

# How to behave: advice from IDPs

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**Humanitarian actors would do well to listen to IDPs' advice when planning assistance for those affected by the presence of NSAGs.**

This article presents advice given by internally displaced persons (IDPs) on how they themselves need to behave in order to survive under non-state armed groups' (NSAGs') control – which in turn has implications for how external actors should behave. The advice is drawn from more than 100 interviews conducted in 2007 and 2008 with IDPs settled in a shanty town on the outskirts of the Colombian city of Cartagena. Contradictions in the 'rules' below show that there is no uniform or right way to survive; an approach that works in one situation might be unwise in another. The ten rules are listed here under four modes of behaviour: passivity, invisibility, obedience and mobility.

## Passivity

In a situation where an illegal armed actor is controlling the local population and imposing order through terror, not to talk, not to know and not to see may be essential coping strategies.

### Rule 1: Keep your mouth shut – your neighbour might be an informer.

"Back in the village you should only mind your own stuff and nothing more", explains one woman. In villages under NSAG control, people need to be careful not to share information or express criticism – even to neighbours – because it could reach the ears of the armed groups and have repercussions.<sup>1</sup> Not knowing whom to trust has a detrimental effect on social relations. When it is no longer possible to know who has made alliances with the militias, or who is an informer, mistrust creeps in, ending all social life. One local leader recalls how social relations deteriorated when the paramilitaries took control of his home region: "Then you no longer talked to the other person, to the friend...." "It was turned into a village of fear", another interviewee recalls.

### Rule 2: Close your door, stay inside and watch television.

Follow the soap operas, watch the news and keep the door closed in an attempt to block out the atrocities unfolding outside. Particularly for young women, another reason to remain inside is to avoid rape. Sexual violence has been a systematic and generalised practice by NSAGs in Colombia in order to instil terror in the population. The house was considered by many the only safe place; venturing outside involved the risk of running into the armed groups, being caught in cross-fire or accidentally witnessing something. To remain inside and close your door is thus also a way to avoid witnessing a violation or an atrocity. As long as you have not seen anything you do not know what happened.

## Invisibility

Invisibility implies to duck and hide, to melt into the rest of the population and avoid actions that can draw attention to you. Certain daily activities should be restricted or abandoned but total invisibility is never possible since everyday life has to go on.

### Rule 3: Stay out of trouble.

"In my community the guerrilla [left-wing militias] kept order", one local leader explains; they punished troublemakers and acted as the rural police – always ready to intervene as the de facto armed authority. "When the local committee held meetings, they [the guerrilla] would always stand at the back of the room, and when we had finished they would give their own speech", he recalls. The population has to adjust to the rules and norms put in place by the armed actors, and face any punishments meted out for transgressing them.

### Rule 4: Avoid social and political involvement.

Among the local communities, people engaged in social and political activities and with key community functions – such as school teacher or priest – are at particular risk of being targeted by NSAGs. When an area

falls under control of a new NSAG all existing political power-holders are regarded as loyal to the enemy, and the NSAG seeks to exterminate them. In order to get rid of all opposition the armed groups also target people whom they believe play any organising role. One older man who had held an administrative post in his village left almost immediately when the paramilitaries moved in because he knew that they "didn't want to know anything about politics". Thus fear undermines social activism in affected communities.

### Rule 5: Don't go out after dark.

In Colombia night falls around 6pm and the sun rises around 6am. Sometimes a night-time curfew is imposed by NSAGs but at times avoiding going outside in the dark is a self-protective measure adopted by people. This is motivated by the perception that most 'bad things' (robberies, assassinations, assaults) take place in the dark; you could be caught in cross-fire or be apprehended. Moreover, remaining indoors is also a strategy for not accidentally witnessing an atrocity. A night curfew deeply affects both social life and the unfolding of everyday livelihood activities such as fishing or hunting at dusk, walking to and from the fields or the village at dawn, or meeting up with neighbours socially after work.

## Obedience

Obedience implies following the rules and orders of the NSAGs – a first step towards securing survival. However, obeying the orders of one group is inevitably perceived by their adversaries as supporting that group. And in obeying, the principle of passivity is violated.

### Rule 6: Go to the meetings but don't look as if you are scared.

The NSAGs oblige the local population to attend meetings. One from each household has to be there and the task often falls on the women. At the meeting people receive warnings and are informed about policy, rules and regulations. An oft-repeated phrase is "el que nada debe, nada teme" – if your

conscience is clean you have nothing to fear, hence the injunction to never look scared at meetings.

**Rule 7: Always do or give them what they ask.**

When NSAGs control a village they require the population to comply with certain injunctions – such as keeping roadsides clear, keeping farm animals locked up, and serving coffee, water or meat to combatants. The groups may also confiscate assets such as livestock, boats and vehicles, or demand that people pay protection money. Inability or unwillingness to comply could lead to violent retaliation, and the only option for survival may be to leave: “We left due to fear and a lot of pressure from the paramilitaries, because we didn’t have the money to pay the protection money they asked of us”, one man says. Civilians living in areas under dispute are in a particular vulnerable situation. If, for example, a family complies with one NSAG’s demand for food, they risk being accused at a later date by another group of being a collaborator. This puts considerable pressure on families. There is no way to escape a demand for food or shelter, one woman recalls: “You have to do it – you don’t want them to kill your children.” There may be situations where people decide to disobey orders but as that is practically signing one’s own death warrant, the only option left for survival is immediate escape.

**Rule 8: If the armed actors accuse you of something, don’t think you can argue or prove your innocence.**

If an individual is accused – whether rightly or not – by the NSAG of having done something, rapid escape may be the only option. At times people receive a direct personal warning, either through a text message or by word of mouth, and thus have some time to leave. Collective warnings of a coming ‘social cleansing’ may lead to the exodus of an entire community. At times lists are hung up in public places with names, nicknames and professions of targets.

**Mobility**

In wartime, mobility is restricted and regarded as suspicious by armed actors and groups. Unnecessary movement should be avoided – but moving away can be the ultimate

solution to secure survival through anonymity in an urban setting.

**Rule 9: Avoid all unnecessary movement.**

Many interviewees talk about how mobility was severely restricted in the communities. Roadblocks were common; local transport was often stopped and – to send a strong signal of power – passengers were routinely dragged out of vehicles and arbitrarily killed. For national government forces and NSAGs, dominating an area implies controlling and registering all movements of people and supplies on the road system or river basins. People with livelihoods requiring mobility are natural targets, suspected of bringing information or supplies through to the enemy. Thus a driver or a travelling salesman may be considered ‘involved’ and therefore targeted. For people living in remote hamlets, regular activities such as going to the village for supplies meant risking one’s life. Some communities have experienced total confinement, resulting in scarcity of food and medicine, or have experienced rigid restrictions on all movements and on the amount of food they could purchase and bring into the area.<sup>2</sup>

**Rule 10: If you leave, never come back.**

Most IDPs say they will never return, recognising that, for the armed actors, leaving equals running away and is interpreted as motivated by ‘involvement’ and guilt. Moreover, when people leave an area they must move to another place where the local NSAG is not able to find them. Most often they head for urban areas where they can melt into the anonymity of the city. And here they stay. Return is not considered viable as long as the NSAGs are still present; even if an area has been freed from NSAGs many people still avoid returning – fearing that the NSAGs might also return one day or that they may maintain surveillance of the area or that they may have demobilised and are now living as civilians.

**Advice for external agencies**

Humanitarian actors most often come into contact with the affected civilian population after they have left their area of origin. However, if they seek to support people living under

NSAG control such agencies would do well to listen to the IDPs’ advice and bear in mind the following – again, in places inherently contradictory – recommendations:

- Expect to meet silence: due to fear of retaliation from NSAGs, people cannot voice complaints and express their distress.
- Expect to meet social isolation and fragmentation.
- Meetings may have acquired a particular – negative – connotation for people.
- People live under constant threat of coercion by NSAGs and aid distributed to civilians may well be commandeered by them.
- Contact between the population and external actors may be considered threatening by NSAGs and may therefore place civilians at great risk.
- Local people recruited as staff by external agencies acquire enhanced visibility and may run particular security risks.
- Attempts to organise the population are very risky, and local leaders are often the first ones targeted by NSAGs.
- It may be impossible to predict which actions or interventions are considered problematic by NSAGs.
- Curfews and generalised fear disrupt regular livelihood activities and food aid may be greatly needed.
- Severe restrictions on mobility may impede bringing supplies into NSAG-controlled areas.
- Once people leave an area as internally displaced it is very risky for them to return.

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1. Many of these ‘rules’ apply to state armed groups, as well as to non-state armed groups, in particular in disputed areas.

2. See 2004 publication on confined communities from the Project Counselling Service in Bogotá: [http://www.pcslatin.org/public/confinamiento\\_esp.pdf](http://www.pcslatin.org/public/confinamiento_esp.pdf) (Spanish only)