



Secretariado Nacional de Pastoral Social  
Cáritas Colombiana



## **The Colombian Conflict: For the Rights of the Victims**

The National Social Pastoral of the Colombian Episcopal Conference (SNPS), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) are committed to a negotiated solution to the internal armed conflict that has afflicted Colombia for more than forty years. The conflict has created and sustained one of the largest internal displacement and refugee situations in the world, and the Catholic Church in Colombia, CRS, international Catholic Humanitarian agencies, and the USCCB support increased attention and response to this large-scale humanitarian tragedy.

Colombia is second only to Sudan as the country with the highest number of forcibly displaced persons within its borders, according to figures of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR). In the period between 1985 and 2008 over 4.5 million people were forcibly displaced in Colombia,<sup>1</sup> the equivalent of 10% of the population of the country. Colombia also has suffered high rates of forced disappearances, massacres, selective assassinations, and a largely hidden epidemic of gender-based violence and other crimes.

As a result of the prolonged internal conflict, Colombia is faced with consistently high levels of human rights violations which have a disproportionate, generalized, and systematic impact on the civilian population. In this complex situation Colombia also has the highest number of victims of anti-personnel landmines, and is the only country in the world where landmines continue to be laid. Between 1990 and 2008, 7,451 Colombians, including 372 women and 722 children, were victims of these mines.<sup>2</sup>

In a sense, the universe of victims is so broad that it cuts across all sectors of society and social classes. In addition it extends across the entire national territory, as shown by the total area of land—some 5.5 million hectares (21,235 square miles)—from which victims have been forcibly displaced. This is the equivalent of 10.8% of the farming area of the country.<sup>3</sup>

It is the position of the Catholic Church in Colombia that for a lasting resolution to this long-term conflict to be possible, the right of the victims of paramilitary, guerrilla and state violence to “Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-repetition” of human rights violations must be recognized and addressed. Victims have inalienable rights, and their access to justice must be guaranteed and protected. Victims’ rights are not transitory, nor do they exclusively pertain to the processes of transitional justice. It is only through the recognition and restoration of the fundamental rights of those most harmed by the conflict, that conditions will be created which will make peace and reconciliation possible.

The accompanying document by the National Social Pastoral of the Colombian Episcopal Conference (SNPS), and the Caritas International Confederation,<sup>4</sup> provides a brief overview of the humanitarian situation in Colombia, identifying key concerns impacting the victims of the conflict and highlighting areas which require improved national and international response.

The challenges faced by the victims are challenges for all of Colombian society and it is essential that even within such a complex security and humanitarian context human rights violations do not remain in impunity. The universal nature of these crimes calls out to the international community to lend its compassion, solidarity,

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<sup>1</sup> According to CODHES, the most well known civil society organization tracking such information.

<sup>2</sup> “7.451 víctimas de minas antipersonal” [“7,451 Victims of Anti-Personnel Landmines”] *El Espectador*, March 2, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Eleventh Report, Commission for Monitoring Public Policy on Forced Displacement, Bogotá, January 19, 2009

<sup>4</sup> Caritas Internationalis is a confederation of 165 national and international Catholic humanitarian and social service organizations that work throughout the world.

and support to help guarantee the rights of victims. Despite the significant role that victims have played in public life in recent years, sufficient protection mechanisms are still lacking and must be created, or where such mechanisms do exist, must be effectively implemented, in order for the issue of victims' rights to move from the realm of hopeful aspiration to concrete reality.

The United States has invested considerable funding in Colombia over the past decade in counternarcotics, military and social aid. This aid is an expression of U.S. commitment to address the drug trafficking that plagues both our countries and region, to support the capacity of the Colombian Government and its military to address a protracted violent conflict, and to respond to the large scale humanitarian and social needs resulting from the violent conflict in Colombia and its impact in the Andean region. Despite some noteworthy advances in security, particularly the reduction of homicides and kidnapping, other areas such as internal displacement and refugee flows, widespread threats and targeted assassinations continue apace. In 2009 it is estimated that more than an additional 280,000 Colombians were internally displaced, while thousands of refugees fled across borders to neighboring Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela. Extensively funded counternarcotics strategies have produced limited end results.

Beginning in 2000 the Colombian and U.S. Bishops' Conferences and their respective humanitarian and social agencies (SNPS/Caritas Colombia and Catholic Relief Services) have worked together on humanitarian responses, the promotion of human dignity and human rights, and peacebuilding initiatives in Colombia, and on advocacy on U.S. policy towards Colombia. The recommendations which follow are an expression of our direct experience and shared public policy concerns.

The Obama Administration has a significant opportunity at this moment to thoroughly evaluate and refocus U.S. policy and aid to Colombia, and to demonstrate a comprehensive commitment to the rule of law, the promotion of human rights, and support for the foundations of a sustainable resolution to the current conflict. This opportunity should not be missed.

To this end we make the following recommendations.

### **Recommendations:**

- ***Actively promote and support overtures for peace.*** The U.S. Government can make a significant contribution to ending the violent conflict in Colombia, but will need to clearly demonstrate a commitment to a just and negotiated resolution, if such an outcome is to be sustainable. The U.S. should support opportunities for international mediation, including possible roles for regional governments and multilateral institutions, as well as promote a substantive role for Colombian civil society, and particularly the victims of the conflict, in defining the central components of such negotiated processes.
- ***Consistently and comprehensively give priority to human rights as the foundation of U.S. policy and aid to Colombia.*** Despite gains in security, serious and widespread violations of human rights continue, with particular impact on Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, human rights defenders, journalists and trade unionists. In the past decade U.S. diplomacy and U.S. foreign aid in Colombia have made significant contributions to the promotion and protection of human rights in some key areas. Such efforts need to be expanded into a consistent and comprehensive framework.
- ***Prioritize social assistance for the victims of the conflict- the internally displaced, refugees, rural and indigenous communities.*** U.S. aid for the internally displaced in Colombia continues to provide significant and greatly needed contributions to emergency response and longer term re-insertion of vulnerable communities displaced by violence. After long needed increases in 2009 and 2010, the President's 2011 Budget Request included more than a 20% cut in the Migration and Refugee Account for the Western Hemisphere at a moment when such resources are critically need for Colombian refugees and Haitians displaced by natural disaster.
  - U.S. funding levels for refugee programming (through the Migration and Refugee Account) in the Andean region should be restored to at least the 2010 levels and reflect the magnitude of the humanitarian needs in the region.

- Within the resources allocated for humanitarian aid in Colombia, U.S. policy and programming should place greater emphasis on mechanisms to prevent forced displacement, and promote the return of land taken from Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs, particularly Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities), a central concern in the resolution of the conflict.
- ***End fumigation as a counter drug strategy.*** We commend the recent efforts of the current Administration and Members of Congress who are calling for a thorough review of U.S. drug policy in general, and in the Western Hemisphere in particular. The position of the Colombian Episcopal Conference has long been that aerial fumigation should be replaced with effective alternative development and voluntary manual eradication programs. We encourage continuing broad-based consultations on more effective long term counternarcotics strategies.
- ***Adopt trade policies that promote sustainable development in Colombia.*** The Church in Colombia and USCCB maintain that certain principles should be taken into consideration in all trade agreements. With the Colombia Free Trade agreement currently in consideration, these principles concern the potential displacement of agricultural workers, pharmaceutical patents and access to basic medicines, and the protection of the human rights of trade union leaders. The loss of the livelihoods of agricultural workers and their potential displacement can add to the already high levels of currently displaced persons and can deepen the nexus where coca growing and unemployment can intersect, for example. We consider it essential to continue attention on these issues.