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## **THE ONGOING CRISIS FOR COLOMBIAN REFUGEES**

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Under the current material support standard, most Colombian refugees, many of whom have been coerced under extreme duress to make payments to armed groups on the State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs), are now ineligible for resettlement to the United States.

The United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and the National Liberation Army (ELN) pervade nearly all aspects of Colombian life, and payments to these groups, often made under threat of torture or death to oneself or a loved one, are a necessity of survival for many Colombians. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that at least 70 percent of the Colombian refugees that would otherwise be suitable for referral to the U.S. refugee program have been forced by the FARC or other designated FTO to pay "taxes" or other types of coerced payments.

Colombian refugees are clearly a population in need. Safe return is not possible and local integration is nearly impossible to achieve. In Ecuador, the growth in refugee arrivals has increased pressure on the inefficient asylum system, creating a backlog and placing refugees in an ambiguous legal status.

Moreover, because of local discrimination against them, Colombian refugees are unable to access even the most basic services. Single women, often responsible for young children, are particularly vulnerable because of gender biases. In Costa Rica, because of economic difficulties, local integration is not a viable, durable solution, particularly for educated Colombian refugees for whom there are no jobs. In Venezuela, where security conditions have deteriorated in many regions along the Colombian border, there is no effective asylum process, and asylum seekers are not eligible for identity documents. The safety of the Colombian refugees in Ecuador, Venezuela, and Panama is regularly endangered by the cross border interventions of the actors of the Colombian conflict – sometimes in direct pursuit of a refugee. Put simply, many Colombian refugees have run out of options.

The only truly durable solution is resettlement, a solution that the United States should actively pursue in order to save lives and offer Colombian refugees the possibility of a safe and productive future. Last year, the U.S. resettled just over 100 Colombian refugees. This is clearly not sufficient to meet the protection needs of this vulnerable population.

It is important to note that, in spite of the changes recently announced by the Administration, Colombians will continue to be excluded from the U.S. Refugee Resettlement and asylum programs by the material support bar, because the duress exception announced by the Administration will not apply to those who have been victimized by the FARC or other groups terrorizing Colombians and forcing them to flee their homes.