Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum

"Enduring Conflict in Colombia and the Swell of the Internally Displaced"

July 11, 2006

The July CPRF examined the causes and potential solutions to the ongoing crisis of the internally displaced in Colombia. The conflict and rising numbers of IDPs have continued to persist despite efforts of the Colombian Government, International Community, and NGOs to alleviate them in the region. Speakers at the forum were Kristele Younes, Advocate, Refugees International; Andrea Lari, Advocate, Refugees International; and Gimena Sanchez-Garzoli, Senior Associate for Colombia and Haiti, Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA).

Kristele Younes and Andrea Lari spoke about the current IDP situation and their recent three-week-long assessment mission to Colombia. In conjunction, they spoke about how displaced citizens are typically caught between battles over the land fought by guerrillas and paramilitary forces. Many are forced to flee their homes in order to protect their family or evade daily life-threatening violence. Compounding the issue are the frequent large-scale aerial fumigations of coca crops in certain areas of the country. It was noted that each fumigation effort is typically preceded by a large military operation in the same area. The destruction of IDPs' personal property is also a major issue because often times, identification papers are destroyed or taken making it extremely difficult for IDPs to declare themselves as such.

Ms. Younes and Mr. Lari recommended that the government of Colombia provide better care for IDPs in urban settings and devote more resources to registering the thousands of unregistered IDPs so that they may take advantage of the programs and assistance offered to them. Younes and Lari also concluded that the Colombian government must recognize that fumigation efforts displace many citizens and therefore the Colombian government should provide alternate livelihoods and assistance to offset the effects of government operations. In addition, the panelists gave policy recommendations for the U.S. Government and other International organizations; most notable is the need for the International Community to monitor program implementation to ensure all IDPs have equal access to protection and resources.

Gimena Sanchez-Garzoli focused on the response of the Colombian Government and International community to the IDP situation and provided recommendations for resolution. Ms. Sanchez-Garzoli explained that the number of IDPs continues to increase (by 8% in 2005), that the reach of organizations and protective efforts are somewhat limited and that there is a lack of political will. However, she noted that the IDP situation is organized; between 70 and 80 IDP organizations exist throughout the country and "Peace/Humanitarian Zones" have been set up by IDPs to ensure their immediate safety in volatile situations.

Ms. Sanchez-Garzoli has several recommendations; the first of which is to address the need to raise awareness of the IDP situation in Colombia with a specific aim on increasing financial support for UN and international agencies/NGOs programs related to protection programs in Colombia. Ms. Sanchez-Garzoli expressed that the Department of State and Members of Congress in the U.S. should strictly enforce the conditions speaking to demobilization spelled out in the U.S. Foreign Aid appropriations bill as well as monitor the process to determine if it is leading to justice and dismantlement. Ms. Sanchez-Garzoli also stated that the Colombian government must strongly enforce the recommendations made by the Representative of the UN Secretary-General on the Human Rights of IDPs and develop a national land survey that will identify lands belonging to IDPs and suggest appropriate mechanisms for the guarantee of their return.