

Colombia: a search for peace in the midst of conflict

by Seán Loughna

After three decades of armed conflict in Colombia, communities of (IDPs) and others threatened by the violence are trying to stop the killing in their communities and prevent further displacement by publicly declaring themselves neutral to the conflict. The first of these 'communities of peace' was San José de Apartado in the war-torn region of Uraba in the north-west of the country. Most of the 300 or so residents of this community (subsequently swollen to 800) were people who had fled violence elsewhere and moved into homes abandoned by people fleeing San José de Apartado for the same reason. In March 1997, the community collectively decided not to carry arms and not to support or associate itself with any armed group. By publicly rejecting all the groups in conflict, however, the people of San José have left themselves open to intimidation by all sides and are protected by none. The security of such communities seems to be highly dependent upon a permanent, visible international presence. Within the first three months of their declaration, 37 members of the community were killed following withdrawal of support by a foreign NGO. A number of national and international NGOs (including Oxfam and Médicos del Mundo) have subsequently offered their support to this initiative, providing accompaniment and emergency supplies, which appears to be providing a degree of protection.



photograph: James Hawkins/Oxfam

Colombia is home to Latin America's longest running internal armed conflict: at least one million Colombians are displaced within their own country, according to figures published by the Catholic Church in 1997. In some departments, including those bordering Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, at least 20 per cent of the original population have been displaced. More people were displaced in Colombia during 1996 than in Burundi, Rwanda or Zaire during the same period, but Colombia's *desplazados* have received little attention, even from fellow Colombians.

About 60 per cent of Colombian IDPs are women, many of them widows and single mothers with their children. Of these, about a quarter are the main wage earners of their families. Seventy-two per cent of IDPs are under 25 years of age and over 40 per cent are peasants. The Colombian Episcopalian Conference estimates that over 72 per cent of IDPs in the country have not received any kind of assistance or support.

In the absence of agrarian reform, Colombia has long been characterised

by land invasions and social conflict. There have been three phases of large-scale internal displacement of Colombians this century. In the first of these, between 1948 and 1965 and culminating in the period known as *La Violencia*, 300,000 people were killed and as many as two million more were uprooted as the two dominant political parties struggled for power. In the wake of *La Violencia*, the two parties formed a pact to exchange power every six years. Often viewed as the origin of the current 'crisis of legitimacy' in Colombia, this arrangement effectively resulted in the exclusion of all other political actors and fuelled the rise of the insurgency movement. The second phase occurred during the 1970s as a result of the repressive measures taken by the state to counter growing insurgency. This period saw the emergence of paramilitary units, or private armed groups, which concentrated their military activities against the left-wing guerrillas and others seeking socioeconomic reform. The most recent phase of displacement coincides with the growth of the cocaine and heroin cartels during the 1980s which, like cattle ranchers and mineral dealers, have

formed powerful alliances with the security forces, paramilitary groups and/or guerrillas.

Caught in the crossfire of the persistently worsening conflict, non-combatants are increasingly targeted. Much of the conflict is fought by proxy, with all sides trying to secure the active support of the civilian population, forcing them to take sides or to flee. Many of those displaced have fled from areas of intense guerrilla and paramilitary activity. But the regions from which people are being displaced are also generally rich in agricultural and other natural resources. When people flee, local landowners and national or multinational investors are then able to appropriate, or acquire at minimal cost, the land left behind. In recent years the guerrillas' main incentives are also less ideological than economic: they seek greater control over territory and national resources, and influence over the population. Consequently, displacement is no longer a by-product of the conflict but a key objective in the war tactics of all sides.

Whereas displacement has tended in the past to affect individuals and families, more recently entire communities of up to 4,000 people have been fleeing *en masse*. Most tend to seek the anonymity of bigger towns or cities, where they usually end up in one of the already overcrowded shanty towns. Here there are few, if any, basic services and little opportunity for employment. Many lack the correct legal documents which enhances their vulnerability. Wherever they relocate to, IDPs may be labelled as 'guerrillas' or 'guerrilla sympathis-

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ers' simply because they fled from areas with a guerrilla presence. Consequently, they are often reluctant to talk about their history and from where they came.

It is not uncommon for IDPs to have been successively displaced two or three times. Furthermore, intra-urban



Colombia: areas of internal displacement

displacement has been on the increase since 1995. In these cases, mainly young people from impoverished neighbourhoods in the main cities are forced to move to other districts by the police, armed forces and paramilitaries as part of a campaign of 'social cleansing'.

Despite the rhetoric, the Colombian Government's promises to assist IDPs

have been woefully inadequate. Although 'well packaged', the government programme CONPES (Consejo Nacional de Política Económica y Social) has minimal operational impact due to insufficient resources, a lack of experience of working with IDPs and non-cooperation with other national and international actors. There is a

large and diverse collection of NGOs which play a crucial role in protecting and assisting displaced people; their efficacy, however, is restricted by poor coordination, fragmentation and the repression they endure at the hands of the military and/or paramilitary forces. The Church is by far the most important institution assisting IDPs in Colombia and the only source of support in some of the conflict zones. It has implemented some key initiatives such as the 'pastoral dialogue for peace' projects and is frequently the preferred channel for international aid.

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