

COLOMBIA SITUATION

(Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Venezuela)

2011: INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF AFRO DESCENDANTS



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The history of Afro descendants in the Americas begins with slavery and the massive and flagrant violation of their rights causing this terrible chapter of history throughout the region. The Afro descendant population in the region come from Africa from the ethnic groups of the equatorial part, brought to America as slaves during the time of the colony period in the sixteenth century, for the exploitation of raw material such as cotton, sugar, rice, tobacco and others.

The most important labors were held in the coastal zones. In order to escape, slaves were forced to seek refuge in, almost uninhabitable, hidden regions of the Atlantic and Pacific coast. There, they bravely struggled to survive and successfully managed to create communities in isolated conditions, arduous weather, and often in extreme poverty.

COLOMBIA
The history of the Afro-Colombian

communities in Colombia are marked by the growing challenges generated by; the armed conflict, illegal armed groups, dispossession of land, agro-business and development of mega-projects. These issues have forced thousands of people to flee from their homes and leave everything behind and thus escaping from constant threats, fear and insecurity.

There is no consensus on the total number of Afro people in Colombia.

According to the 2005's census, Afro-Colombians are representing the interests of 10.62% of the total population. The Ombudsman considers that there are at least 25%, i.e. 10.5 million people.

Afro Colombian communities are one of the most vulnerable groups to the effects of armed conflict, and thus one of the major protection focus against the risk of forced displacement. Thousands of them survive in conditions of extreme poverty.

In a resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly this year was proclaimed the International Year of Afro descendants in order to:

1. Strengthen the national, regional and international cooperation for the benefit of Afro descendants in relation with the full enjoyment of their economic, cultural, social, civil and political rights.
2. Encourage Member States, the specialized Agencies of the United Nations system, within their respective mandates and with the available resources, and the social civil society to develop and identify initiatives that might contribute to the success of year.
3. To request to the Secretary-General a report containing a draft program of activities for the International Year.

Legal Framework

The Constitutional Court, in the bill of law No. 005 of 2009, has concluded that the causes of displacement for Afro-Colombians are: 1. Structural exclusion which results in marginalization and vulnerability, 2. The mining and agricultural processes that impose severe pressures on ancestral lands, 3. Weakness in the judicial and institutional protection of the Afro collective territories.

The five departments with the highest percentage of poverty are those with the greatest concentration of Afro-Colombian communities; Bolívar, Cauca, Córdoba, Chocó and Nariño. The 2005's census revealed that at least 15% of Afro Colombians have nothing to eat one or more days a week, more than twice the national's average. On the other hand, life expectancy of Afro-Colombian women is about eleven years younger than the national's average, and for men is 6 years younger.

According to a report by the UN Special Delegate for afro communities, an escalation of violence against these human groups in recent years has been reported. This includes at least 20 killings of Afro-Colombian leaders in 2009.

The Special Delegate of the United Nations for summary ,arbitrary or extrajudicial executions informed of documents of continuous killings by illegal armed groups. The Delegate explained that "indigenous and Afro communities have been victimized by all parties in Colombian conflict" and that "historically, illegal armed groups have taken over lands of indigenous and Afro-Colombians, committing massacres and intimidating local population."

UNHCR's work for internally displaced population in Colombia

UNHCR believes that strengthening processes of the Afro Colombians' community structures are key to guarantee effective access to rights and conflict prevention.

Based on this, UNHCR works in many zones of the Country. In Antioquia, the Afro Colombian community councils of Mandé and Puntas de Ocaido (municipality of Urrao) have been trained with the aim of generating internal capacities, in order to open dialogue spaces with municipal and departmental institutions, and to establish effective protection mechanisms in the zone.

In Chocó, the FU is executing a process of organizational strengthening and promotion for effective access to rights with organizations of internally displaced population in the municipality of Quibdó. Through this project, the Municipal and Departmental Centers for Attention of Internally Displaced Population will be dynamized, and the groups of work for strengthening of IDPs will be fully implemented. Politics incidence processes have been also developed in Quibdó and Itsmina, under the guarantee of rights' restitution.

Regarding gender work, in Chocó has been developed a training route with the Gender Commission of the Afro Colombian Communities Association, subscribed to the Integral Peasant Association of the Atrato (COCOMACIA). UNHCR has also followed up on the construction of an action plan to be created after the participatory assessment developed in 2010, in the municipalities of Medio Atrato and Quibdó. The training for the Gender Commission and the Directive Board of the COMACIA includes the subjects of forced displacement, SGVB and effective participation.



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likewise, the program Peace Window in Nariño supports 17 afro Colombian community councils of the area of Sanquianga River, through capacity development in conflict resolution and crisis prevention, with and ethno-territorial and gender perspective.

Ecuador

In the 1950's, Ecuador received hundreds of Afro descendant immigrants, specially coming from southwestern Colombia. This migration was caused by economic and security reasons; the Colombian conflict has generated displacements of Afro Colombian communities to Ecuador.

According to a UN report in 2004, in Latin America 35.2% of the Afro descendant are illiterate and 92% live under the poverty line. Ecuador is the fourth South American country in Afro descendant population –after Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela – with an estimate of 604.000 people. 68.7% of this population lives in urban areas.

The 2001 census revealed that Afro descendants constitute the 70.3% of the population with non satisfied needs in Ecuador. Patterns of discrimination and ethnic prejudice are causes of this negative scenery, in which this group has found limited spaces for economical, social, cultural and politic development.

UNHCR activities on behalf of Afrodescendent population

At national level:

UNHCR is implementing the campaign, "Living in Solidarity" in conjunction with organizations of civil society,

governmental authorities and within the United Nations system. Its aim is to promote harmonious coexistence among various social groups living in Ecuador including women, children, adolescents, Afro descendants, indigenous people, persons of other nationalities, refugees, people with different sexual orientation, people with special abilities, among others. About 200 organizations nationwide have signed the manifesto of the campaign against the discrimination. During 2011, various activities are being implemented in the campaign:

<http://www.acnur.org/convivirensolidaridad/>

Esmeraldas Province:

The province of Esmeraldas, located in the north of the Ecuadorian Pacific, receives a large population of refugees and asylum seekers from the Colombian departments of Cauca and Nariño. Out of this population, about 60% are considered as Afro Colombians. In 2008, UNHCR opened its office in this province. As part of the "Living in Solidarity and the Inter-national Year of African descent, UNHCR together with the Municipality of Esmeraldas and other organizations re-launched the International Centre for Cultural Diversity which serves as a space that drives the intercultural dialogue, promotion of sustainable

development, and respect for cultural diversity. In addition, UNHCR supports other activities such as street football festivals to promote a culture of peace among young people, the construction of the 'Youth House' in San Lorenzo and strengthening local organizational processes.



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QUITO

UNHCR works with the Afro-Ecuadorian Cultural Foundation and Handcraft, *Ochun Funcua*, which is conformed by black women, refugees, migrants, immigrants and returnees. It works for the rights of these women with the aim of improving their socio-economic situation via the generation of alternative work in the cultural and handcrafts area. It promotes the consolidation of textile micro enterprises and development of entrepreneurial skills.

COSTA RICA

The exact number of refugees or applicants who are African descendants in Costa Rica is unknown. However, there are nearly 250 women and 425 men of African descendant in UNHCR's data base, numbers as a whole make up nearly a 15% of the total population which has been served by the agency or counterparts.

About 10% of the asylum seekers are mostly extra continental, the majority men of Africa. Practically, all of them leave the country within weeks or months. We estimate that they continue their route to the United States or Canada.

According to a population-based study published in 2008 by the Office of UNHCR Venezuela, 31% of people in need of international protection from Colombia are of African descendants. Many of them are from the Norte de Santander, Bolívar, Atlántico and Cesar regions. Over 70% of this population is located in the states of Zulia and Tachira, and like most people in need of international protection in Venezuela, have not been registered with authorities.

On the base of the same study these families have the highest unemployment rate of the population in need of international protection no registered and a significant presence of illiteracy among heads of household. However, families of African descendants have acceptable living conditions in access to potable water, electricity, transportation and health services.



UNHCR is the United Nations High Commission for Refugees with the international mandate to protect over 34 million refugees and displaced persons around the world. For further information in Colombia, contact: Francesca Fontanini, telephone: 571 6580600 ext: 156, fontanin@unhcr.org - in Venezuela: Victor Febres, telephone: 58 212 286 3883 ext: 133, febres@unhcr.org - in Ecuador: Andrea Durango telephone: 593 22 460 330 ext: 1128 durangoa@unhcr.org - in Panama: Eyra Harbar: harbar@unhcr.org - in Costa Rica: Andrea Vasquez: vasquez@unhcr.org; or go to our website at: www.unhcr.org.