

Colombian Refugees – Fact Sheet

Background on the Conflict

The civil war in Colombia has spanned more than four decades and has resulted in the most urgent humanitarian crisis in our hemisphere. Civilians are the real victims of this war between left-wing guerillas, right-wing paramilitaries, and the Colombian government's armed forces. Up to four million people have been internally displaced and another 500,000 to 750,000 Colombians have fled to neighboring countries in an attempt to escape the violence and persecution by armed groups. Fumigations and the resulting food scarcity are another major factor behind community displacement, although persons displaced for these reasons are not formally recognized as IDP's or refugees. Since they do not live in camps and usually cross the border in "drop by drop" displacements rather than mass group movements, they have been called the world's "invisible" refugees. In their countries of asylum, Colombians are often not formally recognized by host governments as refugees and thus receive little attention and humanitarian assistance. While Ecuador hosts the largest community of displaced Colombians (an estimated 250,000), there are also large refugee populations in Venezuela, Panama, Costa Rica, and even Chile, Argentina, and Brazil.

Refugee Conditions and Concerns

Security Concerns: The same porous borders that allow refugees to cross to escape persecution also allow persecuting irregular armed groups to follow and pursue civilian targets across those borders, where they also traffic and in drugs, arms, and sometimes people. Even on the other side of Colombia's borders with Ecuador and Venezuela, Colombian children are particularly vulnerable to targeting and recruitment by Colombian armed groups.

Economic Resources: Access to the labor market is a continuing problem facing many refugees seeking protection in neighboring countries. This is true not only for refugees denied legal status by host governments (who are then *de facto* economic migrants in the eyes of the state), but also for legally recognized refugees who face xenophobia and employment discrimination despite holding work permits.

Legal Rights and Protections: Even when Colombians fleeing persecution are aware of the asylum system and have the access and willingness to apply, the lengthy waiting period before refugees receive responses on their refugee status determination creates a legal protection gap. During which time persons are unable to work legally in their country of asylum or access health and education services. Meanwhile, those persons who apply for legal status but are denied, or those who never apply, are left in legal limbo and are subject to deportations or abuse and exploitation by local authorities. For those who are recognized as refugees by host countries, educational and profession qualifications obtained in Colombia are often not recognized in neighboring countries, hampering access to the job market, housing, and university-level - and at times even secondary and primary level - education.

Specific Country Contexts

Ecuador: An estimated 250,000 Colombian refugees live within Ecuador's borders. While Ecuador has one of the more functional refugee status determination systems of countries in the region, only 15,000 Colombians have been recognized as refugees by the government to receive legal residence permits and humanitarian assistance. About half of the refugee population lives in Quito, while others remain along the porous Ecuador-Colombia border or in other areas where the security situation leaves them vulnerable to continuing persecution by Colombian armed groups. Colombians often suffer from discrimination in Ecuador no matter their legal status, and this situation has increased following Colombia's military incursion

into Ecuadorian territory on March of 2008. Of particular concern are Afro-Colombian refugees, unaccompanied Colombian minors, and refugee women at risk of exploitation.

Panama: Colombians who cross by land into Panama seeking asylum continue to be confined by the government to the dangerous Southern jungle region, living in camp-like conditions but without the basic assistance and services usually provided to refugees living in such conditions. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Colombian refugees who live in Panama City lack legal recognition and live in constant threat of deportation without access to employment, health care, or education.

Venezuela: Unlike Ecuador, Colombian refugees living in Venezuela have little chance of ever receiving legal status due to a lack of a functional refugee status determination process. While the Venezuelan government is unlikely to deport Colombian nationals without legal residency permits, this leaves Colombians with limited access to the job market, education, or health systems. Furthermore, Colombian refugee children are often targeted by marauding armed groups who use these children as informants or to traffic drugs or gasoline.

What Can the United States Do for Colombian Refugees in Neighboring Countries?

1. **Allocate Money from Migration and Refugee Assistance Account to Colombian Refugees**
The Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) currently directs only 5% of its funding for refugee assistance to the Western Hemisphere. This is the lowest amount of aid given to any region for this purpose, including Europe. The amount of funding allocated by PRM to support the programs of UNHCR and humanitarian groups operating in the region is disproportionately low considering the ballooning needs of Colombian refugees in the region. The limited funding for refugees meant that UNHCR and the World Food Programme had to suspend food rations last March for refugees and asylum seekers in Ecuador. While food assistance resumed in August after UNHCR made a special emergency request to donors, the situation remains precarious for Colombian refugees in the region. This is by far the largest conflict-related displacement in our hemisphere and one of the largest in the world. **Congress should urge the State Department to ensure that humanitarian assistance for displaced Colombians is more reflective of the magnitude of the need inside Colombia and among refugees in neighboring countries.**
2. **Increase Refugee Resettlement in the Region** - The U.S. Refugee Resettlement program offers new hope for refugees who are still threatened in their country of first asylum or are unable to locally integrate in the first country of asylum because of conditions on the ground. Neighboring countries do not have the capacity to assimilate the 500,000 to 750,000 Colombian refugees who have sought refuge within their borders. To encourage humane treatment of Colombian refugees, **the U.S. can negotiate more robust burden-sharing resettlement initiatives with Ecuador, Panama, Costa Rica and Venezuela, resettling refugees to the United States in cases where Colombian refugees can not integrate before these refugees are targeted by armed groups or become destitute, homeless, jobless and excluded from the workforce and educational arena. The revitalization of the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program in the region would allow UNHCR to be more proactive in its work to find swift durable solutions for vulnerable Colombian refugees.**