



The conflict between the Colombian government and armed Marxist guerillas that began in the mid 1960s have left over 3 million people as refugees in their own country. Not often mentioned in the world media, these internally displaced people (IDPs) are a part of everyday life in the South-American country of Colombia. The IDPs often live deplorable conditions, in constant fear of arbitrary killings with no long-term solution in sight. This creates a precarious humanitarian situation. The Colombian IDP problem is labeled one of the world's forgotten crises by the Norwegian branch of Doctors Without Borders (MSF).

According to different sources the IDPs constitute between 3.2 million people (Colombian government estimates) to 4.9 million people (Human Rights and Displacement Consultancy estimate). A disproportionate number of IDPs are either afro-Colombians or indigenous people. The United Nations High Commissioner for refugees, UNHCR, operates on an estimate of 3.6 million people. "One reason for the discrepancy in numbers is because the numbers come from different sources and the government started registering IDPs in 1997", says Terry Morel, UNHCR representative in Colombia. According to Morel, about 1.7 million of the IDPs are living on the fringes of urban areas in Colombia.

No papers, no help

Doctors Without Borders (MSF) are working to improve the health situation for the IDPs and other refugees. One of the main problems for the IDPs is that they lack proper identity papers. Intensive care nurse and volunteer for MSF Norway, Tove Halsos Klinkenberg says that, without the right papers people cannot get the help they need:

“Without identity papers you have no rights for healthcare or any other government help. It was heartbreaking to witness a husband carrying his wife who was about to give birth to their child, rejected at the hospital door because they had no papers. His wife died that day”, Klinkenberg says.

Klinkenberg who worked for the MSF in Colombia in 2004 says that working in a jungle also presents considerable challenges, “Sometimes I took 14 hours to get to settlements in the jungle, 10 hours with a canoe and 4 hours on foot”, she says. “Nobody has a real overview where people are and it is sometimes impossible to get access. Mapping out where the IDPs are and what actual needs they may have, is demanding work”, she adds.

Violence and kidnappings

With conflict seeping into everyday life, villagers, peasants and indigenous people living in rural and forest areas are often forcibly displaced by guerillas or other groups fighting for space, to grow coca plants or extracting other resources.

“A direct consequence of this conflict is that people are fleeing violence and are seeking security in the large cities”, says Atle Solberg, Country Director for Colombia for the Norwegian Refugee Council. Most people try to stay neutral, but are often forced to turn to one of the factions involved in the conflict for protection. “These groups are also actively recruiting new members and this is also a reason people are fleeing, they do not want to be part of this or that faction”, Solberg adds. “These groups are controlling some parts of the country, deciding when and if people can move”. According to Solberg they sometimes plant mines in certain areas to control movement.

The forgotten people in the forgotten crisis

According to UNHCR representative in Ecuador, Debbie Elizondo, since July 2011, Ecuador has recognized more than 50,000 Colombian asylum seekers and there are still 20,000 pending applicants. “We are working with three durable solutions for these people, local integration, voluntary repatriation or resettlement to a third country”, Elizondo says and adds; “We cannot

ignore this situation”.

The UNHCR was asked by the Ecuadorian government for help with the refugees in 2001. “The conflict in Colombia is spilling into the region and other countries, like Ecuador, are affected”, Elizondo adds. UNHCR estimates that there are a total of 400,000 refugees from Colombia in neighbouring countries today.

Solutions

UNHCR are working closely with the Colombian government and other NGOs to help the situation for many of the IDPs. Over 600,000 people are now under UNHCR assistance. One of the organizations the UNHCR are cooperating with is the NRC. Country Director for Colombia, Atle Solberg, says both organizations share the same goal of protecting refugees. “We have several joint projects dealing with judicial and rights advice to IDPs where we have split the operational costs between us”, he says. “We are also cooperating on so-called ‘protection clusters’ where, in every sector, we gather all the participating organizations and coordinate our efforts. UNHCR and NRC lead this coordination”, he adds.

UNHCR is working as an advisor to the Colombian government to help them find durable solutions for the IDPs. “Only about 15 percent of the IDPs can return”, says Terry Morel, the UNHCR representative in Colombia. “The rest we have to relocate or integrate. We are trying to help the Colombian government in communicating with local communities and help to ensure that public policy on this is followed through”, she adds.