

Migrations and conflicts; internal displacement in Colombia

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Abstract: One of the most important consequences of the Colombian conflict is the massive internal displacement. It is contextualized within internal migrations which are interfered by performances and land use policies. Unfortunately both interventions and policies have been characterized by the ownership of land and other strategic resources, relegating in a second place the rights of the affected populations. Thus, in this paper one of the most important topics at present is presented: migrations, taking into account that in general forced migrations, and in particular internal displacement, have been “forgotten” in terms of both scientific and academic areas. The main goal is to try to research the Internal Displacement in Colombia from a macro-scale analysis. From there, a short review about both the perception of forced migrations within migrations, generally in terms academic-scientific and the perception of internal displaced people in comparison to refugees is done. Then, the paper deals with internal displacement in Colombia, explaining the keys to the Colombian armed conflict, to finally represent in this context the area of Catatumbo. There the conflict is very particular because it is performed in a border with the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

Key Words: migrations, forced displacement, return, conflicts, Colombia.

Resumen: Una de las consecuencias más importantes del conflicto colombiano es el masivo desplazamiento interno. Este se contextualiza dentro las migraciones internas, marcadas por actuaciones y políticas de ordenamiento territorial donde la apropiación de la tierra y otros recursos estratégicos han sido una constante, quedando los derechos de las poblaciones originarias relegados a un segundo plano. Así, el presente trabajo trata uno de los temas de mayor atención en la actualidad: las migraciones, con la particularidad de que las migraciones forzadas en general y el desplazamiento interno en particular han estado “olvidadas” desde el punto de vista científico y académico. Se trata, como objetivo principal, de investigar el Desplazamiento Interno en Colombia partiendo de una escala macro de análisis desde donde se realiza un breve repaso acerca de la consideración de las migraciones forzadas dentro de las migraciones en general, desde el punto de vista académico-científico; y la consideración prestada en aquellas a los desplazados internos en comparación con los refugiados. El resto del trabajo aborda el desplazamiento interno en Colombia, explicando las claves del conflicto armado colombiano; finalmente se escenifica este contexto en la zona del Catatumbo, que por su delimitación fronteriza con la República Bolivariana de Venezuela adquiere rasgos muy concretos.

Palabras clave: migraciones, desplazados internos, retorno, conflictos, Colombia.

Introduction

There is no doubt about the importance of the scientific production that, especially since the second half of the 20th century and currently, has emerged around the migration phenomenon as for theoretical interpretations, empirical analysis and to scale studies with temporal and/or spatial details (Egea *et al.*, 2005). This huge production contrasts in the opposite direction with the lower attention given to forced migration. Studies about migrations continue the tradition of focusing almost exclusively on the exit movements and not on those regarding the entry (emigration and migration), and among them those that are related to economic causes.

In this line, Bonilla (2004) summarizes in a good manner the treatment provided to this other kind of migration:

Despite the importance and frequency of the displacement, it has not been a central topic for the social and economic sciences. Studies about migrations are focused in those originated by economic expectations, yet migrations produced by armed conflicts, especially internal ones, have received little attention. In recent decades, forced displacement has started to be considered as a modality of migration, and some of the causes that are attached to it are violence, persecution and repression. (Bonilla, 2004: 1).

Nevertheless, forced migrations have been present in the context of the migrations in general when, from the theoretical point of view, typologies of migratory movements have been established. Thus, Petersen (1958), almost by the end of the 50s, mentions a kind of forced migration that is related to the migratory policy. More recent studies such as that by Abellán, Fernández-Mayoralas, Rodríguez and Rojo (1998) distinguish clearly two kinds of movements as for the reasons that cause them: *free*, identified with economic causes, and *forced*, linked with hazardous situations and caused by conflicts, political and social instability, natural events, and so on. By their side, Hugo and Bun (1990, in Perez, 2001) differentiate between “free migration”, identified with a free decision and “obliged migration”, in which affected people are not fully free to make the decision, and “forced migration” where the lack of freedom to decide is the first defining characteristic.

A fourth typology is mentioned by Blanco (2000), in it, forced migrations are precisely the most prominent. Thus, when referring to the migrat-

ing decision, he differentiates between “spontaneous”, “directed” and “forced” migrations. In the first two, the migrating person consents voluntarily to the mobility. And in the third case not only it is involuntary, but the affected individuals do not know the arrival place. This classification goes a bit further, also categorizing the causes of migration: ecological, economical and political, from which the first and the third explain forced migrations. Nevertheless, and taking into consideration the current reality, the author leaves open the possibility regarding the *economic migrants* and *forced migrants*, due to the difficulty of drawing a clear line between the former and the latter, since “the disasters of a war or the consequences of a dictatorship that keeps its population in a terrible state might encourage people to look for better conditions of life in another place without being explicitly persecuted” (Blanco, 2000: 33).

Actually, in both cases the departing scenery is characterized by a series of problems and vital needs that in one or another way are not fully satisfied in the place of origin. It is here where the political and economical mingle and “many exits are caused by the joined and inextricable effects of violence and economic need” (Escalona, 1995: 69).

From the political point of view, this difficulty to clarify who the “economic migrants” and who the “forced migrants” are, is exploited by the involved countries themselves: for the countries that receive the *mishmash* it can be an excuse to reject refugees. Migrants who abide to the “no return” right, and for the ejecting countries, this aspect eases an indolent attitude and of no-acknowledgement of the conflict situation that causes that mobility of people¹. One fact that could tell the difference between voluntary and forced migrants is that in the first case the migration movement is planned and in the second one there is not time for such planning and the exit is rather an escape.

¹ It is not surprising that the diversification, complexity and extension of the population movements increase and it makes it increasingly harder to know who belongs in which category. Thus, the unequal relationships among countries, the increase in social imbalances and poverty, and the maintenance of the civil wars and conflicts with the appearance of other (Gil, 2000) will do nothing but provide people with more reasons to emigrate.

On the other hand, just like there is a tendency to identify voluntary migrants with economic migrants, as if all people moved for economic reasons, there is another tendency to identify the causes of war and civil conflicts as main reasons of forced displacements, in which civil population plays the role of military objective (UNHCR, 2000), including their resources which become part of the war economies.

To the most strictly military causes, one can add the political, economical, environmental and ethnical (Malguesini and Jiménez, 2000): in the political plane, one flight from situations of generalized violence that alter daily life. From the economic perspective, poverty and economic tensions are the reasons that lead to human displacement, not disregarding the appropriation of land and resources. From the environmental point of view, it is the destruction by overexploitation, degradation of human resources and exclusion of vulnerable groups that depend on them. Finally, in the ethnical plane, ethnical groups are easier manipulated by fanatical groups that control the state apparatus, defining the characteristics of the nationality, and even achieving a potential extermination and *ethnic cleansing*.

Forced migrations: refugees and internally displaced. Where do the differences lie?

“Forced migrations” and “forced displacements” are terms used without distinction and refer to the movements that people perform in an involuntary way as a consequence or response to specific natural events (famines, droughts, floods, earthquakes) and human actions (wars, civil conflicts, persecutions, environmental degradation, development projects).²

The consequences of either case change the affected people and oblige them to displace in the most vulnerable group among the migratory movements in general (Van Hear, 1994). The vulnerability situation worsens when said people do not find the appropriate response to their lacks derived

² Other terms used to refer to forced displacement are: refugee movement, massive exodus, asylum flow, mass expulsion, ethnic cleansing, disaster-induced displacement, development-induced displacement, forced migration, internal displacement, population transfer, population exchange, involuntary repatriation and imposed return (UNHCR, 1997)

from an unplanned movement, and likewise they do not fulfill the requirements to “be considered technically as refugees or to ask asylum in another country” (Malguesini and Jiménez, 2000: 115). All these circumstances can worsen even more when it’s a question of individuals displaced in their own country.

Nevertheless, traditionally, the concern has been focused on *refugees*, which starts in the XIX century with F. Nansen, founder of the *International Office for Refugees*. His work starts in the postwar of the First World War and is focused on recovering documents for the refugees.

People in this situation were considered up to the middle of the XX century as *specific groups* that were out of their country as a result of two world wars. Specific groups were Turks, Armenians, Germans, Spanish, Palestinians and Koreans (UNHCR, 2000). This concept was extended with the creation of the International Refugee Organization (IRO) in 1947 which included the “disadvantaged people” as result of the Second World War. Some years later, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), created in 1951, expands the concept of refugee again overcoming the *specificity* of the affected groups.³

As time passes, not only has this organization extended its responsibilities regarding the refugee people⁴, but it also has recognized the needs of other groups of people affected by conflicts of different nature such as the returnees, previously deported people, migrants in transit, illegal migrants, ecological migrants, involuntarily resettled and internally displaced people.⁵

³ The refugee definition in the way it is known at present is as follows: “...the term “refugee” shall apply to any person who: [...] owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it...” (Art. 1 (A) 2 of the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention relating to the Status of Refugees).

⁴ Their assistance activities regard two areas: refugee assistance programs from the initial phase of emergency to reach permanent solutions, and to assist in terms of food, shelter construction, water supply, sanitation, education, etcetera (Media and Gil, in Pérez, 2000)

⁵ These nine situations were announced in Soviet Union in 1996 (UNHCR, 2000)

In regard to the internally displaced, these awoke interest in the 90's, although the UNHCR started to draw attention to this collective in the 60's. In this way, in 1997 UNHCR asked the Executive Committee to classify the distinction between refugees and internally displaced. This request is dealt with again in the Contadora Agreement for the Peace and Cooperation in Central America (*Acuerdo de Contadora para la Paz y la Cooperación en América Central*) (1984), and in 1998 the United Nations define the internally displaced as *Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.*

This broad definition does nothing but extending the discussion about the concept and situation of the internally displaced people (UNHCR, 2000): a) internal displacement is associated with visible and destructive armed conflicts (Bosnia, Chechnya, and so on) that draw the attention of the media and international organizations, whereas other conflicts that are extended in the time are called *low intensity conflicts* (Colombia, Peru) have received less attention; b) the studies have been focused on people that flight in an spontaneous way, while transfers and forced resettlements receive less attention; c) people who are obliged to displace as a result of natural disasters, development projects and infrastructure plans are often excluded; d) internally displaced people are only considered just a human category; e) the needs of the non-displaced can be the same as those of the displaced in situations of violence and conflict, and violence; f) little attention has been given to the moment in which a person stops being displaced.

For authors such as Bennett (1998), the term internal displacement is above all

conservative given that it does not acknowledge the borders and supports the responsibility of the governments to protect all the people in their interior. Actually [...] people are uprooted forcibly (frequently by the government in charge of their protection), they move in mass towards and within their borders, they become shield for the insurgent activities, and they are subject of harassment and violations of human rights (Bennett, 1998: 5).

Nevertheless, differences between refugees and internally displaced people go beyond the formal concept, and lie especially in the protection system and international refugee assistance, which is not the case of the internally displaced people, who only count on the attention of the national jurisdiction. In this sense, the gap of an international protection system has caused the debate of widening the system of the refugees to include the internally displaced people (Barutciski, 1998; Rutinwa, 1999; Kingsley-Nyinah, 1999), without making obvious the role of the government as guarantor of human rights in a broad sense.

Some have tried to cover this administrative shortage that affects the internally displaced with the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, a document that was presented by F. M. Deng 1998. It is not a binding document, but it is of great value for it gathers, in a single text, scattered norms from diverse instruments of International Law, and it helps as control regarding the treatment of the internally displaced people (Cohen, 1998), such as the prohibition of arbitrary displacements, the play down of the effects of the displacement, not to separate the members of the same family and in some cases to know the destination of each of them, to provide specific treatment (food, housing, health), to secure the voluntary return, secure and decent.

Apart from the concern for their protection, other reasons that justify the interest for the internally displaced people is their vulnerability and their rise in quantitative terms. The aspects that characterize that vulnerability are: less attention on the side of the international community, lack of security and welfare in the flight process, exposure to more direct physical threats and to a discriminatory treatment and rejection, not to have freedom of movement, especially when they are transferred and resettled by force, lack of legal documentation (UNHCR, 1997).

On their part, the increase in the number of internally displaced people is related to the complexity of the international migratory movements, that has made the international community take measures that restrict the exit of people in refugee condition (Gil, 2000), avoiding with it long term settlements. Measures such as creating security zones in countries in conflict, to give temporal protection instead of the refugee condition, to spread the idea of the “right to remain”, to increase the volume of repatriations, and

some other; have progressively internalized the displacement and kept people within the borders of their respective countries. To these “measures of internalization” one can add the increase in the number of internal conflicts in potential countries of asylum, the existence of long civil wars that have made border areas impassable, more diversity in the uprooted people... (Schmeidl, 1998).

The numbers, although not totally coinciding, have started to show these policy changes, so that the number of displaced people has increased, and the number of refugees decreased. Thus, in 1999 there were about 11,6 million refugees around the world, plus a million asylum applications, and 20 million of internally displaced people, from which only four million had received attention from UNHCR. This volume approaches the one mentioned in 1998 by the Internally Displaced People: A Global Survey (Norwegian Refugee Council [NRC]) program, which considers that if apart from counting the number of people that become refugee by armed conflicts, one counts that which has been displaced by natural disasters, development projects and economic migration, the global number would exceed 160 million.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a unanimity regarding the fact that the higher number of internally displaced people is located in Sudan, Angola, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Colombia, Sri Lanka and Bosnia.

How many and where are the internally displaced?

On a worldwide scale, one of the main problems when studying internally displaced people is counting them. This situation is derived mainly from the different conception that the governments, the United Nations and the NGO's have regarding who is an internally displaced (Bennett, 1998). To this, one must add the attitude of the governments that not always acknowledge the presence of the internally displaced people, because they do not want to recognize conflicts that they partially cause. Also, that the displaced person not always registers with the local authorities and looks for means to become *invisible*⁶, that some people count on the economic

⁶ Some people tend to “merge” with families and friend in urban zones where they have more anonymity (UNHCR, 1997).

means or social networks which are enough to renounce to the registering and the help that is derived from them. In many conflict zones international presence is minimal or does not exist at all, this reduces the possibility of counting the number of people that flee, also, that the count is done sometimes according to the number of people that require food aid, who not always are all of the displaced people. At the beginning of the process the mobility is fast and from one place to another, with this factor the count does not exist or is not necessary, lastly, that people that have already returned are still counted as displaced (UNHCR, 1997; Bonilla, 2004; OIM, 2001).

Colombia is an example of a country where it is hard to know the number of displaced people. Almost all studies performed coincide on the internal displacement, pointing out that this nation is the one with the highest number of displaced people.⁷ It has even gained positions in the last years. Thus, the US Committee for Refugees pointed out that in 1997 Colombia occupied the ninth position in the world with more displaced, after Sudan, Afghanistan, Angola and Bosnia. In 2002, the UNHCR considered Colombia in the third position after Sudan and Angola⁸ (Collymore, 2002) (Map 1). Nowadays it holds the first position according to the 2007 UNHCR report.

This country draws to four sources to count the displaced that provide different numbers.⁹ This *dance* of numbers is easy to understand given that the counts do not have the same objectives, methodology, and of course, the same interests of the institution that is in charge of performing it. To this one adds the fact that, because of diverse reasons, not all the displaced resort to the same organism, therefore the official register of the RSS, Unique Register of Displaced Population (*Registro Único de Población Desplazada*) (RUPD) – sometimes is not the most reliable source, given that it only

⁷ According to the UNDP (2005), internal displacement in Colombia is considered one of the most important since Second World War.

⁸ Sudan had 4 millions, Angola 2,3 millions and Colombia 2 millions.

⁹ CODHES, Non-governmental organization that has performed pioneering studies for several years, analysis, measurement and proposals to pay attention to displaced people. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the System of estimation and registration (*Sistema de estimación y el registro*) and the Episcopal Conference's information system of Colombia named RUT.

counts those who resort to public organizations (municipal representation, municipality) in order recognize their displaced condition.¹⁰

Thus, if one considers CODHES and RSS, the number of internally displaced people had a continuous increase up to 2002 (table 1 and graph 1), this coincides with one of the most critical years in the history of the displacement in Colombia. In the subsequent years, both sources differ in regard to the evolution of the phenomenon. Despite the fact that they coincide in pointing out that 2003 is a year in which the number of displaced is reduced, this decrease is momentary for CODHES and shows a clear increase in 2004 and 2005, whereas for RSS this decrease is kept up to 2005.¹¹

The Colombian armed conflict as cause of the internal displacement.

Territory as space of power

Colombia is part of a region, Latin America, which is historically marked by the inadequate use of power, by the marginalization of indigenous communities, by the unequal access to the resources, by the imperialist economic colonization and by the oligarchic systems. In this environment, the Colombian country is presented as one of the best examples of “intense and systematic violence” (Cohen and Sánchez-Garzoli, 2001: 71). This to the point that the extension and almost “tradition” of this situation makes many specialists describe the Colombian internal conflict as a “low intensity” one, in order to differentiate it from others, more destructive and concentrated, which occur in a shorter period of time (Bosnia, Ruanda).

¹⁰ The registration in the Unique Displaced Population Register (*Registro Único de Población Desplazada*) (RUPD) is the compulsory requirement to access to most programs of Emergency Humanitarian Attention (EHA) and socioeconomic stabilization. In order to have access to SUR, displaced families have to make declaration before any representative of an attorney's office, which is resolved 15 days later. Most of them are rejected because they take place one year after the displacement occurred (Ibáñez and Moya, 2006).

¹¹ The temporal series must not be understood as if the phenomenon had its beginning in 1994. It is a question of more accessibility to the sources, since 1985 is the year with an increase in the number of displaced as a consequence of the intensification of the armed conflict, which has another significant increase from 1993 (Murad, 2003).

Such conflict situation has been the incentive for the forced displacement to be constituted as an essential characteristic of the country's history (Lozano and Osorio, 1996), considering that it has produced a constant weakening of its socioeconomic structure and an increasing impact on the civilians.

The different conflict actors (armed forces of the State, guerrillas and paramilitaries act in order to seize and control the resources and the territories that have more productive and strategic potentials, destabilizing broad rural zones of the country: because of their mineral resources and the economic of extraction in zones such as the Llanos Orientales and el Chocó, the expansion of the agro-industrial and livestock companies in Sucre and Bolívar, and because of being strategic representatives for the trafficking of illegal crops and armaments in the Catatumbo, Chocó, Meta and Putumayo zones (González, 2001, Murad, 2003, Ibáñez and Moya 2006). This explains, at the same time, the geographical expansion of the conflict, and that new zones of interest have appeared synchronically for the actors involved.

What has been previously stated explains how hard it is to separate forced displacement from the expansion of the territorial control of alien groups, where not only do the actors of the Colombian armed conflict take part, but also the big multinational firms that develop their mega agro-industrial projects, in which the smallholder peasant is an obstacle for their commercial interests. The responsible for the process of deterritorialization and ejection of these people from their lands are frequently the militia that, pretending to be "private security companies" and with the complicity of the government officers,¹² form an alliance with the big multinational firms and oblige these people to leave their land, in order to acquire them at very low prices (U.S. Committee for Refugees, 1998). In these circumstances, terror and violence become an instrument to expel population.

¹² "An important number of violent acts committed by paramilitary guerrillas take place in connivance, not to say complicity, of the public agents, specially the members of the armed forces and the national police [...] When we speak about the ombudsman, the paramilitary guerrillas have become the illegal arm of the armed forces and the police, for whom they perform dirty labor that the armed forces and the police can not perform for they are authorities subject to the rule of law" (United Nations, in Vono, 2002: 43-44).

The economic interest also explains that the internal displacement takes places in zones that are about to be colonized and where population density is low, with the peculiarity that the property of the land is not totally defined and this fact makes the occupation process easier, generating conflicts among the very peasants simultaneously.

An example of this is the Catayumbo case, which will be dealt later, and that of el Chocó, known as *the best corner of America* where hydro-electric, harbor, interoceanic canal, oil pipelines, roads and railroad tracks projects concur. The added value to this territory by its opening to commercial use explains the war against the people of this zone: the agro-industries of the Urabá from Antioquia expand in this direction, mine and oil exploitation, hydro-electric project that makes energy exporting to Central America and U.S. easier, the presence of French multinational companies performing genetic and medicinal plant extractions.

In the same way, the geostrategic position that the region of the Catatumbo provides in regard to Venezuela, has allowed insurgent groups to find shelter in this neighbor country with the complicity of the government itself, consolidating their illegal commercial practices. This has happened up to the extent that Colombia is not the focus of attention of the DEA to monitor drug and arms trafficking, for they have centered their operations in Caracas and other shipping points of Venezuela instead.

In concordance with this, in the last four years the current Venezuelan President has demonstrated a contradictory discourse when referring to insurgent groups from Colombia (FARC and ELN), pointing out in 2004 in Cartagena, Colombia, that he did not support any of these military groups. Later in January 2008, in Caracas, he asked the international community to remove them from the *terrorist* list and place them back in that of *belligerent group* that is committed in the fight for a *Bolivarian political project*. This has generated a diplomatic crisis with Colombia pointing out this country as “friend of the imperialism” and provoker of a war against Venezuela.

The conflict also acquires a border character in Nariño, a department that is border to Ecuador, where the actors of it come together, narco-trafficking gangs, aerial dusting of illegal crops, gunrunning... and an important forced displacement of indigenous people and Afro-descendants (CODHES, 2007).

Recent evolution of the Colombian armed conflict

The Colombian society has evolved accompanied by war for five centuries (Sarmiento, 2001), starting at the moment of the Spanish conquest. This makes numerous annalists to state that the *modus vivendi* of the country is a permanent state of violence, which is perpetuated in the set of social economic, political and religious structures that promote and tolerate it. It has even been stated that “its people have some genetic formation that induce them a permanent state of social exaltation” (www.colombia.com/gobierno/especial1/).

Internal and transnational confrontations that have accompanied this process are numerous. Some that have occurred during the current XIX century are: the fight for independence, “eight (8) national civil wars, fourteen (14) local civil wars, two (2) international wars with Ecuador, two (2) coups d’État and the thousand (1000) days war [...] In the XX century in one international war against Peru” (Hernández, 2003: 239). All these conflicts were caused by political demands of bureaucratic participation.

The climax was reached in the second half of the XX century with the assassination of the leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the closest alternative to the clamor of the rural and popular areas, repressed and alienated for long periods of time. This alternative stated an agricultural reform that threatened the interests of the big landowners, who belonged to the traditional political parties simultaneously. It is here where a violent 20-year period starts. In it, broad rural population groups fragmented and gave rise to the liberal guerrilla movement with communist ideology (FARC-EP). This period claimed around three hundred thousand civil victims and two million internally displaced (UNHCR, 1997; González, 2001; Obregon and Estavropoulou, 1998).

The social and political unrest of the 50’s spread violence to large regions of the country, several insurgent groups organized in El Valle, Tolima, Caldas, Cauca, Boyacá, Cundinamarca, los Santanderes and other regions.¹³

¹³ These facts implied deep demographic changes in the country, mainly in the rural areas with important migratory movements from the country to the city, to which we must add the rapid increase of the population in the 60’s. The number of inhabitants was 11,548,172 inhabitants in 1951 and became 17,484,508 in 1964 (Ocampo, 1999), which supposed a population increase of 51.4%.

In these circumstances, armed forces turned against the established political order, this brought the lieutenant general Gustavo Rojas Pinilla to power, who governed a short dictatorial period and with help from the Church he established a reformist order based in the universal justice and freedom ideas. The fact that he did not count on political support led to a turn taking process in office between the two traditional parties (liberals and conservative), that was called National Front (*Frente Nacional*) and remained for 16 years starting in 1958.

During these four periods of the National Front, the government programs focused in the rigorous planning policy, austerity in public expenditure, pacification of the country, economic and social development and incentives for the foreign investment. Nevertheless, this taking turn system will count on the dissatisfaction of the other political groups because of the social reforming of the National Front. Thus a new generation with Castrist, Marxist, Structuralist ideology emerged (Ocampo, 1999) and the constitution of guerrilla groups with it.

The decade of 1970 was marked by the economic progress (boom of coffee and increase of international oil price), supported by neoliberal ideas and with the objective of eliminating obstacles to foreign investment. In contrast, the problems of the rural economy increased given that the expulsion of peasants was frequent with the increase of illegal crops and property concentration.

At the same time, paramilitary groups financed by big landowners and businessmen emerge, this, on its own, was accordant with the governmental policies of repression to the guerrilla groups. A submerged economy supported by drug trafficking started to be consolidated in this moment. Not only did it allow the direct financing of violence, but it also reconfigured the political order that starting from political and judicial corruption and continuing with that of security organizations, establishing an order of widespread impunity. This was clear with the assassination of political leaders, presidential candidates, town leaders, NGO's representatives, political annalists and academicians, attacks against the headquarters of the main newspapers and an ultimatum to the freedom of expression, attacks to political headquarters, public bodies, kidnapping, extortion, etcet-

era. In this environment, massive forced displacements occurred towards the borders of the country and above all within the country¹⁴.

At present, and despite efforts of many former governments in the negotiation processes with the insurgency, the main actors of the armed conflict continue (FARC, ELN and AUC)¹⁵ as well as the attacks on civilians.

To confront this situation president Álvaro Uribe Velez took “the patriot plan” (*el plan patriota*), as administration motto which consists of using the armed forces to recover territories that were once ruled by insurgent groups. This supposes an increase in the military expenditure, the constitution of “country people soldiers” and “informer groups”, and the extension of the conflict towards the east. This way of behaving has weakened the political and military structures of the guerrilla groups without defeating them.

That is why the zones with more ejection of population are located in regional contexts where there is a robust presence of armed forces and armed groups on the fringes of law, whose clashes reduce the guarantee of security because they become operational theatres in which war strategies are put to test, contradicting the official opinion which states that the more military presence produces higher security levels.

The Catatumbo case

Territory and conflict

The Catatumbo zone fits with the previously stated ideas¹⁶. Its geostrategic

¹⁴ According to the UNHCR 2007 report, they assisted 3 million in Colombia out of the 13 million displaced people that there are in the world, placing this country in the first place of the nations with more internal displaced.

¹⁵ FARC: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*); ELN: National Liberation Army (*Ejército de liberación Nacional*); AUC: United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*).

¹⁶ This zone had 176,000 inhabitants in 2004 National Administrative Department of Statistics (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística [DANE]) distributed among the municipalities of Convención, Sardinata, El Carmen, Hacaré, El Tarra, Tibú, San Calixto, El Zulia and Villa del Rosario, being Tibú, El Carmen, Convención and Sardinata the municipalities with higher population volume.

value is unquestionable (PCS¹⁷, 2003) since it is located in the northern department of Santander (northwestern part of the country). It stretches up to Maracaibo in the Republic of Venezuela and it is demarcated by flat, mountainous and forest zones around the Catatumbo river. In the north and west it borders on the Republic of Venezuela, where the oil pipeline Caño Limón-Coveñas is located. In the east, it borders on the department of César, through which one enters by the Serranía del Perijá, and in the south with the municipalities of Cúcuta, Puerto Santander, El Zulia and Villa del Rosario. Additionally, there are important natural resources such as oil, coal, marble, gold, limestone, coca production.

The previously explained conditions justify, partly, the dynamic of the conflict generated in this zone, set, in turn, in the adoption of neoliberal policies and economies in Colombia at the beginning of the 90's which make the transnational connections¹⁸ easier and feed the war economies.

The same topographic characteristics, mountainous and forest zone have helped to keep the guerrilla presence in this region for three decades, despite the attacks of self-defense groups and the operations carried out by the Armed Forces. For their part, the self-defense groups have been settled mainly in the flat and forest zones, both in the south borders of César, and in the right and left margins of the Catatumbo river, in the administrative municipalities, some municipalities located in the mountainous zone and some rural areas with coca crops. The incursions to rural zones, where the influence of the guerrilla is higher, are organized in these places.

¹⁷ Projects Department (*Consejería en Proyectos*) (PCS) is an international association of European and Canadian agencies of cooperation created in 1979 and constituted by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), the Swiss Reformed Churches Aid Agency (HEKS), Action by Churches Together (ACT/NL) and the Canadian Inter Pares (IP) agency.

¹⁸ La Gabarra (border with Venezuela) has one of the largest coca plantations in Colombia. Coca was introduced in the 90's and was facilitated by the favorable attitude of the State and the worsening of the impoverishment of the region after the government adopted a neoliberal project. The violent conflict, after the destruction of the local markets and the forced displacement are phenomena which have produced a potential army of "raspachines" or coca harvesters.

Traditionally, the ELN has had an important presence around the oil pipeline Caño Limón-Coveñas, from which they have obtained great economic and strategic benefits, thanks to oil theft and attacks on the pipes. Although this influence has decreased progressively due to the pressure of the Armed Forces and the self-defenses, it has been strengthened by FARC, which at the present is the strongest guerrilla group in the region. They receive large amounts of money in exchange for *security* to the sectors linked with illegal activities such as the grow of coca, and the marketing of the product derived from this activity through several distribution centers, among them, the province of Filo Gringo (El Tarra), which has been source of intense disputes.

The self-defense associations are growing nowadays and have presence to a large extent in the northern part of Santander, in the municipalities of Puerto Santander, Cúcuta, El Zulia and Villa del Rosario, and in Catatumbo in the municipalities of Tibú and El Tarra. Since 1998 they have tried to control the border with the south of César and in this way a part of the trade of coca and the smuggling in the region.

The recent extension of the self-defenses in the Northern department of Santander aims at dividing the north and the center of the country, linking the Urabá with the Catatumbo. This becomes evident in the Tibú–Cúcuta corridor which intends to communicate the Catatumbo and the metropolitan area of Cúcuta in the Sarare region, in the border, with the department of Arauca. It's a question of blocking the way to the guerrilla through this department and towards the north of Santander and to control the border with Venezuela, a source of great strategic advantages for the trade of coca and other smuggling products, as well as by the access to the black market of military weapons.

The self-defenses use their capacity to intimidate to force a person to become a *raspachin** in their coca crops. Likewise, they have tried to displace the FARC coca crops towards the mountainsides by putting pressure on the small growers.

*The person who removes the leaves of the coca plant [T.N.]

Internal displacement: a war strategy?

The described state explains the dynamic of the forced displacement in the Catatumbo zone, being the communities that inhabit it in the middle of the armed confrontation of the different social actors of the conflict. The study published by the ReliefWeb (2004) for the 2000-2004 period reveals that the dynamic of the forced displacement in the Catatumbo region is bound to the development of the conflict (massacres, homicides, kidnappings and threats). This dynamic responds to the incursions that illegal armed groups perform in the different municipalities of the region to monopolize the economic resources and the loyalty of the population, and to threaten them for the possible support to opposing groups. Similarly, it is worth highlighting the free and uncontrolled incursions of the FARC guerrilla in Venezuelan territory. Specifically in the land border with the Catatumbo where kidnapping and extortion practices to traders and stockbreeders are increasing in the Apure, Zulia and el Táchira states.

A 2003 report from the PCS described an invasion that occurred by the end of 2001 and the beginning of 2002 by the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-defenses of Colombia) (AUC) in the northwestern part of the Catatumbo caused the flight of 15,000 people of El Carmen, La Trinidad, Cartagenita, Miraflores, Ocaña and Convención to the closest urban communities which are Cucutá and Bucaramanga, and also to the periphery of Ocaña and Convención cities.

According to the same report, the rural communities of La Libertad, Cartagenita, Miraflores and El Aserrío have become ghost towns since then. Few families remain in the area. Many fled to neighbouring rural areas, and other families moved to the indigenous territories of the central Catatumbo, where they received support from these communities.

The consequence of the AUC invasion is not only the amount of displaced population, but the implications for the population that survives in their communities in the middle of the clashes between the armed actors. Blocking food and medicine, as strategy from AUC to confront the guerrilla forces, suppose the destruction of the local markets, in turn, scattering anti-personnel mines, as strategy of the guerrilla forces to prevent the advance of the AUC, supposes reducing the possibilities of growing

agricultural products. This is combined with the destruction of the local infrastructure. This fact brings people to highly vulnerable situations, up to a point where we can talk about periods of widespread famine.

The return: new conflicts?

Yet forced displacement also has a second movement, the return to the place of origin that in the Catatumbo zone is produced without knowing the physical and socioeconomic conditions and without any support from the state and military authorities, which converts the return into a controversial and complicated process. For instance, the rural area of Convención is a region which armed actors (PCS, 2003a) still dispute, having blocked roads since the end of 2001 with numerous paramilitary incursions. In general, conflict actors continue sowing fear and hate, and obstructing the entrance of food and medicine, which in turn hinder the revival of the local rural economies.

Likewise, the location of anti-personnel mines supposes an obstacle for the recovery of the local rural economy and the reconstruction of the schools. In the same way, the degradation of the social tissue, as a result of a divided and disorganized civil society by the perpetuation of the conflict can imply making the returned people getting gradually involved in the conflict because they are not able to confront their actors.

The same PCS report (2003a) mentions that more than 400 people returned home without help, in the middle of the conflict, and without any social or economic security. This makes the situation more difficult given that it can create new displacements. Also, returning as a result of a personal decision the help from the government can be left out, which can cause new conflicts between one and other type of return in dispute by such help.

To this respect, organizations involved in the return processes state that help must reach all the population in order to avoid any kind of tension according to differentiated policies depending on the kind of population, and have identified several needs in the return process: to improve housing and roads, to establish health centers and to provide medical personnel, medicines and surgical equipment, to reconstruct schools, investing in school refectories and hiring teachers, to help building and strengthening the basic

organizations and the social processes to contribute to food security providing seeds, livestock and creating mini-projects, responding to concerns about security by installing new communication equipment (for instance, installing telephone lines), to monitor human rights abuses by appointing an ombudsman for the zone.

In terms of government policies, several NGO's and UN have questioned the dignity, voluntariness and security of the return (PCS, 2003b) for several reasons: there is no investment in the social services of the returned population, the difficulty to recover self-sufficiency and decent living conditions in the origin place, the anti-personnel mines and the armed conflict actors are still present. The return takes place in the middle of a *never-ending* conflict; it is a complex situation considering that the returned population and the humanitarian aid may be close to any of the irregular armed actors, the potential increase in the vulnerability and impoverishment of the returned population, taking into consideration their lack of housing, economic insecurity, etcetera.

Besides, we shall not forget that the circumstances in the destination place also push the population to return: lack of help in the destination urban communities (Cúcuta, Ocaña and Convención), this help is nearly always precarious. Not to appear in the official records and therefore not to have access to help. Few chances of employment for, among other reasons, many of them are believed to be guerrilla sympathizers. An important presence of armed actors in the urban communities (Cúcuta, Ocaña and Convención), which leads to a constant risk for the internal displaced people.

This is the way armed conflict has direct implications in the rural population, which displaces forcefully towards urban nucleuses, whereas the illegal armed actors appropriate their land and use it as war economy by using them as commercial corridors and border connections.

This means that this region, as many others of the Colombian geography, in spite of being rich in natural resources become poor, or impoverish their inhabitants, being underexploited and at the expense of the interest in the illegal crops that do not solve the needs of the native population.

Conclusions

The Colombian armed conflict is characterized by having been prolonged for over half a century, the process of social and economic degradation, the use of the civilians as war tactics, breaking any norm in defense of the human rights. The increasing consolidation of the armed actors, the territorial control as power space, the lack of any credibility by the armed actors by the civil population, and the extension of the armed conflict and the impossibility of consolidating the peace agreements.

Internal displacement is presented in this context as one of the most dramatic consequences from the human point of view. And although no one can assure that it is a “new” phenomenon, it is true that the worsening of the armed conflict in recent years has increasingly involved civil population, being possible to characterize the current situation of this phenomenon as critical, for different problems concur such as the violation of rights as fundamental as that of life and personal security, familial losses and de-structuring, to lose material, affective and personal goods, to lose jobs and access to few qualified jobs. The challenge that the displaced people suppose for the arrival places that aren’t always in optimal conditions to attend a population that most of the times arrives impoverished.

The internal displacement phenomenon has become more complex with the evolution of the conflict, not only because of its extension, but also because of its dynamics, given that along with the more frequent rural-urban displacements, the interurban and intra-urban increase. This makes their geographic location difficult, for the territorial dynamic responds to a great extent to the dynamic of the armed conflict. Thus, affected municipalities can change their ejection role to that of a recipient in a short period of time. Similarly, the fact that no single department of Colombia has been kept separate from the phenomenon, that is, each of them has experienced to a certain extent forced exits of their populations, and this also indicates to which extent violence is widespread in the country. An example of the expansion of the phenomenon is the increase in the number of affected municipalities in 2005, as it is the case of registers of new displacements in the departments of Vaupés and Guainía.

It is worth asking to what extent the democratic security policy of the government operates, since the zones with higher population ejection occur in regional contexts where there is a robust presence of armed forces and armed groups on the fringes of law.

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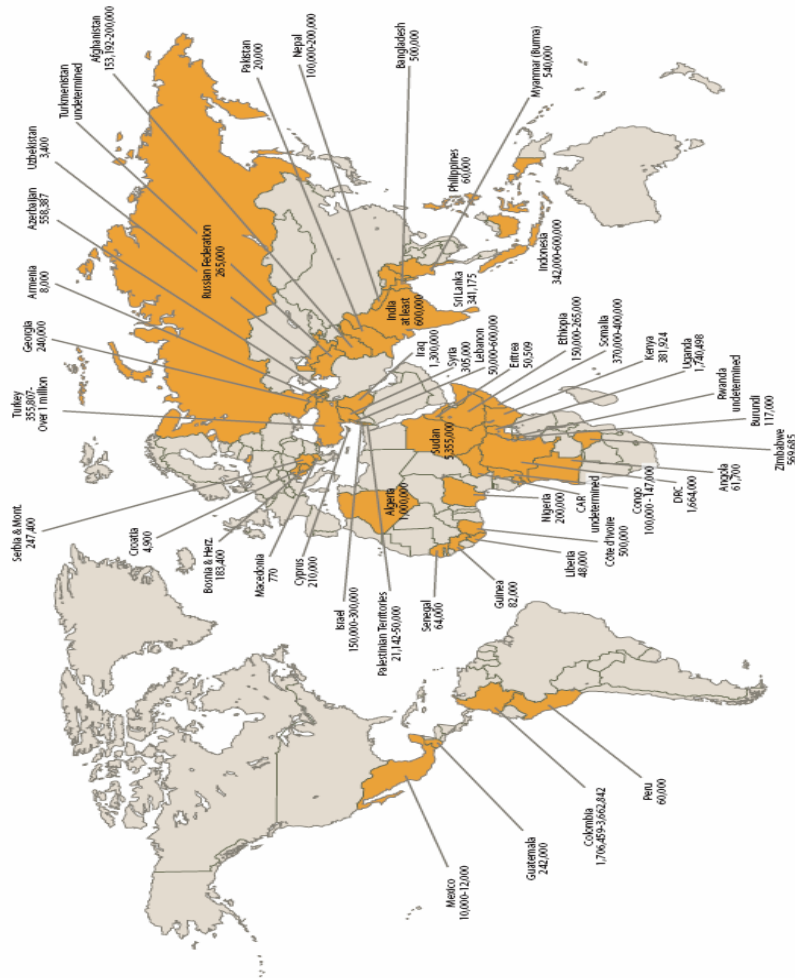
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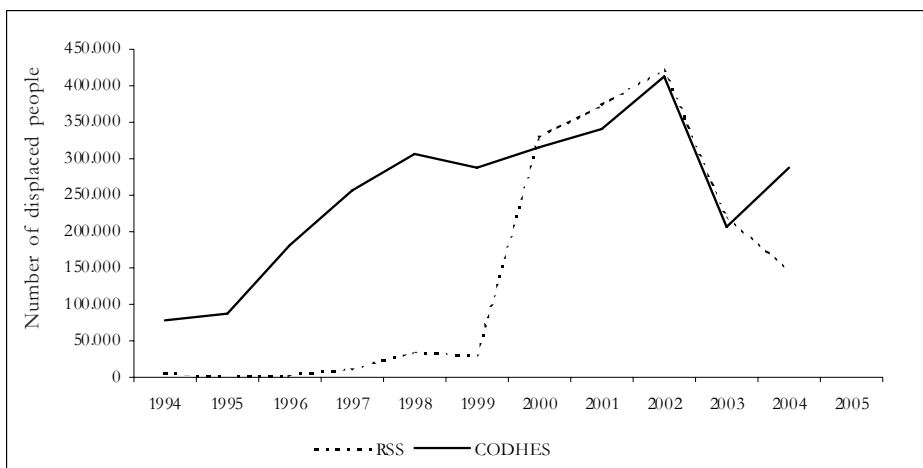
Map 1
World internal displacement 2005



Source: IDMC (2006), Internal Displacement: A Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2005.

NB: The data correspond to the source used in each country. In the Colombian case, the first number corresponds to the counting made by the Social Solidarity Network (*Red de Solidaridad Social*) – data collected since 1994 – and the second from the CODHES – data collected since 1985–.

Graph 1
Evolution of the internal displacement in Colombia 1994-2005



Source: RSS and CODHES. Own elaboration.

Table 1
Evolution of the internal displaced people in Colombia 1995-2006 19 ¹⁹

Years	CODHES	RSS -SUR-
Before 1995	720,000	55
1995	89,000	251
1996	181,000	2,582
1997	257,000	15,260

¹⁹ In a recent CODHES (2007) research it is pointed out that from January to October 114,930 displaced people have registered in Colombia.

1998	308,000	35,704
1999	288,000	31,584
2000	317,375	331,593
2001	341,925	375,428
2002	412,553	424,520
2003	207,607	221,208
2004	287,581	162,604
2005	310, 387	161,175
2006	Without data	46,339 (30 June)
Total	3,720,428	1,814,964

Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) (2006), SUR; CODHES; own elaboration.