
Press Release

Palm oil cultivation for biofuel blocks return of displaced people in Colombia

Geneva, 5 November 2007 – In Colombia, private companies cultivating African palm oil for use as a biofuel are preventing displaced communities from recovering their land, according to a report published today by the Norwegian Refugee Council's Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC).

The report, entitled *Resisting Displacement by Combatants and Developers: Humanitarian Zones in North-west Colombia*, examines how groups of internally displaced people (IDPs) in the north-western Department of Chocó have set up "Humanitarian Zones" on small patches of collective land, in a desperate bid to protect themselves and remain in their area of origin.

The Colombian government and its international partners have supported the development of African palm plantations to help eradicate illicit crops, and to provide opportunities for development and peaceful employment in Chocó, an area once blighted by Colombia's internal armed conflict.

However, there is growing evidence that the African palm industry is fuelling forced displacement and other human rights violations in the region. The Procurator General's Office has expressed concern that palm companies have commissioned human rights violations from paramilitary groups, and the Ombudsman's Office has concluded that the companies have "taken advantage of forced displacements".

Yet the majority of reported human rights violations, including massacres and torture, leading to the forced displacement of civilians have not been investigated, and officially-demobilised paramilitary groups are still preventing IDPs from recovering their land. In September 2007, two IDP leaders were shot and seriously wounded in a reportedly "paramilitary-type" attack.

The Humanitarian Zones illustrate many of the choices and threats facing Colombia's three million or more displaced people. The report suggests that development projects cannot provide a way out of conflict unless genuine peace has been restored between the warring parties, and the victims have been involved in processes to restore their rights. It shows instead how development efforts may indeed prolong and worsen the injustices faced by the conflict's victims.

The report will be presented to policy-makers and civil society groups in Washington DC by Arild Birkenes of IDMC and staff of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) on Monday 5 November and Tuesday 6 November. For more information on the Washington events, contact Gimena Sanchez-Garzoli or Jessica Eby at WOLA (tel. +1 (202) 797-2171).

For more information on internal displacement in Colombia, contact IDMC's Jens-Hagen Eschenbaecher in Geneva (tel. +41-22-799 0703, mobile +41-79-79 79 439); to download a copy of the report in English or Spanish, visit www.internal-displacement.org/countries/colombia. To read or hear the life stories of people displaced in Colombia, visit www.idpvoices.org.

The Geneva-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), established by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring internal displacement worldwide. Regularly updated information on all situations of conflict-induced displacement is available from the IDMC's website, www.internal-displacement.org.

The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) promotes human rights, democracy and social and economic justice in Latin America and the Caribbean. WOLA facilitates dialogue between governmental and nongovernmental actors, monitors the impact of policies and programs of governments and international organizations, and promotes alternatives through reporting, education, training and advocacy. See www.wola.org.