

My experience as a leader of the displaced in Colombia

by Antonio Perez Ballestero Hober

In the 1980s the department of Cordoba started to be affected by the presence of paramilitary groups and by their actions against the civil population, especially against peasant, community and union leaders.

At the end of the 1990s, I was living with my family in Monteria where I had been working as a primary teacher for eight years. I was also studying for a degree in Spanish and Literature. I was community leader for the district where I lived, developing social programmes to help improve the quality of life of the residents.

In 1998, the army's 11th Brigade initiated a major project to build two oxidation lakes for the treatment of sewage effluent from military installations on the perimeter of the district. Aware of the potentially harmful effects for the environment and the health of the inhabitants, the community opposed their construction. They wrote letters, held protests and convened a Public Environmental Hearing.

As president of the Committee for Communal Action and as one of the leaders opposing the project, I received verbal threats from members of the B-2 military intelligence organisation. Armed B-2 agents visited my home. Eventually in May 1998 I had to leave with my family.

After our arrival in Bogota, our living conditions were very poor. I received no assistance from the government and had to look elsewhere to survive, seeking help from the churches, NGOs and local communities to support my family - my wife and two sons of one and eight years.

We initially rented an apartment. We did not try to access government assistance as, in addition to the lack of information about how to apply, we also feared for our safety in case the

authorities denounced us to the army. This situation lasted for five months until we received emergency humanitarian assistance from the Ministry of the Interior.

In 1999 we set up the Association of Displaced People for Peaceful Coexistence (ADESCOP) in order to offer solidarity to displaced families and to develop assistance programmes in accordance with Colombia's 1997 Law 387. This organisation, of which I am president, currently includes 250 families. ADESCOP is part of the Bogota Desk

on Internal Displacement, formed by three organisations of displaced people working with an NGO devoted to formulating proposals for solutions and to developing dialogue with national and local government authorities. Since 2000 ADESCOP has been involved in the National Coordination of Displaced Persons, an attempt at awareness-raising by IDP organisations in different regions of the country. Despite many difficulties, we have tried to establish a dialogue with the National System for Care of the Displaced Population.

In February 2001 I was elected Representative of the Displaced in the District Council for Care of the Displaced Population, responsible for the development of the District Plan for Care of the Displaced Population and for ensuring its coordinated implementation by the District Mayor's office and by the public enti-



ties at national level. Despite the fact that the representatives of the displaced in this council have been constant in participation and in putting forward proposals for action, after eight months of meetings the District Plan has still not been approved.

In my experience, the main difficulties for the organisations of the displaced and for its leaders are:

- the dispersal, heterogeneity and anonymity of the displaced populations in Bogota
- lack of information among the displaced population regarding their rights and regarding the processes for access to the few government programmes that exist
- the continuation of persecution, threats and attacks by armed groups
- discrimination and rejection by local authorities and communities
- Despite the existence of a law protecting the rights of the displaced, the response of the state is less than generous, usually late and generally focused on emergency assistance. Furthermore, the authorities delegate their

responsibilities to national and international NGOs.

- Facing this situation, the displaced population is then at the whim of offers of help and of pressure by political sectors and armed groups.
- Basic operating conditions do not exist for organisations nor for the practice of leadership and dialogue with the state. The government does not support the organisations; its relations with them are characterised by distrust, lack of transparency and verbal aggression. Also, in the few instances of participation and dialogue, the government will not offer logistical assistance (offices, transport, photocopies of documents, etc) which means that most of the organisations are weak and it is difficult for the leaders to do their work and support their families.
- The government does not meet its obligations under Law 387 to offer protection to IDPs and their leaders, many of whom are once again victims of threats, attacks and repeated displacement.

On the other hand, my experience does offer some positive results:

- Despite all the above constraints, the displaced population persists in its attempts to organise in order to rebuild its social fabric and to demand that the government fulfil its legal duties to care for and protect IDPs.
- Through its efforts in organisation and training, the displaced population has succeeded in formulating and disseminating several proposals for widescale solutions (such as resettlement and urban integration) and pressed demands for truth, justice and reparation.
- There has been some progress in relations between the organisations for the displaced population and national and international NGOs, UN agencies and other sectors of Colombian civil society.

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