

Colombia's displaced trickle home

Only Sudan has more internal refugees. But government aid and better security are helping Colombians reclaim their land.

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DIAMANTE, COLOMBIA – "I missed the water," recalls one farmer shyly. "I missed the avocados," says another. "I missed the silences," admits a third. The little group sits quietly in the shade and looks out at the fields they had to leave behind when the rebels came. It's been a long journey back home.

There are an estimated 3 million internally displaced people in Colombia today: more than anywhere else in the world save Sudan.

Fleeing a relentless civil war that has killed tens of thousands, these so-called *desplazados* stream out of the countryside and crowd into urban slums - looking for jobs they are ill prepared to fill, leaning on relatives unequipped to help.

Last year, an average of 850 people fled their communities every day in this nation of 44 million, according to CODHES, a Colombian watchdog group that tracks *desplazados*.

But the trickle of those *desplazados* who do return home and successfully rebuild their lives - here in Diamante, 290 miles northwest of Bogotá, and in small villages and towns elsewhere around the country - is a whiff of what the government hopes a more peaceful future will bring.

Government aid eases problem

In the past three years, with President Alvaro Uribe's dedication to both strengthening the military and entering into peace negotiations with all sides to the conflict, security in parts of the country is improving. This, together with a vast government assistance program that has rebuilt 7,000 houses in 150 villages, has allowed half a million *desplazados* to go home, says Luis

Alfonso Hoyos Aristizábal, director of Acción Social, the lead government agency responsible for the displaced. "Is the situation grave? Yes. Have we fixed it? No," he says. "But we have some results."

The rebels and militias had battled for years in this disputed state of Cordoba, a region of rich farmland and a key corridor for illegal arms trafficking and the growing of coca, the leaf used to make cocaine. But Diamante, somehow, had been spared - until 10 a.m. on Dec. 28, 1998.

Two of Adriano Condes Casa's grandchildren were visiting for the holidays. When the shooting started, he grabbed their hands and ran toward the caves up the mountain. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas who attacked that morning - suspecting the villagers of assisting rival paramilitaries - razed Diamante to the ground, leaving behind more than a dozen burned and dismembered bodies.

Mr. Condes fled without a change of clothes, without his wife's cooking pots, without the hens or the cow. He was so confused, he says, he didn't even take the framed photo of his parents, though it was his only one. He arrived in the nearby town of Tierra Alta a few days later, on his 70th birthday, and tried to begin anew.

"I could not make a peso to even get on the bus. I could have tried to learn to be a carpenter's helper, but that was not in my soul," says Condes, whose father founded Diamante in 1959, settling there with his wife and 17 children. "I was shamed because the fields my father passed on to me were abandoned," says Condes, who spent six months there living off government subsidies and help from family. "I hated buying yucca or plantains at a market."

Pining for his old life, Condes, together with his older brother, Francisco Javier "Pacho" Condes Casa, returned to Diamante six months after their displacement. The land was in shambles. The fields were overgrown; the houses, school, and store were all destroyed; and the road had washed away, making it a three-hour donkey ride away from the nearest villages. "Few wanted to return at first," says Pacho, whose own sons preferred to stay in Tierra Alta. "Many had bad memories and remaining fears ... and to start from zero is not easy."



COMMUNITY HUB: Displaced persons gather outside a food distribution center on the outskirts of Monteria in northern Colombia.

Forced to the cities, lured to stay

Nationwide, many *desplazados* become accustomed to city life. The speed, variety, and the hint of economic opportunity often hooks them, despite the garbage they live among, despite the jobs they can't get, and the everyday limits they bump into. And, whether due to the convenience of staying, fear of returning, or actual danger - only a fraction express a will to go home, according to Mr. Hoyos, the Acción Social director.

A 2004 Constitutional Court ruling established legal frameworks for protecting the rights of *desplazados*, ordering the government to provide more resources for integrating them into the cities. The law - which the United Nations deemed one of the most advanced in the world - says that no *desplazado* should be forced to return home. But, in the event that any do want to resettle - and security permitting such a move - the government is obligated to help them.

"The displaced have the right to reestablishment, or to settle in another place and the government must guarantee this right," says Manuel Jose Cepeda, the justice who wrote the ruling. "We are committed to seeing this right of voluntary return implemented."

\$2.2 billion to help *desplazados*

From 2000-05, the government spent \$350 million on *desplazados* - a fraction of what is spent on fighting the war and on coca-eradication programs, both of which create more displacement, leading NGOs to

criticize the government for not doing enough. But last year, in response to the court ruling, the government allocated \$2.2 billion through 2010 to protect and help *desplazados* - both those in the cities and the ones returning home.

In the past year in Diamante, Acción Social has rebuilt the school, recruiting and paying teachers from Tierra Alta to teach there and providing food for students' breakfasts and lunches. The patio where the farmers while away the late afternoons has also been rebuilt, as have dozens of houses. And an agricultural program has been launched, under which the farmers are taught to protect the forests and grow plants other than coca.

With the improvements, more villagers have ventured back. Before the 1998 attack, 130 families lived in Diamante, and 600 families lived in the surrounding Diamante Corridor. Today, villagers say, there are 70 here, with 235 living in the Corridor. "But we want more people to return. More people means more friends. More production, more work, ... more jokes," says Eliu Mercado, a young, single farmer here.

"I was created in the countryside, and agriculture is my love," says Mercado, explaining what drew him back. "It sustains me. It fascinates me. I like to see seeds become corn."

Mercado would also like to meet a woman and get married, he admits. Sometimes, when he goes to visit in Tierra Alta, he goes on a date. "But none of the women want to move here because the road is still washed out," he bemoans.

"Patience," suggests Condes. "Everything takes time."

Mercado's mention of Tierra Alta gets the farmers thinking about city life. "I miss the elegance," says one, running a blade of grass through his fingers. "I miss cold drinks ... and the crowds," says another. "I miss watching TV, especially now, with the World Cup and all," says a third. "But here we have yucca," an elderly man in a cowboy hat reminds them.

"And tranquility," says Condes. The men nod, and fall silent.



REFUGE: Some of Colombia's 3.7 million displaced people, such as this mother and child in Diamante, are trickling home.