

# Colombian peasants return from Ecuador

The Miami Herald

Aug. 30, 2007

QUITO, Ecuador --

Hundreds of Colombian peasants returned home from Ecuador on Thursday after the government promised to protect them from leftist rebels trying to sabotage a coca eradication campaign.

Some 1,600 Colombians from two southern villages fled to Ecuador last week, afraid of being caught in the crossfire between government coca eradication efforts and armed rebels who depend on coca - and the end product, cocaine - to finance their insurgency.

A Colombian government commission reached an agreement Wednesday with the refugees gathered in shelters in the town of San Lorenzo, eight miles from the Colombian border, to return home in exchange for security guarantees.

The peasants, mostly women and children, could be seen streaming across the border Thursday in buses provided by the Ecuadorean government.

At least 25 people fearing their homes would be engulfed by violence remained behind and intend to seek asylum in Ecuador, said Javier Orellana, a spokesman for the United Nations refugee agency in Quito.

Authorities in Colombia are on alert for possible reprisals by leftist rebels.

"It's clear the dangers don't end with their return," said Gustavo Valdivieso, a spokesman for the U.N. refugee agency in Bogota. "The situation in the southern part of the country is delicate and there's a strong pressure on civilians by armed groups."