

## **Violence Against Women in Colombia**

**William Spindler and Jennifer Clark, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Bogotá, Colombia, 25 November 2004**

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On the morning of May 5, 2003, Omaira Fernández took a walk to the stream that runs near her home in the indigenous reserve of Betoeyes, in the Colombian province of Arauca. She was 16 and already a widow, her husband another victim of the violence that has shattered this corner of northern Colombia. While she was washing clothes, an advancing column of uniformed men wearing armbands of one of Colombia's illegal armed groups spotted her. Omaira was six months pregnant and the men had no difficulty in subduing her. After gang raping her, they ripped her belly open with a bayonet. They cut her and her baby's bodies into small pieces, put them in plastic bags and threw them into the stream.

Fernández's case is one among many described in a series of recent reports (two of them published in collaboration with UNHCR) which have brought attention to the horrific violence suffered by women and girls in the context of Colombia's prolonged internal conflict. According to the reports, all sides in the conflict have been guilty of atrocious crimes against women and girls, including rape, murder, torture, kidnapping and sexual mutilation.

"These violations, committed against civilians and armed group's own combatants, have remained behind a wall of silence, hidden by discrimination and impunity," says the Amnesty International report ("Scarred Bodies, Hidden Crimes: Sexual violence against women in the armed conflict"). The report also shows how worsening violence against women is extending even to the imposition by armed groups of rules of conduct and dress codes: "Women and girls have had their heads shaved for wearing cropped tops, have been stripped naked and publicly humiliated for wearing shorts and threatened with punishment for wearing 'low-slung' jeans. Other punishments have included floggings and mutilation with knives."

The use of sexual violence in conflict - which has been reported in numerous conflicts including Sudan's strife-torn Darfur region, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo - is also a factor in Colombia. A report, published last month by a UNHCR partner, the Working Group on Women and Armed Conflict, concludes: "In the context of the Colombian armed conflict, armed groups use sexual violence as a weapon of terror... the direct victims are mainly women and girls who assume on to themselves the deep suffering and effects on themselves, their families, partners and communities."

According to government figures, half of the 1.5 million people registered as internally displaced persons (IDPs) are adult women. According to Colombian non-governmental organizations, the real figure could be twice as high, as many IDPs do not register with the authorities. Many IDP women have been victims of sexual violence and many have had to assume the role of heads of household following the death or disappearance of

their husbands. According to official statistics, 40 percent of displaced families are headed by women (compared to 28 percent among non-displaced families).

Internally displaced women in Colombia are particularly vulnerable to further violence, as evidenced by a recent study which shows that 52.3 percent of IDP women have been victims of domestic violence, compared to 41.1 percent of non-displaced women. Moreover, one out of every three IDP women has been forced to have sex with strangers, according to official government statistics quoted in the two reports.

In early November, the office of the Ombudsman published a third report ("The Human Rights of Displaced Women") in collaboration with UNHCR. It underlines a clear lack of public policies favoring women in general and displaced women in particular, especially on crucial issues such as sexual and reproductive health and domestic violence and abuse. The report recommends that the government implement gender and age-oriented public policies and offers a model of how to design successful and appropriate public policies that would benefit IDP women. This constructive approach is part of UNHCR's role of advising the Colombian authorities on the best policies to protect and assist IDPs.

The publication also shows the changing roles and responsibilities of displaced women, as well as the ways in which they have managed to change a devastating experience such as displacement into opportunities to play new roles, especially in public life as leaders of IDP organizations. UNHCR is carrying out several initiatives to encourage and support women IDP leaders.

Some women's organizations which provide assistance and advice to women victims of violence have in turn found themselves the target of the armed groups. In February 2004, Marta Cecilia Aguirre, vice-chairperson and founding member of the UNHCR-supported Apartadó Displaced Persons Community Association (ASOCODEA), was murdered. In December 2003, a group of unidentified armed men stole computer files and documents from the premises of the Corporación Casa de la Mujer, a Colombian non-governmental organization which works closely with UNHCR helping internally displaced women and their families. In September 2003, a member of a women's IDP association in the southern city of Puerto Asís, Francis Girón Quilindo, was murdered. Another activist, Esperanza Amaris Miranda, was slain on October 16 in the city of Barrancabermeja. Other attacks and threats have been carried out against women involved in IDP groups in various parts of the country.

On the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women today, UNHCR is launching a campaign with the aim of preventing violence against women in Colombia. Thousands of posters, badges and T-shirts bearing the "No to violence against women!" slogan and logo will be distributed across the country. Male celebrities, including the Colombian national football team, are being encouraged to make public statements condemning violence against women.

The effort to involve men in the campaign goes beyond those in the public spotlight. At all levels, initiatives to put an end to violence against women are bound to fail unless they

include men and boys. Men and boys are an integral part of the solution as well as the problem of violence against women. In Colombia, workshops on gender and notions of masculinity, as well as specifically on violence against women, are being set up by UNHCR with IDP organizations.

The workshops are among a number of initiatives by UNHCR to pay special attention to the issue of sexual and gender-based violence in Colombia as well as to the needs of IDP women and girls. Programs are being implemented by UNHCR's offices in Apartadó, Barrancabermeja, Barranquilla, Bogotá, Mocoa, Pasto and Quibdó. These include projects to assist victims of domestic violence, workshops on the causes of violence against women and how to prevent it, and support networks for victims of domestic violence, organized in collaboration with family welfare authorities in neighborhoods with a high percentage of IDPs. Family sessions organized by UNHCR's implementing partners provide psychological support to mothers and child victims of violence, while nurseries and children's homes provide child care facilities, learning support and simple meals to the children of IDP women.

In the northern city of Cartagena, IDP women supported by UNHCR have built multifunctional centers which are used as meeting rooms, classrooms and crèches. This project gives women the opportunity to be leaders of their communities. Another project supports pregnant teenagers, giving them a safe place to live and providing them with job skills.

In other parts of the country, UNHCR has income-generating projects in which IDP women learn to make and sell handicrafts such as weavings, embroidery and masks, obtaining an income and improving their self-esteem. Small catering enterprises have also been started with UNHCR's help in Mocoa and Barrancabermeja. Participants in these projects receive training on the rights of women and gender issues.

UNHCR recognizes that indigenous women have specific needs. For that reason, the agency is working in various parts of the country, such as the Uraba and Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta regions, to empower indigenous women within their communities.

Reliable, up-to-date statistics on complaints relating to sexual violence are crucial if effective prevention and response strategies are to be developed. UNHCR supports many initiatives which provide this information and monitor the human rights situation of IDP women.

With all these projects, and by drawing attention to the issue, UNHCR hopes to make an important contribution to changing the very bleak situation of the survivors of sexual violence in Colombia.

Today's International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women marks the beginning of "16 Days of Activism to Eliminate Violence against Women", an internationally recognized period to highlight strategies around the world to call for the elimination of all forms of violence against women, the prevention of HIV/AIDS and the

promotion of human rights. The 16-day campaign ends on December 10, International Human Rights Day.

In addition to the Colombia efforts, activities are planned in a number of other field operations to support this campaign, including in Sierra Leone, Sudan and Egypt. In eastern Sudan, for example, UNHCR has planned an awareness raising campaign against female genital mutilation and sexual and gender-based violence with government officials, NGOs, influential refugee community members, religious leaders, midwives and refugee women elders in nine locations. The refugee agency is also sponsoring an essay competition and a poster competition for school children in all the eastern Sudan refugee camps, focusing on the themes of HIV/AIDS, violence against women, human rights and promotion of girls' education.