



IDPs in a Humanitarian Zone in Chocó, Colombia

Resisting displacement: IDPs in Colombia

In Colombia, private companies cultivating African palm oil for use as biofuel are preventing displaced communities from recovering their land.

In the north-western department of Chocó, near Colombia's border with Panama, Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups of IDPs have established 'Humanitarian Zones' on small patches of collective land in a desperate bid to protect themselves, hang onto their land and livelihoods, and remain in their area of origin. Forced to leave their homes originally as a result of a major military campaign launched by the Colombian army and paramilitary forces against left-wing guerrillas in 1996, those who have more recently returned to reclaim their land are facing a new source of persecution and displacement.

In the communities of Jiguamiandó and Curvaradó, private companies cultivating African palm for the production of biofuel started to establish plantations on the land soon after its inhabitants were displaced. The Colombian government has provided political and financial support to the development of African palm plantations as part of its effort to eradicate illicit crops, promote regional development and, reportedly, to provide economic incentives for paramilitary combatants to demobilise in line with the country's legal 'Justice and Peace' framework. However, according to the Ombudsman's office in Colombia, the African palm companies have commissioned paramilitary groups to forcibly displace the original Afro-Colombian and indigenous

owners of the land who have since returned. This has been corroborated by the IDPs themselves who have documented not only forced displacements but also other grave human rights violations, including massacres, death threats, torture and forced disappearances.

In response, the IDPs have established Humanitarian Zones both to demonstrate their determination to regain their land and to better protect themselves from attacks by paramilitaries and the guerrillas. The Humanitarian Zones consist of delineated areas where the members deny access to arms and armed parties and actively insist on neutrality, refusing to pass on information to the armed groups or to provide them with logistical support. In addition, many have established warning mechanisms – involving national and international networks – in case of threats or violations against their members. Signs by the barbed wire fencing surrounding the Zones indicate that the land is collectively owned by the communities and protected by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

As of November 2006, there were five Humanitarian Zones in

the districts of Jiguamiandó and Curvaradó, hosting an estimated 400 out of the 2,125 people who lived in the two districts before the counter-insurgency operation began in 1996.

"It is better to die from a bullet at home than from hunger and desperation in a municipal centre."
Colombian IDP leader

For more information, see the IDMC's report 'Resisting Displacement by Combatants and Developers: Humanitarian Zones in North-west Colombia', online in English and Spanish at www.internal-displacement.org/countries/colombia. To read or hear the life stories of people displaced in Colombia, visit www.idpvoices.org.



Memorial sculpture in honour of 83 community members killed or disappeared in Cacarcia, Chocó, since 1997.