

Unmet refugee needs: Colombian refugees in Ecuador

Marie-Hélène Verney

A recent needs assessment has allowed UNHCR to identify and start to meet significant protection and assistance needs among Colombian refugees in Ecuador.

The long drawn-out internal armed conflict in Colombia has uprooted millions of people over the years. The crisis is largely one of internal displacement, with about three million IDPs in Colombia – out of a total population of 42 million. In 2008 alone, a quarter of a million Colombians were internally displaced.

The dynamics of the conflict have changed in the past few years, shifting its intensity towards the borders of the country. Partly as a result of this, more Colombians have been seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, notably Venezuela and Ecuador. Along the Pacific Coast, the department of Nariño – where all the major armed groups are present and active – has the worst

countries, and in many ways the region is a model for local integration. There are no camps; the refugees all live among the Ecuadorian population and are allowed access to health care, education and employment. Yet lack of development, difficult security conditions and increasing numbers represent serious challenges to Ecuador's capacity to adequately protect and meet the needs of refugees.

Assessing needs

With its excellent refugee legal framework and national commitment, yet unmet needs, Ecuador was a natural candidate to become one of eight pilot countries in UNHCR's Global Needs Assessment project (GNA). This initiative, piloted in

difficult to plan. The first step in defining the refugees' needs was to get the systematic input of refugees and local communities through a series of participatory assessments. While the concept of participation is easy to grasp, it is often hard to put into practice. Many of the refugees in Ecuador live in remote jungle locations that are very difficult to reach. From the local UNHCR office in Lago Agrio – a small town just a few kilometres from the border – it can take two days of travelling by small boat along the Amazon to reach some of these communities. Many of the participatory assessments were conducted in small river settlements, talking to the whole community and listening to smaller groups to map out the specific needs of women, young people or the elderly.

Lack of documentation came out as the top refugee concern, limiting access to material assistance, education, the workforce and even protection. Under-registration is partly due to people not coming forward to register, some because they are not aware of their right to ask for asylum, others because they are too scared to come forward. Some people know their rights but have no means of reaching the nearest registration office and depend on UNHCR visits to be able to make asylum claims.

UNHCR's 2008 survey showed that there are 130,000 unregistered people living in a 'refugee-like situation' in Ecuador, more than six times the number of recognised refugees. Indigenous people and Afro-Colombians are the most likely to lack documentation, while single women and girls are especially at risk and prone to exploitation and abuse. Lack of registration means no state services and extreme vulnerability. Irregular armed groups are very suspicious of anyone without documentation, because this is seen as an attempt to disguise one's identity (because of belonging to 'the other side'). There have been many cases of people being

rate of displacement, armed fighting and selective killings in the country. Further to the east, in the Amazonian region, Putumayo Department also suffers high levels of instability and violence.

Ecuador has maintained a consistent policy of open borders, even at times of extreme tension between the two

2008 and launched in early 2009, aims to map out the real needs of refugees, locate the gaps and identify a common way forward for refugees, states and other partners [see box on p61].

Most of the refugees are un-registered and their location uncertain, making assistance programmes extremely



UNHCR mission on the Putumayo River to reach isolated communities.

killed for not being able to produce ID cards. Other practices include tying people without ID card to a tree until someone comes and testifies to their identity. Furthermore, both the army and the police also tend to be suspicious of undocumented people.

"I am sick and unable to work for now. The refugee ID card has been a blessing for us; we can show it to the police and they see that we are legal in this country."

Colombian refugee in Ecuador

Since 2002, UNHCR has worked with Colombia's National Registry Office to bring documentation to high-risk areas – conflict zones with communities at high risk of displacement. More than 500,000 Colombians have received ID cards, or at least birth certificates, through this campaign. In 2007, the campaign focused on indigenous communities. In some regions, fewer than 30% of the population had any form of identification.

The region's low levels of development, as well as difficulties of access, impede the delivery of basic services for refugees and local population alike. Security is another concern, especially in border areas where conditions are tense due to extensive criminality and trafficking. There has been a tendency to associate Colombians with some of this instability and refugees are suffering. Half of them said they lack confidence in the police and judicial system while some complained of harassment, arbitrary detention and sexual violence.

The way forward

With this information, UNHCR organised a National Consultation in Quito, bringing together government ministers, refugees and local representatives from all over the country, as well as NGOs and representatives of civil society and the international community. More than 100 people took part in the two-day meeting, focusing on six issues identified in the gap analysis: the legal protection framework; strengthening of the institutions with responsibility for refugee issues; enforcement of refugee rights; integration and access to services for refugees and host

communities; the creation of a culture of peace; and regional initiatives to enhance refugee protection.

The Consultation ended with the participants' commitment to a two-year plan of action and an announcement by the government of Ecuador of a new Policy on Refugee Protection. This includes practical measures for quicker and fairer registration, with a large-scale enhanced registration exercise to start in the next few months. This should benefit between 50,000 and 60,000 people and will start along the northern border with mobile registration brigades made up of government employees and accompanied by UNHCR. The brigades will visit communities all over the region to receive and process asylum claims. The exercise, a huge challenge in capacity building and logistics, is designed to help refugees to access basic rights and services and improve the planning of assistance programmes.

Meanwhile, UNHCR's strategy is to help both refugees and local communities meet their urgent basic needs, with projects like the River Health Boat in the Amazon region. Since August 2008, this floating clinic,



UNHCR/MH Verney

equipped with basic equipment and medicines, has been going back and forth between 28 small settlements along the Putumayo and San Miguel rivers, where malaria and other tropical diseases are endemic. The clinic brings urgent medical care to people who have no other access to health care. Through this and other projects, UNHCR continues to work with its partners to find practical solutions focused on local integration, the most realistic option for the majority of Colombian refugees who fear violence continues there.

This Quechua indigenous woman crossed the border to take refuge in Ecuador where UNHCR got her documented and gave her a kit to build a small house.

Marie-Hélène Verney (VERNEY@unhcr.org) is Senior Regional Information Officer for UNHCR Colombia.

Global Needs Assessment

Eight countries were part of the first phase of UNHCR's Global Needs Assessment: Cameroon, Ecuador, Georgia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Thailand, Yemen and Zambia. The assessment exercise focused on the unmet needs of refugees, IDPs, returnees, asylum seekers and stateless people. The aim was to outline the total needs, the costs of meeting them and the consequences of any gaps. The GNA is designed to be a blueprint for planning, decision making and action with governments, partners, refugees and people of concern.

The results of the pilot GNA, published in the report *Refugee Realities* (online at <http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/48ef09a62.pdf>), revealed a sobering reality of substantial and disturbing gaps in protection, including basic needs such as shelter, health, education, food security, sanitation and measures to prevent sexual violence. It showed that a startling 30% of needs were unmet in the pilot countries – a third of them in basic and essential services. UNHCR is already actively involved in these sectors but not to the levels required.

Results showed a clear need to improve and ensure access to asylum systems with better reception facilities and procedures, registration, documentation and border monitoring. Training and technical support are also needed to increase the capacity of governments to adequately respond to people of concern. Women and children require better protection with improved prevention and response measures for sexual abuse and violence, as well as strengthened child protection programmes.

See <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/GNA>

More information on the GNA in Ecuador is at <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/GNA?page=ecu>