

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

**Representative of the Secretary-General on
Internally Displaced Persons**

Statement by

Dr. Francis M. Deng,

Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons,

to the International Seminar on Displacement:

Implications and Challenges for Governance, Democracy and Peace,

Bogota, Colombia, September 4, 2002

I would like to express my solidarity with the participants of this international seminar who are seeking to raise greater awareness to the plight of internally displaced persons in Colombia and to find effective and practical solutions for the problems that they face. Although I am unfortunately unable to be with you today in Bogota, allow me to commend the Consultancy on Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES) for organizing today's seminar. Over the years CODHES has made a valuable contribution to the international community's understanding of the situation of internal displacement in Colombia. It is my hope that today's seminar, like its predecessor in 2000, will promote greater understanding of the situation of internal displacement in Colombia and point the way toward more effective solutions.

At today's seminar, CODHES has disseminated the Spanish translation of the United Nations *Handbook for Applying the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*. The *Principles*, as you know, are the first international standards for internally displaced persons. Prepared at the request of the UN Commission on Human Rights and the General Assembly and presented by the Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons to the Commission in 1998, they set forth the rights of internally displaced persons and the obligations of governments and other controlling actors toward these populations. The *Principles* extend to all phases of displacement, covering protection from arbitrary displacement, protection and assistance during displacement and during return or resettlement and reintegration. The *Handbook* which was developed to implement the *Principles* in the field was first published in English in 1999 by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Brookings Institution Project on Internal Displacement. It provides practical guidance to field staff on the actual steps they can take on behalf of displaced persons to carry out the *Principles*.

I very much hope that the Spanish edition will serve to support the work of international and national organizations working on behalf of the displaced and will reinforce efforts of displaced communities themselves. The *Handbook* should prove useful at this seminar as well as other workshops and at field staff training programs concerning internally displaced persons. Additional copies are available from my office. Please contact Gimena Sanchez-Garzoli at gsanchez@brookings.edu

Turning to the situation in Colombia, I am pleased to note that since my last visit to your country in 1999, the Government has taken a number of measures to address the problem of internal displacement. In particular, it has taken steps to further develop national legal and institutional frameworks. I am encouraged, for example, by the Government's efforts to strengthen the implementation of existing legislation, specifically with Presidential Directive No. 6 (2001), which supports the Constitutional Court's decision T-327 (March 2001) that upheld the *Guiding Principles* and stressed the need for Government officials to receive training in the *Principles*. It is also noteworthy that a prior Constitutional Court decision SU-1150 (August 2000) states that the *Guiding Principles* should be utilized in the interpretation of existing legislation for the internally displaced and as the standard for any new legislation on displacement. Furthermore, in the past year, the *Red de Solidaridad Social* has taken measures to try to improve its emergency humanitarian response.

While these developments are all noteworthy, there nonetheless continues to be a tremendous gap between the standards set forth in the *Guiding Principles* and Law 387 of 1997 and the reality on the ground. Sadly, early warning indicators have failed to prevent and protect persons from displacement. The number of internally displaced persons only continues to rise, with significant new displacement occurring on a frequent basis. With an estimated number of more than one million displaced, Colombia today has one of the highest internally displaced populations in the world.

Displaced populations continue to live in fear as they face discrimination and stigmatization. Their living conditions are sub-standard and many continue to have limited access to essential services of food and medicine, adequate shelter, income generating activities, employment and education. Afro-Colombian and indigenous persons make up a disproportionate number of the displaced, and as already marginalized groups, face additional obstacles once displaced.

While the registration system has improved, there continue to be many displaced who do not receive much needed assistance because they are not registered. Moreover, emergency assistance, when an internally displaced person can attain it, is not sufficient for persons who may remain displaced for years. This is aggravated by the fact that many internally displaced persons fled rural areas and the adjustment to urban environments can be particularly difficult. In this light, it is important to link short-term and long-term assistance so that internally displaced persons can cope until their social and economic situation is stabilized.

It is also worrisome that efforts to protect human rights defenders have not prevented leaders of displaced persons organizations and those who work on their behalf from facing threats, attacks, kidnappings and killings. It is critical that those working on behalf of the displaced be better protected by Government protection programs.

The new Administration in Colombia faces enormous challenges in dealing with the problem of internal displacement in the country. It is my hope that it will build upon the normative and institutional frameworks that have already been created and that it will work closely with the international community, national and international non-governmental organizations and the leaders of the displaced to address the existing gaps.

In particular, I would urge the new Government to give the issue of internal displacement high national priority and to consider the designation of a senior level focal point within the Government. Such a focal point could work with all concerned actors to try to ensure that the guarantees provided for in existing normative and institutional frameworks are fully implemented and that the gaps in the response system for the displaced are addressed. I have recently written to President Alvaro Uribe to raise these issues and look forward to an ongoing and constructive dialogue with the Government in an effort to promote a more effective response to the situation of internal displacement in the country.

As this seminar is about governance, democracy and peace, it is worth noting that displacement and the conflict that causes it are fundamental symptoms of deeper structural problems facing the country. That is why I always end my comments on the crisis of displacement in a country by noting that it also offers an opportunity for addressing those structural problems. The goal must be a national framework that provides justice, equality and dignity for *all* citizens.

It is my hope that this week's seminar will reinforce the relationship between the Government, civil society and the international community. Only through strong partnerships can the complex problem of internal displacement be addressed effectively. I look forward to the findings of the seminar and to continuing to work with all of you in collaborative efforts on behalf of Colombia's internally displaced. Strengthened efforts must focus on preventing displacement, improving conditions for those who are displaced and finding sustainable solutions for the many now uprooted in the country. A better future for Colombia's displaced must become a national priority.
