rights issues and refused to acknowledge the presence of an internal armed conflict, despite the urging of UN agencies that the government meet its responsibilities under international human rights and humanitarian law.<sup>24</sup>

As a result, UN political and humanitarian representatives and NGOs are prohibited from dealing with the armed actors even on humanitarian issues. What is more significant, OCHA is unable to issue a Consolidated Appeal through which donors can fund humanitarian activities. The absence of a CAP and the concealment or lack of visibility of the crisis has made raising funds and attracting donor attention extremely difficult. A regional donor commented that “the dead in Colombia are less visible and funding for this country only comes at the end of the fiscal year and depends on whether no hurricanes or earthquakes take place elsewhere on the continent.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that most implementing agencies view their funding and programmes in Colombia as inadequate.

Third, the international community is divided in its response. For many donors, this is conditioned by their relationship to the government, that is, to political concerns. Plan Colombia with its strong military component and some social and development schemes in the regions most affected by coca farming, epitomises this division. For example, the United States provided US\$138.52 million in 2006 for social and development schemes, but US\$641.15 million (82.23 percent) in military and police aid to the Plan.<sup>26</sup> The consequences of the Plan’s implementation are complex and affect not only large drug producers, but also small peasants involved in the cultivation of illegal crops and indigenous communities. Colombia is the source of nearly 90 percent of the cocaine entering the United States.<sup>27</sup> As a result, US policy towards Colombia is influenced by its anti-narcotics strategy and commercial and strategic regional interests, including Colombia’s oil reserves, its opposition to Venezuela, and its concern for regional stability. The Uribe government is considered a US ally in both the war against drugs and against terrorism, with the FARC, ELN, and AUC listed as terrorist organisations, by the United States and the EU.

According to OCHA’s Financial Tracking Service, OECD-DAC donors committed over US\$36 million in

humanitarian assistance to Colombia in 2006. The largest donors were: the EC/ECHO with US\$12,356,614 (33.8 percent), Norway US\$5,286,663 (14.5 percent), Netherlands US\$3,468,054 (9.5 percent), Switzerland US\$3,445,904 (9.4 percent) and Germany US\$3,444,157 (9.4 percent). In fact, through ECHO, the European Commission has provided over €100 million in humanitarian assistance since 1994, with additional EC support channelled through the uprooted budget line. Certain donors, including some of those above, have engaged in conflict-resolution efforts and human rights programmes, in addition to providing humanitarian assistance. Implementing agencies commented that Spain was only interested in funding projects in the West, especially in tourist areas.<sup>28</sup> France is also known for providing humanitarian support alongside its efforts to liberate Ingrid Betancourt, a French national and Colombian politician, held hostage by the FARC since early 2002.

### **Implementation of the humanitarian response: Need for protection and longer-term strategies**

Displacement is a daily reality in Colombia, illustrating a chronic emergency. Protection, therefore, remains a key feature of the required response. Implementing agencies point out that many donors not only do not fully understand protection, but, aside from supporting the Red Cross operations in Colombia, do not foresee flexible support mechanisms for successful protection efforts, despite the fact that these are fundamental issues covered in GHD Principles 3, 4, 7, and 16. Security issues and humanitarian access remain a constraint and affect the delivery of protection and assistance across large parts of the country. Violent incidents were reported in border areas throughout 2006, such as the imposition of ransom demands, death threats to humanitarian workers, and assassinations. Given that medical personnel are often attacked by armed groups, the International Committee Red Cross (ICRC) accompanies Colombian medical teams in many areas. Agencies were in fact critical of donors, complaining that they were inconsistent by focussing on cost-per-beneficiary ratios and neglecting to provide sufficient funds for logistics and security measures needed to reach those in greatest need.<sup>29</sup> The latter is contrary to GHD Principle 17 and the facilitation of safe humanitarian access. A key feature of the international response through the ICRC involves supporting protection-related activities and facilitating humanitarian organisations’ efforts and access. With the

exception of the ICRC, organisations (including UN agencies) prohibited by the government from dealing with the armed actors even on humanitarian issues, created an additional obstacle. In contrast, the Colombian army provided humanitarian assistance in many instances, and some implementing agencies worked alongside them, channelling assistance through them, theoretically contrary to GHD Principle 19.<sup>30</sup>

In relation to the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality in addressing needs, it should be noted that a number of large international NGOs refused donor funding for activities in support of demobilised paramilitaries, as they felt this would represent a contradiction of their activities supporting the victims of paramilitary violence.<sup>31</sup> Some organisations felt that donors were discriminating against returnees, and that many returnees were worse off than the displaced and received *no* assistance. This was confirmed by a major donor,<sup>32</sup> and suggests that the response was category-based as opposed to needs-based, since the latter would take into account additional vulnerability criteria, such as ethnicity and exposure to the conflict. GHD Principle 6 promotes just such a needs-based approach and is absolutely fundamental to humanitarian action. Nevertheless, the vast scale of the crisis and the fact that organisations in Colombia are kept in check and lack access to many areas and groups, have impeded a more targeted and long-term approach. Because agencies have less room to manoeuvre because of the government's attitude and are also limited by the security situation, they have great difficulty in carrying out vulnerability surveys, and cannot ensure adequate coverage and reach.

Since aid in Colombia is not driven by the need to respond to emergencies, timeliness is a less important factor than full fledged support and consistent, predictable funding in key areas, such as protection. Implementation involves responding to both mass and individual displacement. Since the government's response to the IDP situation was imperfect but well funded, the international humanitarian response did not match the scale of the crisis. Although the UNHCR received sufficient funding for its regional programme, it faced a budget shortfall for Colombia in 2006. Thus, some core protection activities, such as the reinforcement of national registration capacities and the profiling of unregistered IDPs were not implemented.<sup>33</sup> However, the government response did not always cover these gaps. While local organisations and IDP representatives saw the May 2006 presidential elections as an opportunity to address humanitarian issues, the UNHCR argued that

electoral campaigning actually postponed significant decisions.<sup>34</sup> In fact, despite OCHA's recommendation in January 2005, the criteria for IDP status were not redefined in 2006. The government's humanitarian response focused only on the immediate needs of IDPs for the first three months of displacement—mainly food, shelter, and access to healthcare, leaving significant problems in the medium to long term. Livelihood strategies for the displaced in urban settings are complex as the vast majority are farmers. Moreover, there was also insufficient funding for UNHCR community support, local integration programmes in rural areas, and microcredit projects for urban refugees.

Nevertheless, some progress was made with the issuing of more than 400,000 identity cards and the protection of some 1.2 million hectares of land belonging to IDPs and persons at risk of displacement.<sup>35</sup> Independent organisations, such as the ICRC—the only organisation that has a presence in the entire country—provided assistance to 45,000 IDPs in 2006. National NGOs and civil society organisations, including the Catholic Church, also played a crucial role in protecting and assisting IDPs. The Church has a local presence throughout the country, is actively involved in the IDP problem—documenting IDPs displaced at the parish level—and promotes “pastoral dialogue for peace” initiatives. National NGO efforts were also wide-ranging, from the provision of aid to advocacy for IDP rights. Moreover, Colombia has an extensive civil society peace movement. For this reason, given the limited presence and response of the state to the IDP crisis, international agencies have often sought to strengthen Colombian civil society. Thus, the capacity, level of involvement, and ownership by Colombians themselves constitutes a positive and distinct feature of the humanitarian response. Partly because of their level of preparedness, the duration of the conflict, and the fact that many Colombians have been displaced several times, it is common for Colombian nationals to head international NGOs and occupy key positions in implementing agencies.

As regards coordination, in September 2006 the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) activated the cluster approach, introducing three thematic groups under the overall leadership of the UN Humanitarian Coordinator. Despite some skepticism on the part of humanitarian actors concerning coordination and meeting overkill in Bogotá, OCHA was well funded and played an important role in linking international and national government agencies and providing updated information on the humanitarian situation. In contrast,

coordination among donors regarding funding of humanitarian activities was inadequate, prompting Sweden to ask OCHA to facilitate monthly or bi-monthly coordination meetings among donors to monitor humanitarian issues on a permanent basis.<sup>36</sup> However, the UN in Colombia has a difficult relationship with the government. After criticising the government's security policy, UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy, James Lemoyne, was not reappointed in 2005.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

Paradoxically, Colombia's ongoing humanitarian crisis still remains largely invisible. Its inclusion in the *Index* is important, not only because of the scale of the crisis, but because of its complexity and political overtones. Lack of visibility and denial—in the context of a relatively strong, functioning state, economy and society—severely limits the level of international funding. Many donors have a delicate relationship with the government due to political and strategic interests, in particular, the “war on terror” and the fight against drugs. Thus, funding is not proportional to need. The prosperity of many in the capital, Bogotá, where the international community is based, stands in stark contrast to the situation of the displaced—the majority Afro-Colombian and indigenous people—in urban slums and rural areas. Despite the disputed figures, it is clear from reports<sup>38</sup> that large segments of the population, often the most vulnerable and marginalised, are trapped in the middle of the conflict and risk forced displacement, confinement, and continued human rights abuse. Humanitarian access is another key problem.

Although government policy regarding the humanitarian crisis is advanced and well-funded, it is lacking in coverage, short-term in approach, and category-, rather than needs-based, aimed at blending the displaced population into the same social programmes as poverty-stricken Colombians. Ironically, the very existence of the government's limited response to the crisis poses an obstacle to international funding, which does not meet the dire need and is undermined by the lack of a CAP. Donors have consistently advocated for increased governmental involvement and responsibility.

In light of the complex, highly politicised situation, many implementing agencies argue that political support and backing from donors to address the crisis is just as important, if not more significant, than funding. This is especially true with regard to protection and human

rights-related activities and on issues of humanitarian access. There is considerable room for the donor community to further support and promote many of the key Principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship.

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- 22 Castro, 2001.
- 23 United Nations System Thematic Group on Internal Displacement, 2007.
- 24 Minear, 2006.
- 25 DARA field interview, May 2007.
- 26 Centre for International Policy, 2007.
- 27 International Crisis Group, 2007.
- 28 DARA field interview, May 2007.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 UNHCR, 2007.
- 34 DARA field interview, May 2007.
- 35 UNHCR, 2007.
- 36 OCHA, 2005.
- 37 El Espectador, 2005.
- 38 ICRC, 2006b.

## Notes

- 1 The opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DARA.
- 2 [Army of National Liberation]
- 3 [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia]
- 4 [United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia]
- 5 González, 2004.
- 6 [Death to Kidnappers]
- 7 International Crisis Group, 2007.
- 8 Republic of Colombia, 2005.
- 9 González, 2004.
- 10 UNHCR, 2006.
- 11 Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia [National Indigenous Organization of Colombia].
- 12 UNHCR, 2006.
- 13 International Crisis Group, 2007.
- 14 Land Mine Monitor, 2007.
- 15 CODHES.
- 16 The World Bank (2006) estimated that if Colombia had achieved peace 20 years ago, the income of an average Colombian today would be 50 percent higher and a further 2.5 million children would be living above the poverty line today (US\$2 per day).
- 17 Familias en Acción is a cash-transfer programme directed towards Colombia's poorest families.
- 18 DARA field interview, May 2007.
- 19 A National Displacement Plan, drafted in January 2004 found the government's response to the IDP situation unconstitutional.
- 20 UNHCR, 2007.
- 21 ICRC, 2006a; Human Rights Watch, 2007.