

“To lose our land is to lose ourself”

Indigenous people and forced displacement in Colombia



From the mountains of the Sierra Nevada to the Amazonian jungle, Colombia is home to 90 different indigenous groups, one of the wealthiest ethnic diversity anywhere in the world. But many of these groups are very vulnerable to the country’s ongoing armed conflict and resulting forced displacement. As a result, up to a third of them are at risk of disappearing or of extinction, according to Colombia’s Constitutional Court.

Three million people at least are internally displaced in Colombia, the second largest such crisis in the world. Forced displacement is always hard, for the individuals who have to flee, their families and the country as a whole. In the case of indigenous people, whose cultural, economic and social systems are entirely based on their relationship to the land, forced displacement is an unmitigated tragedy. It shatters traditional systems, leading to the loss of social structure, language, culture and identity. Ultimately, it can result in the extinction of an entire group.

“To lose our land is to lose our self,” one Siona indigenous man said when he was forced to flee his home last month. “To go is to take one step closer towards death”.

For UNHCR, this is a tragedy that affects not just Colombia but humanity as a whole: every ethnic group that dies out is a loss that will never be replaced. To avoid this, indigenous communities are one of the highest priorities of UNHCR work all over Colombia, with a strong focus on prevention of displacement and enabling communities to remain on their lands.



WHAT UNHCR DOES

UNHCR works in cooperation with the State, civil society and other UN agencies to:

Support and lobby for state initiatives to protect indigenous and take special measures to prevent their forced displacement in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Forced Displacement

“Protection by presence” in zones at high risk of forced displacement: being with the communities in some of the remotest parts of Colombia with the worst indices of conflict and violence

Supports the social and associative processes of indigenous communities to help them stay on their lands, during displacement and when they take the decision to return to their lands at community level and at central level with the national indigenous association ONIC

At local level, contribute to contingency planning with indigenous people and local authorities in high risk zones in order to minimize the harmful impact of forced mass displacement if and when it occurs

Advocating for better awareness of the situation of indigenous people in Colombia and to lobby for greater involvement of civilian authorities and the international community in a collaborative effort to support indigenous people in the search for solutions

Provide information and training to relevant

Practical protection projects in high risk zones to help indigenous people stay on their lands: for example, boarding schools for indigenous children to hel

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People

In April 2009, Colombia joined the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, which contains a number of important articles defining the rights of indigenous people to stay on their lands and duties of the State to protect them.

The Declaration outlines a series of human, cultural and economic rights related to indigenous people worldwide. It is not legally binding but affirms a State's commitment to abide to its spirit and respect its principles.

It contains a number of articles of importance to help protect and prevent the forced displacement of indigenous groups during armed conflict.

These include Article 7 and 8 on the right to life, physical integrity and protection duty of the State; as well as Article 10, which stipulates that indigenous people shall not be forcibly removed from their lands and Article 26 on the right of indigenous people to live on, own and develop the lands their traditional lands.

The UN Guiding Principles on forced internal displacement

The United Nations Guiding Principles on Forced Displacement are a series of 30 principles outlining universal rights against forced displacement, as well as rights to protection, humanitarian assistance and reintegration if they suffer from displacement.

The Guiding Principles also outlines the duties of the state in the protection and prevention of forced displacement. Principle 9 stipulates that the States have a "specific duty" to take measures to protect forced "indigenous people, ethnic minorities, campesinos and other groups with a strong dependency or special link to the land."



Testimony Nukak

The **Nukak Maku** are a nomadic indigenous group who lives in the Guaviare jungle. Until just a few years ago, they had had no contact with the outside world. Now, more than of the 500 Nukak have been forced to flee from the armed groups that have come into the jungle. They live in a state of utter deprivation on the outskirts of the city of San José de Guaviare and are at risk of extinction. For them, the word "Nukak" means the world, man and the hearth all at once, reflecting their vision of the universe as a place where man and the earth are indivisible and rely on each other for survival.

"Why do they want to get us out of the forest? We have nothing to do with any of this. We are hunters from the forest. Here there is no land, there is no food. We are scared. Before, no white man knew Nukak. Now they threaten us with their guns and we have to keep quiet. They come with their drugs and their mines and we are scared. We saw the soldiers come and they took away the wounded with their helicopters. We stayed quiet into the night."



UNHCR is the United Nations Refugee Agency, with the international mandate to protect more than 34 million refugees and displaced people around the world. It is in Colombia at the invitation of the government to support the State's efforts to assist and protect displaced people. UNHCR has 12 offices in Colombia, including a branch office in Bogotá and 11 field offices in conflict zones and reception areas. For more information: www.unhcr.org or call UNHCR Bogotá on + 57 1 658 0600.