

The displaced also protest

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Displaced people in Colombia are resorting to mass demonstrations to persuade their government to assume its responsibilities towards them.

Decades of armed conflict in Colombia have displaced more than three million people, primarily in rural areas – indigenous communities, people of African descent and small farmers. In 2009 the national forum of the Constitutional Court of Colombia, in a sitting following ruling T-025 of 2004 that declared displacement to be an “unconstitutional state of affairs”, declared that the state’s response to the crisis had been neither integrated nor coordinated. Particular attention was called to issues of access to rights among the displaced population including the problems of restitution of land, home and income.¹

Given the lack of effective action by the state, displaced people have resorted to collective actions – known as ‘de facto procedures’ – such as protests and occupations in order to raise awareness of their situation and to demand fulfilment of their rights.

The action that gained the most media coverage was the occupation in 2009 of the Tercer Milenio (Third Millennium) Park in the country’s capital, Bogotá. The occupation involved 2,000 displaced people from all over the country and lasted for six months, ending only – on 2 August – when protest leaders signed an agreement with the government and the Mayor of Bogotá that included commitments on economic support and access to livelihood projects.

On 21 July, in the southwest of the country, protesters in the district of Buenaventura took over buildings belonging to the district government’s Unit for Attention and Guidance of displaced persons, following its failure to fulfil economic aid commitments made by national government and in protest against its poor treatment of displaced people of African descent. Nemesio Quinto, one of the leaders, said: “We need help to reintegrate displaced people into society. We are still in the same condition as in 1998; we live in total

poverty.”² The occupation lasted 11 days until an agreement was finally signed with Acción Social³ and the Mayor’s Office of the municipality of Buenaventura, where these two institutions made commitments to provide the necessary assistance.

Around the same date, 23 July, some 500 displaced families occupied land in Santa Marta (capital of the department of Magdalena), demanding their right to housing but also complaining of a lack of care and delays in the provision of subsidies and aid. The occupation lasted a month, during which time the police attempted to remove them on two occasions. When an international agency started negotiations to build some homes, the Mayor’s Office of Santa Marta opposed their plans, stating that no land was available and that the displaced people had taken this property from a coal company. It appeared, however, that “existing documents indicate that the Mayor’s Office currently owns that land although [Colombian coal company] Prodeco is interested in establishing a dry coal depot on the site.”⁴

In Medellín (capital of the department of Antioquía), on 29 August several displaced people occupied the cathedral demanding humanitarian aid and access to land and education. The occupation lasted just one day before an agreement was reached with Acción Social for them to leave the cathedral and meet for further discussion of their demands. “We have resorted to de facto procedures to make them listen to us,” said Francisco Eugenio Pedroso, one of the leaders.⁵

Those demonstrating have usually exhausted the legal pathways open to them and are acting from desperation. These protests seem to have achieved little in the long term, however. Although the protests may have increased awareness of the problems faced by the displaced, it is fairly clear that negotiations with the protest leaders aimed only to remove them and to return the occupied locations in the cities to ‘peace’ and ‘security.’ The ‘solutions’ provided for the protesters were aid-based and did nothing to tackle the underlying problems such as the re-establishment or restitution of land, access to housing and income generation. National government needs to do far more if these issues are to be resolved, people’s rights respected and people’s livelihoods restored.

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1. ‘Manejo del desplazamiento por parte de Acción Social recibió críticas de la Corte Constitucional’, *El Tiempo*, 11 July 2009.

2. ‘Buscan salida a protestas de desplazados’, *El País*, Cali, 27 July 2009, Adonay Cárdenas.

3. The government body responsible for coordinating care for displaced people in the country.

4. Boletín No. 11, Codhes, July-August 2009.

5. ‘Desplazados salieron de la Catedral Metropolitana de Medellín tras lograr un preacuerdo’, *El Tiempo*, 1 September 2009.



March for the victims of conflict in Colombia, Bogotá, 6 March 2008