

Acompañamiento in Colombia: international human rights protection of IDPs

by Luis Enrique Eguren

The deployment of international observers can effectively deter human rights violations against displaced people and those working with them. This article discusses the role of organisations such as Peace Brigades International in providing international human rights protection.

Peace Brigades International (PBI) is an international NGO, with headquarters in London and national groups in 12 countries, which maintains teams of international observers in conflict areas where a request for international human rights protection has been made by the local population. Since 1994, PBI has maintained a team of up to 20 international observers in Colombia, covering three regions: Bogotá, Magdalena Medio and Urabá. Its aim is both to protect the political space occupied by human rights defenders and the displaced population, and to provide training in matters related to psychological/social help and the reconstruction of the social fabric.

Internal displacement in Colombia

The conflict in Colombia has displaced up to a million people in the last ten years. Magdalena Medio and Urabá are two of the regions worst affected by threats and attacks carried out by armed bodies on the civil population. In general, the displacement takes two forms: a gradual 'family by family' displacement, in which families move to the slums of big cities, and mass displacements where hundreds or thousands of families move to zones close to their residential area.

In Urabá, on the Atlantic coast in northern Colombia, one of the largest displacements

took place towards the end of 1996 when more than 10,000 people fled from an operation carried out by the army and groups of paramilitaries in an area maintaining a guerrilla presence. The majority of those displaced grouped themselves in the area of Turbo and Pavarandó, while some groups moved to other localities and even sought refuge in Panamá. Another focus of displacement was San José de Apartadó.

Although the process of displacement has continued (in smaller numbers), the displaced population has begun to organise itself with the help of NGOs¹ and the diocese of Apartadó. As a result, negotiations have started with the government, and various Comunidades de Paz (Peace Communities) have been created among the displaced population, declaring their neutrality in the conflict and claiming the protection due to their status as civilian population².

In the case of Magdalena Medio, there has been a number of recent mass displacements. Some of these have been spontaneous, others organised (*éxodos campesinos* - peasant exoduses) in order to call attention to their denunciation of paramilitary attacks. Although the organisers of the *éxodos campesinos* have reached an agreement with the government, the safety of the area is still uncertain, subject as it is to dispute between the uprising, the army and the paramilitaries.

In both areas, NGOs and other Colombian bodies (some linked to the Catholic Church) have been denouncing and monitoring the situation, providing legal and humanitarian aid, and arranging the process of relocation and return. All of these organisations are subject to pressure and attacks from armed bodies. These international NGOs carry out a large part of their work via local organisations and NGOs. The Colombian government has put into operation various initiatives related to the displacements but the Colombian NGOs are unanimous in criticising them as being insufficient³.

Acompañamiento

The mere physical presence of expatriates (for example, those offering humanitarian aid) is not sufficient to secure adequate protection⁴. In order for observers to provide protection, certain strategies, activities and training are needed which are not usually within the remit of international NGOs dealing with either human rights or humanitarian aid. The deployment, however, of teams of international observers is a more effective deterrent of possible violations. They maintain a permanent or periodical presence in the differing scenarios, have regular interviews with the authorities and other bodies, and periodically publish information. Should violations take place, they provide information about them, to enable action to be taken against the violator in order to prevent future violations. This is known as *acompañamiento* and only in this way can the presence of international personnel afford the displaced population a measure of security.

Goals of PBI

Given its mandate, the important role of Colombian bodies in protecting the displaced population and the level of local organisation, PBI's work in Colombia

focuses on protecting the fragile arena for action of NGOs and local organisations of displaced people. It aims to:

- avoid the need for displacement by acting on the immediate causes which produce it (protecting those social agents who in turn confront violations of human rights)
- protect NGOs and the displaced population from the violations of human rights which occur during displacement and refuge
- facilitate the return process, providing protection during return and resettlement

Strategy of PBI

- I. *Acompañamiento* and providing an international presence
 - a. International human rights protection for i) NGOs and Colombian bodies working in the field of human rights and ii) the displaced population

This protection includes

involves maintaining an international presence in lodgings/refuges (with the effect of these becoming safe places) and throughout the process of return and resettlement, especially in the areas of Urabá, Chocó and Magdalena Medio.

- b. Participating as international observers in inspection commissions and at mixed negotiation tables (made up of authorities, state bodies, NGOs and displaced people)

Providing an international presence in situations involving inspection and dialogue acts both as a guarantee and reminder of the commitments reached for all those present, especially the authorities and armed bodies.

- II. Talking to and lobbying the civil and military authorities, institutions, the diplomatic service, international organisations, and others, in order
 - i) to ensure that all sectors understand as fully as possible the objec-

tion and the major the situa- placed pop- 1998 PBI 10 meetings

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age of infor- rtain ntegration tivities of fferent s, some- ing which th helps ork on the round and mproves the ecurity situ- tion of the NGOs and the dis- placed pop- ulation.

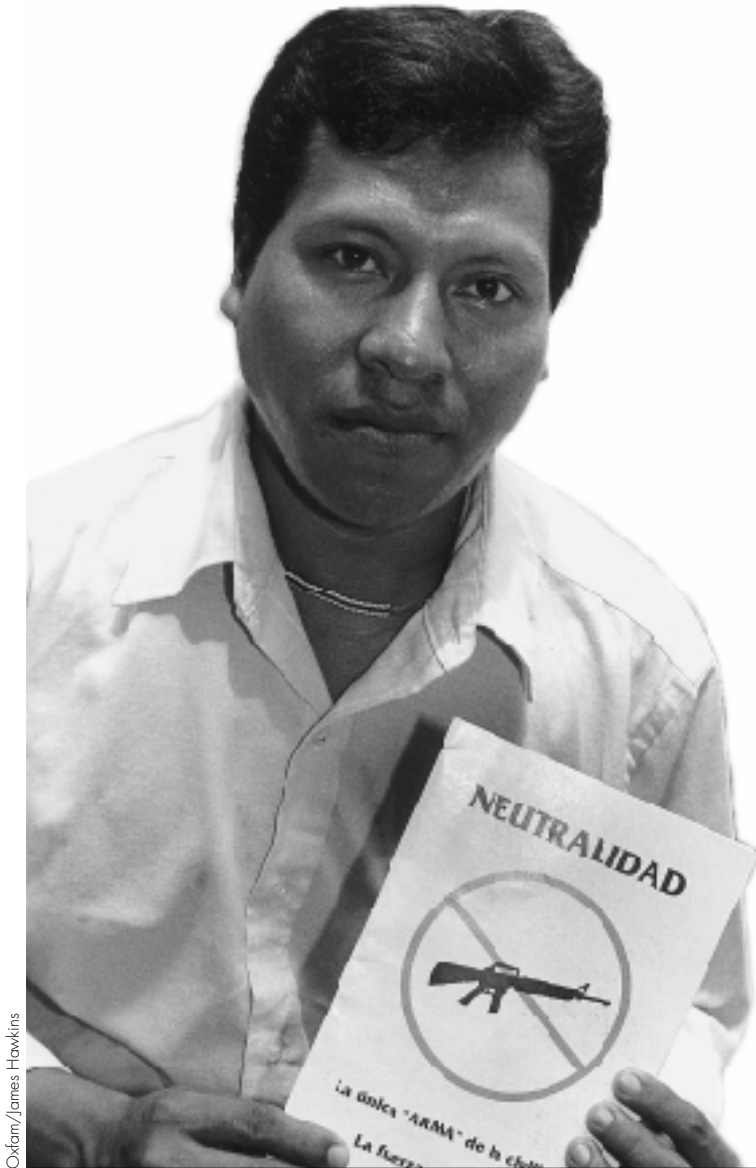
- V. Reconstructing the social fabric: psychological and social aid, repairing the social fabric and resolving conflicts

The training team of PBI Colombia runs workshops for members of those Colombian bodies and organisations working in the defence of human rights and with the displaced population. These focus on themes relating to trauma, grief, psychological and social intervention, collective memory and an analysis of conflict, which these organisations can later apply to their daily work.

Other cases of international *acompañamiento* of displaced populations

In El Salvador, Salvadorean refugees returning from Honduras and internally displaced Salvadoreans returning to their homes also had international *acompañamiento* by NGOs, particularly from 1987 to 1992. The convoys of buses were escorted by members of international NGOs (PBI among them) and of the Christian Churches who then stayed in the new settlements for several months. This fairly spontaneous movement evolved and developed considerably in neighbouring Guatemala. In the early 1990s, PBI accompanied the first delegations of the CPRs (*Comunidades de Población en Resistencia*: populations which had remained displaced in the highlands since the army operations of the 1980s) when they started travelling to the City of Guatemala to negotiate their return with the Government. *Acompañamiento* by international NGOs was included in the return agreement signed by the Government and the Guatemalan refugees in Mexico; since then, dozens of foreign volunteers have lived and travelled with the refugees and displaced people in the jungles that had previously been the army's private war zone.

Both cases of international *acompañamiento* in El Salvador and Guatemala reflect an evolving tool which required considerable reflection and development of strategies and tactics in order for it to become of significant use in ensuring the protection of the displaced population. The case of international *acompañamiento* of displaced populations in Colombia is another step forward in its development; further steps are still needed, as suggested at the end of this article.



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The effectiveness of *acompañamiento*

It is always difficult to measure the impact of the protection offered by the presence of international observers. One index could be the continuous demand for *acompañamiento* coming from NGOs and the Colombian organisations for displaced people. PBI Colombia has received requests for international presence from all the Colombian NGOs that work with the displaced population in the areas that have already been mentioned, such as Urabá and Magdalena Medio - a demand that is so great that the PBI teams are unable to meet it.

The conclusion reached at two international congresses organised in 1996 (by Amnesty International) and in 1998 (by the International Service for Human Rights and the Comisión Colombiana de Juristas - the Commission of Colombian Jurists), in Colombia, was that *acompañamiento* is an effective tool, recognised by a number of international bodies.

Nevertheless, the presence of observers is just one factor in a whole series of activities aimed at providing protection. It is a factor which gains in significance when fully integrated into the whole, but it can never be seen as being the single, determining factor when judging the results of protecting the displaced population. The displaced population and its international observers move in areas under dispute between the army, self-defence groups or paramilitaries and guerrilla groups. There have been no attacks reported, up to the present, against either displaced people or local NGOs when they have had international human rights protection. The process of resettlement initiated in Urabá and the return of the exodus of Magdalena Medio are seen to be under threat due to pressure from the paramilitary, the army and the guerrilla groups. The declarations of the Comunidades de Paz remain the international standard with regard to areas exempt from armed bodies, but the supposed agreement made by the armed bodies is not complied with consistently; the grimmest case is that of the Comunidad de Paz at San José de Apartadó (Urabá), where nearly forty people are reported to have been murdered by paramilitary groups and, to a lesser

extent, by guerrilla groups in its first year of existence. In all these scenarios, international human rights protection - *acompañamiento* - represents one more factor in the protection on offer.

The type of protection offered by *acompañamiento* is not valid in all conflict scenarios. A prerequisite is that the violator must be able to be affected by the international pressure which an international NGO can bring to bear. This implies that *acompañamiento* is particularly valid when the violator is the state or a body against which the state can take action. This also implies that in such a scenario the government has to be capable of maintaining its executive role within the state. In those situations of open conflict where a state or a government stops fulfilling their role (such as in Somalia at the beginning of the 1990s), there is no body to which international NGOs can appeal that is likely to be susceptible to international pressure.

Conclusion

Acompañamiento is a versatile and adaptable tool, representing an important link in the chain of activities offering protection to the displaced population. It is part of an integrated system in that, as well as including humanitarian, social and legal aid, it is carried out, to a large

extent, by a network of local organisations. From an international point of view, what is needed now is the development of cooperation between those NGOs providing humanitarian aid and those, like PBI and the local NGOs, that carry out work specialised in on the ground protection. Cooperation will be a key factor in enhancing the results of field protection of displaced populations. Accordingly, NGOs should work towards a) developing a shared mandate and strategy for action, so that such cooperation could be easily implemented in different scenarios, and b) training the staff of those international NGOs providing humanitarian aid in the protection of human rights of the displaced population. In this way, the displaced population and organisations operating locally will be able to look to the international NGOs for assistance in the protection of human rights.

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See p38 for update on recent events in Colombia. The RSP and Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, are organising a workshop on Political Violence in Colombia, 5-6 July 1999, Oxford. For more information, contact: Sean Loughna, RSP (see p2 for contact details); email: sean.loughna@qeh.ox.ac.uk

- 1 Comisión Intercongregacional de Justicia (Intercongregational Justice Commission), Paz (Peace) and CINEP (The People's Centre for Investigation and Education).
- 2 See *Forced Migration Review* 1, p15, for description of Comunidades de Paz and San José de Apartadó in particular.
- 3 Éxodo (1998). "Los derechos civiles y políticos y el desplazamiento interno en Colombia". GAD (Grupo de Apoyo a Organizaciones de Desplazados). *Bulletin on internal displacement in Colombia*, n° 9, September 1998. Bogotá.
- 4 Cohen, Roberta (1991) *Human Rights Protection for Internally Displaced Persons*, Refugee Policy Group, June 1991, Washington, USA. Mooney, Erin (1995) 'Presence, ergo Protection?', *International Journal of Refugee Law*, vol. 7, n°3, Oxford University Press. Mahony, Liam and Eguren, Enrique (1997) *Unarmed Bodyguards. International Accompaniment for the Protection of Human Rights*, Kumarian Press, CT, USA.



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