



The sheer number of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Colombia illustrates how serious the situation is, according to UNHCR representative in Colombia, Terry Morel: “The situation is clearly difficult, especially when you look at the dimensions. According to official government figures there are 3.6 million IDPs in Colombia today. A disproportionate number of these are afro-colombians and indigenous people.”

“One of the main problems for the Colombian IDPs is that they are seen, by many including the poor communities who receive them as dependent on material assistance and competing with those living in poverty rather than as victims of violence and a group who needs additional help due to the violations of their rights. This, in turn, leads to a lot of discrimination against the IDPs”, Morel tells us. UNHCR is working with the Colombian government to help the situation for the IDPs. “We have an advisory role; we do not deliver assistance, but rather help the government in creating strategies to prevent new IDPs, to protect and respond to the displaced and also to find solutions for the roughly 3.6 million people already internally displaced”, she says. UNHCR are also working closely with communities including accompanying those at risk of displacement through UNHCR’s large field presence.

Morel says that the tragic situation in Colombia has deep roots in an unequal society. “Over 50 percent of the population lives under the poverty line and another 25 percent are living in abject poverty. This is a country abundant with natural resources and there is an uneven distribution of wealth”, she says. Government institutions in local areas are weak and people are not always aware of their rights, Morel further explains. “But the underlying causes are now almost forgotten after so many years of conflict”, she continues. “Today many people in Colombia are constantly worrying about kidnappings, land seizure, illegal extraction of resources, violence, extortion, drug trafficking, criminal gangs, being confined in remote areas by land mines and control on freedom of movement, forced recruitment of children and increased sexual and gender based violence, all of which lead to forced internal displacement.”

Morel says the current situation is of particular concern: “Right now it appears that the situation is getting worse. Our first numbers for 2011 indicate we have an increase in large IDP displacements. Since late last year we have witnessed increased rebel activity, but also increased activities by post demobilization groups. The situation could get worse given local elections this October”, she adds.

But the UNHCR is praising the Colombian government to some degree: “We have to remember that they have established a system to register the IDPs since 1997 and that they have invested in providing humanitarian assistance and responses. We have seen a new law on land restoration for the victims, a key initiative, which is enabling a better dialogue and will help restore the dignity of IDPs and the victims of the conflict.” But Morel admits that implementation of the law is difficult given that the conflict continues. There is great concern regarding the protection of those who are reclaiming their land and the need to ensure effective measures for their safety.

Morel identifies four main challenges in the current context: Discrimination against the IDPs, a general fatigue from conflict and war, lack of understanding, and the critical question on how to

find durable solutions to the IDP problem. “We are working on how to support the government in its policies to relocate, integrate or return the IDPs, but it is a difficult task”, Morel says.