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Displacement in Colombia

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Mamie:

We're very happy to be here to talk about the mission we just got back from in Colombia. We'll be speaking about the security context in Colombia and the impact on communities of displaced people who live there.

Democratic security in the country entails trying to regain control in country from FARC—that has been active almost for 40 years. They became actively involved in drug trade and kidnapping and started targeting larger land owners who decided they needed to take back control of their land from the guerilla.

The landowners started to employ paramilitaries so an entire paramilitary movement started to develop into an illegal war. What happened really was that civilians got caught in the crossfire of the guerillas and paramilitary. If you were a civilian in a rural area where you had a farm, a group could come in and accuse you of having given aid to the other group, single out a few of you and shoot you in front of the entire community, and that starts a wave of displacement.

Currently, 2 million, in some cases up to 3 million people have been displaced, and out of a population of 40 million that's quite alarming. So our objective is to pull out some of the armed actors from this complicated state of affairs. However, the Government is really militarizing the conflict, trying to take the FARC by surprise. They're doing that through the introduction of antiterrorism legislation and by training Campesino soldiers – not trained the way normal military soldiers are trained, they're based in small communities and act as eyes and ears of government. There are mass detentions. It is quite a severe approach to dealing with conflict

Paramilitary are demobilizing but are not held responsible for acts they've executed against civilian population. Civilians are at risk because the government doesn't want to recognize that there is an armed conflict – this puts it under too many limitations. The government would not be able to fight the war on terror with the tools of just a regular armed conflict. That way, International humanitarian law does not apply and this is important for regular campesinos, displaced peoples because they are no longer seen as a protected body under the law. Rather, they can be seen as either collaborators with the government or can be seen as enemies.

What we were told by many of the displaced populations is that they can't live safely in their communities because of the attacks of the paramilitary and being accused by the Colombian government of being collaborators.

One man – in a community living in peace – had returned to community after being displaced to city. In the city he also faced ongoing threats because of being accused of being guerilla sympathizer. He was trying to find work in a local village.

Guerillas told him if he didn't sell his house to them they would kill him – he fled when his brother was killed and now is back looking for work He is being pulled upon by all sides of the war and is unable to protect himself or his family.

There is an exceptional legal framework for protection of IDPs in Colombia There is a Law for social security just for IDPs, to provide health care, education, shelter, and returns of populations. Constitutional court decision (T025): came up with checklist of items that had to be implemented immediately. It costs more than the current budget, so it is unlikely to be applied, but at least the framework is there. There's also a national Plan for IDPs but it's not being implemented despite its presence.

Sahuacha is not as bad as other regions you may see in the world but very substandard, hardly any efforts are made on part of the government to fulfill its responsibilities. Cartagena used to be a tourist destination when Colombia was safe, kind of gives an example of how upper and middle class Colombians live. They are very isolated, don't really see the impact of their government's policies and the war on rural communities. The conflict in many ways is invisible, largely ignored by both the middle class and the ruling classes, so the chances that they would be made an agenda item in a way that is meaningful is unlikely

Colombians who want to make a difference in their lives have to do it themselves – there is very strong communal leadership, and they were able to pull in international actors and authorities.

Andrea:

The IDPS are mostly rural groups, their main skills are linked to access to land, so in an urban area that is impossible to use. Although communities have been able to develop tremendous coping mechanisms, there have been problems.

Nueva Vida – community in resistance, fenced area that has been given by government to this community. The community itself approached the government and negotiated with them to have assistance in returning back home. They're demanding assistance in terms of either loans or materials, but have taken responsibility and action on their own, these IDPs have not waited for the government to do this.

-In negotiations with the government they also ask for projects, agricultural or being able to produce tools and sell tools back in city

What is very interesting that we found was that the international community has been instrumental. In the humanitarian zone, the community does not accept any armed actors. They want to enjoy the right to not be drawn into the conflict.

International actors can be deterrents for groups who are breaking security and can activate alerts to the Ministry of Defense.

The Saiza community – decided to go back despite huge insecurity, 8 people had been executed. Then the Army pulled out and the guerilla came in so the residents had to flee. They decided to return last year in July despite the fact that the situation is not safe. They are demanding that the international community be there.

These communities are finding more cooperative ways of cohabitation – they will remain autonomous but will engage with dialogue with these groups. The situation remains very unsafe; the locations of villages are very crucial strategic points. There are also increasing levels of cocaine trafficking.

Recommendations: (as per slide)

- Government should negotiate with the communities, implement their own legislation.
- Fund for US Plan Colombia should be used also for these initiatives
- There needs to be more coordination among the agents involved.
- More funding is needed for peace building.
- The demobilization program should not be funded until a legal framework is set to ensure justice.
- The UN only has an advisory role, needs to be more hands on.

UN more coordinated in covering areas that are affected by displacement

Questions:

In terms of international actors' role in supporting communities of resistance, you mentioned presence and funding, are there any other roles besides those two or do you want to expand on those?

Mamie: Presence is a big one because that's basically where we're seeing gaps, UN taking advisory roles to the government. Participating in providing technical advice, but we haven't been invited in on an operational level.

Advising role hasn't been enough

UN is trying to build up capacity to try to deal with IDPs

Without a political solution the operational response is very different

How can ignorance of middle and upper classes be overcome?

Andrea: The role of the civil society in this case can be instrumental to bridge this gap of lack of interest and information. We have seen that civil society is trying to move away from demonizing the government and trying to discuss with them, trying to take a greater stance in presenting the situation of this place, trying to fight against the government's efforts to make the situation invisible

The Colombian Government has countless tools to make the conflict invisible with control of the media. It is very difficult in any way to bridge this gap.

Mamie: The media is taking on an antiterrorism dialogue. It is up to Colombian media and advocacy groups in Colombia to not demonize the population and find peaceful solutions.

Some people are saying that it is a little like El Salvador, but there is no civil society movement in this country to help them, can we build some sort of effort in this country? What about the US government funding to Colombia?

Mamie: The main issue in Colombia has been captured by the war on drugs debate – not about the violence against civilians, about the war on drugs

How do we as civil society try to change that perception?

\$700,000 going mostly to fumigation

It is very difficult to counter that in Congress.

Looking at the post 9/11 context and framing Colombia as a new war on terror, using the term narcoterrorists, how is that being used as a blanket term and within US and Colombian discourse being used to justify further fumigation?

Andrea: The conflict is moving more toward the south and toward eastern Colombia.

There is very little honesty in this discussion because from the narcotraffic many groups are actually profiting, including some groups that are allegedly associated with the state – namely the paramilitary and army.

This Blanket association is leaving very little hope for farmers.

At the UN, they have decided that fumigation is a direct cause of displacement – it is a criminal action. UN should also be supportive of trying to bring the explanation away from narcotraffic and focus the discussion on people being affected.

Provide additional projects in terms of reconverting crops or other solutions.

The US policy is not actually reducing conflict or drugs trade.

Mamie: The one area where this label is helping is with the extradition process, it has been helpful to the Colombian government because the local justice system can't deal with them and they can send them to US.

The US responds more from an antiterrorism perspective, but countering violence with more violence is only making things worse

Fumigation is affecting the water supply, regular crops. There are other ways of eliminating coca, such as trying to shore up the coffee trade – other things you can do that are less punitive if you're not looking at it from an antiterrorism response, if you're looking at it from a development perspective.

With the issue of coffee, it needs to be addressed on a global level, the Colombian government is talking to other coffee producing states and working on how to be competitive

What kind of framework do you think would work and whose model for legal framework? Who do you think is responsible for reparations and how do you see the tradeoff between reparations and preventative work?

Andrea: With reparations we're talking about people forced off their lands, and we mean them getting their own land back. The demobilization program is unacceptable and international community should not support the process as it stands right now.

Mamie: We would want to see a local solution to the conflict in Colombia but what do you do with an inherently unequal society? That's where international community comes in. If you're looking at an unequal society where paramilitary and guerilla have a lot of control and the government has not been willing to penalize the paramilitary in terms of reparations, the UN can really help in raising these issues.

Andrea: Also in terms of these initiatives, there is also permanent presence of Colombians from civil society and actually help victims in applying alert systems, filing petitions. But these organizations are losing funding, and their capacity to operate. Huge amount of funding that has gone through legal system for alert has been wasted because system has not worked.

Have you seen self-management like this in other parts of the world?

Mamie: Andrea was surprised about how organized civil society was and how they had sense of staying together throughout the process. They are really trying hard to develop community awareness response

African context is a very good model but there is a history in Latin America of a community awareness model.