

COLOMBIA SITUATION

(Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela)

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

No. 4



© UNHCR/ Colombia. Chocó, Arquia, Kuna children.

Indigenous peoples and nationalities form one of the groups most impacted by Colombia's internal armed conflict both within and beyond the country's borders. They experience serious threats to their autonomy, their own systems of government, their territory, their means of regulating their own cultural relationship with nature and of maintaining their own cultural identity.

For UNHCR, it is vital to protect indigenous peoples and to ensure that they have access to protection.

Colombia:

Colombia is home to 87 identified indigenous peoples, speaking 64 different Amerindian languages. According to the 2005 census, they are distributed across 710 reservations in 27 of the country's departments.

Indigenous peoples represent 3.4% of Colombia's population. They are one of the groups most vulnerable to violence and one of its direct consequences:

internal displacement. According to official figures, indigenous peoples make up approximately 2% of all displaced peoples within the country.

The principal reasons for the displacement of these communities include territorial disputes between armed groups, threats to life and personal safety, invasion of usurped land for legal or illegal cultivation, and the exploitation of resources such as minerals or hydrocarbons on their territories.

According to the Constitutional Court of Colombia (Auto 004/09), the main factors affecting the individual and collective rights of indigenous peoples include the forced recruitment of minors and young adults, sexual and gender-based violence, as well as forced prostitution, armed clashes, the laying of antipersonnel mines, confinement, and targeted assassinations of community leaders, teachers and health workers. The court also indicated that at least

32 indigenous peoples in Colombia are in danger of extinction.

During a visit to Colombia in July 2010, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (Unpfii) concluded that "In spite of constitutional recognition of the human rights of indigenous peoples, the situation of indigenous peoples in Colombia is serious, critical and deeply worrisome".

Violence and other crimes such as forced displacement and confinement threaten the physical and cultural survival of the indigenous people of Colombia.

One of the most endangered environments is inhabited by the Nukak Makú, Jiw, Tukano and Sikuani indigenous peoples, in the department of Guaviare. Their precarious situation is caused by the presence of irregular armed groups, illegal crops in reservations, displacement and murders associated with armed confrontations experienced by these indige-

nous peoples within the framework of the armed conflict. For example, in less than 20 years, the Nukak indigenous people have gone from 1,200 confirmed members to just 500.

According to the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia) 122 indigenous individuals were murdered, 10 disappeared, and 1,146 forcibly displaced in 2010. The indigenous people most severely affected by the armed conflict in that year were the Nasa people (Cauca), of whom a total of 45 individuals were murdered during 2010, followed by the Awá people (Nariño y Putumayo) with 25 murdered individuals.

UNHCR in Colombia fosters organizational capacity building at community level for the establishment of autonomous and participative plans for prevention and protection against the risks of the armed conflict. Its priority is to train government officials in indigenous law in order to recognize ethnic authorities and to support communities at risk by providing protection through presence.

- Indigenous peoples account for approximately **2%** of the total displaced population (according to official figures).

- Between 2005 and 2010, **52,521** individuals from indigenous peoples were forcibly displaced (according to official figures as of December 2010).

- The departments most seriously affected: Guaviare, Caquetá, Arauca, Norte de Santander, Magdalena, Meta, Guainia, Vaupés and Putumayo.

- Over **90%** of the population located in the department of Putumayo lives in extreme poverty.

“Why do they want to drive us away from here? (...) We don't have anything to do with this (...) We're hunters, we belong in the forest (...) There's no land here (...) There's no food here (...) We're scared (...) Before, no White knew the Nukak, now they point weapons at us and tell us to stand still (...) We stayed there with the thugs, harvesting coca leaves, and we're afraid of the *yemunos* (guerrilla) mines (...) there are *yemunos* and soldiers, and they take the wounded in helicopters (...) We stay quiet, we never move, only at night”.

Testimony from the Nukak authority, San José del Guaviare.

Ecuador:

In recent years, Ecuador has become the country with the largest refugee population in Latin America: This country is currently home to around 54,000 individuals with refugee status. The provinces along the northern border are inhabited by various indigenous groups that have been affected by the Colombian conflict and by the arrival of asylum seekers on Ecuadorian territory. The province of Sucumbíos is inhabited by five indigenous nationalities: Siona, Secoya, Cofán, Kichwa and Azur. The province of Carchi is home to the Awá and the Pasto people, while Imbabura is home to the Awá and the Kichwa. This last group includes the Karanki, Otavelo, Natabuela and Kanyambi peoples.

According to a December 2009 report by James Anaya, the UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples, the lack of a law promoting compatibility with indigenous justice systems causes conflicts of competence between official and indigenous jurisdictions. The problems experienced by indigenous peoples in accessing justice are aggravated by the lack of an adequate public defense system.

The banks of the San Miguel and Putumayo rivers are home to various Kichwa and Signa communities directly



© UNHCR/ Colombia. Bellavista, Chocó. Wounaan women.

affected by the Colombian armed conflict. Many of these indigenous communities along the border host refugees and asylum seekers, many of whom are members of Colombian indigenous nationalities.

The Ecuadorian provinces of Carchi, Esmeraldas and Imbabura, on the other hand, are home to the Awá people, a bi-national indigenous group that also inhabit the Colombian department of Nariño. This indigenous nationality comprises around 15,000 persons, of which 3,600 live on the Ecuadorian side of the border in 22 communities legally recognized as Awá Centers, gathered in a Federation.

UNHCR in Ecuador has worked on various projects, including improving basic infrastructure and providing educational materials for 17 Awá schools attended by over 500 children.

It has also organized a number of workshops for the empowerment of teachers, women and community leaders, and community health promoters from the Federation of Ecuadorian Awá Centers (*Federación de Centros Awá del Ecuador*).



© UNHCR/ Ecuador. Épera leader.

Another bi-national community, located along the Pacific coast of Ecuador and Colombia - in the department of Chocó - is the Epera people. The UNHCR office in Esmeraldas provides support for comprehensive farms that not only contribute to improving the living conditions for that population, but which also improve integration within the local community, as they are worked by all members of the same family. Projects with a comprehensive approach are important to that community, that have been marginalized for a long time.

Most indigenous communities in border regions lack basic services and are located in remote, barely accessible areas. In Sucumbíos, for example, the main means of access to some communities is by river. In this region, the UNHCR sub-office in Lago Agrio supports border Kichwa communities that host Colombian refugees of the Siona, Awa and Murui Huitoto nationalities through productive projects aimed at improving food security by helping the refugee and local population to revive traditional agricultural practices.

In the same way, these projects have been implemented in the Ecuadorian communities of Shuar, Charip and Yamaram Nankais, where the impact of the conflict in the neighboring country has caused the displacement up to four times of those Colombian indigenous communities.

UNHCR has used participatory assessments to identify various requirements in matters of access to basic services and livelihoods in the province of Sucumbíos and has triggered various projects in the areas of water, health, education and income generation in communities along the banks of the San Miguel and Putumayo rivers.

Panama

There are various indigenous peoples in Panama: the Kunas, Ngöbe-Buglé, Emberá, Wounaan and Naso. They live in indigenous areas covering around 20% of the territory of Panama.

The levels of poverty in the indigenous zones are the highest in the entire country, as are the levels of inequality compared to the rest of the population. For this reason, government projects in recent years have focused on sectors of this population and have created programs such as the “network of opportunities” which entails granting subsidies that promote literacy and vaccination levels of children and “100 to 70” (paying 100 balboas to individuals over 70 years of age with no social security or pension).

Currently, the main demands from indigenous groups (particularly the Ngöbe-Buglé and Naso) relate to concessions in their territories granted to companies operating in the sectors of mining, hydro-electric power, tourism and ranching. These demands have led to various public demonstrations and land clearings, and have led to an ongoing debate over a new mineral code under discus-



© UNHCR/ Panama, Vista Alegre. Wounaan women.

sion in Panama that would grant economic benefits in the event of exploitation of indigenous lands.

The problems of the indigenous population living in border regions are related to national security issues, due to the Colombian internal conflict (police controls of indigenous communities, limits to transportation of food for sale or consumption, for example). This situation is worsening in the province of Darién.

Panama – Costa Rica:

Of the various actions implemented by UNHCR for the cross-border Ngobé-Buglé population (Panama - Costa Rica), the PAF B project for reducing vulnerability to STDs/HIV/AIDS stands out. It also seeks to strengthen bi-national cooperation in the area of prevention between Panama and Costa Rica, providing culturally-adapted information to the migrant indigenous population and enabling access to health services along the migratory route.

In the same way, as a follow-up of the bi-national actions promoted by UNHCR Costa Rica for training and capacity building of local authorities, training workshops are organized for migration officers, aimed at the appropriate identification and treatment of people in need of international protection.



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Venezuela

The indigenous population in Venezuela comprises 28 ethnic groups, making up 1.5% of the total population. The Barí, the Yukpa, and the Wayúu, located along Venezuela's northern border with Colombia, are among those most affected by the Colombian conflict, as their communities host men and women crossing the border in search of international protection. With around 300,000 individuals, the Wayúu are the largest indigenous group in Venezuela. The Barí and the Yukpa number 3,500 and 1,000 respectively.

Nearer the southern end of the border with Colombia, many refugees arrive in the state of Amazonas. Most of

these are indigenous peoples and are received by Venezuelan ethnic communities such as the Piaroa, the Puina-be and ethnic groups originating in Colombia, such as the Kurripaco and the Jivi.

UNHCR is developing culturally-appropriate activities aimed at protecting these groups and promoting their identity and traditional values. One of these is the production and broadcasting of radio materials intended to inform and raising awareness among the population of the plight of refugees and their human rights in Venezuela, in the languages Wayuunaiki, Bari and Yukpa via local and community broadcasters.



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In parallel, we strengthen bonds with indigenous communities and promote participation of local and national authorities in the implementation of appropriate responses to the humanitarian crisis that are sensitive to the specific requirements of these peoples.

Like most refugees arriving from Colombia, indigenous refugees tend not to register with the Venezuelan authorities, mainly because they are unaware of their rights and the procedures they must follow to request protection.

In a report issued in 2009, the UNHCR estimated that 50% of the Colombian refugee population in need of protection in the state of Amazonas is indigenous by origin. As there is no permanent UNHCR presence or government asylum officers in this state, naturalization based on dual nationality (a right enjoyed by both Venezuelan and Colombian indigenous peoples), is the most appropriate durable solution for those residing in Amazonas and requiring international protection.

It is necessary to strengthen and improve measures that ensure respect for the fundamental rights of indigenous peoples and to consolidate mechanisms that make it possible to ensure their "decent living" in zones of conflict, particularly those in danger of extinction.



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.