Myths and realities of humanitarian work

By Gerard Gómez, Head of Office, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Colombia

The signature of the Peace Agreement between the Government of Colombia and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP) guerrilla puts an end to more than fifty years of armed conflict. With this agreement, there will be new opportunities for the country: there is no doubt that local, national and international institutions will put all of their efforts into an adequate implementation of these historic accords.

In this context, it is fundamental that humanitarian organizations continue their work in the most remote areas of Colombia. It is important because armed groups other than the FARC-EP have been reconfiguring their actions and are, in some departments, responsible for the most serious humanitarian impacts on civilians, with a potential to threaten peacebuilding efforts.

On the occasion of World Humanitarian Day, celebrated on 19 August, I would like to clarify a number of myths and realities around humanitarian aid and the humanitarian community in Colombia.

The first myth is that humanitarian actors are pessimists, as if we had a special interest in spreading bad news, or as if our only motivation was to justify our presence in a country. I want to highlight that humanitarians seek peace and support all solutions that relieve the suffering of a population. Nobody more than ourselves is aware of the pain and suffering of civilians affected by a crisis. But, as long as there are new victims, and while the population suffers from access limitations, while there are forgotten crises and situations that need a humanitarian response, the humanitarian imperative obliges us to continue to speak in the name of people who have no voice.

To speak of the victims of other armed groups, to raise awareness regarding their humanitarian needs and violations of their rights, working at the same time with Colombian institutions to find solutions, also means contributing to peacebuilding.

The second myth is that we do not coordinate with the State or with local institutions. While it is true that one of the fundamental humanitarian principles is independence, humanitarian workers complement State actions: we do not want to substitute the State, especially in cases such as Colombia, where the State has response capacity. Our value added is to fill critical gaps and to provide specific responses based on international standards. In Colombia the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and Local Coordination Teams (LCTs), maintain constant contact with their state counterparts, for example with the IDPs and Victims Response Unit-Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral al las
Víctimas (UARIV), or the Disaster Response Unit- Unidad Nacional para la Gestión del Riesgo de Desastres (UNGRD), Mayor’s and Governor’s offices and the Ombudsman’s Office. This complementarity exists in the definition of legal frameworks, in seeking solutions for vulnerable groups, in improving information management among other areas of work.

The third myth is that humanitarian organizations are only made up of international personnel who are unfamiliar with the culture of the country where they work. In Colombia, more than 90 per cent of humanitarian workers are Colombians. International organizations employ people from the communities themselves, who understand local context and know the needs of the population. In many cases, these humanitarian actors are the only ones who accompany the most remote communities. This profound knowledge of the reality of the field is a value added and represents an opportunity to support peacebuilding.

Instead of separating peacebuilding, development and humanitarian actions into categories that have no meaning for the population; instead of dividing with words, or creating competition for funding, it is time to build indispensable bridges to say to all Colombians, who are tired of suffering, that they should not worry, that we will work together in a coordinated manner to ensure that they have hope for the future and that they feel no more hunger or fear.

For the population affected by a crisis, myths don’t count: it’s the reality of facts that can make the difference.

**New conflict dynamics create humanitarian consequences, ¿are we aware?**

*Francisco Rey Marcos, Instituto de Estudios sobre Conflictos y Acción Humanitaria (IECAH)*

The peace agreement between the Government of Colombia and the FARC-EP is the best news that a country that has suffered the consequences of a five decade war could receive. The hope that this agreement creates in society cannot, however, hide some evidence that humanitarian organizations are observing on a daily basis in the field.

The dynamics of armed conflict and other forms of violence are changing in some parts of Colombia. Armed actors are adapting and anticipating to a new situation that could arise after a peace accord with the FARC-EP. These dynamics continue to lead to humanitarian consequences and are a challenge in terms of protection of civilians.

The humanitarian impact of the armed conflict has dropped in overall figures, but social and humanitarian effects of new dynamics are very important and continue to impact certain communities and groups such as Indigenous people, Afro-colombians, and populations living on the outskirts of some cities. The de-escalation of the conflict has contributed to a drop in homicide rates, massacres and armed actions, but other more

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1 See: “Ser Trabajador Humanitario”: [https://goo.gl/5QH9EI](https://goo.gl/5QH9EI)
2 Author along with Joséphine Dubois of the report: “The Humanitarian impact of the new dynamics of the armed conflict and violence in various regions of Colombia,” commissioned by OCHA Colombia, elaborated by IECAH, Spain, and supported by NOREF.
surreptitious forms of violence such as threats, individual displacement, extortion and social control have persisted and even increased, indicating that the humanitarian situation continues of concern. Addressing the humanitarian consequences of this violence should be priority for transition and post-peace agreement planning.

In term of geographical analysis, violence has displaced towards remote areas of the country, particularly the borders with Venezuela (Catatumbo in Norte de Santander, Arauca, Perijá in Cesar), the Pacific coast, Chocó and Putumayo that have concentrated certain forms of violence. Armed actors have also consolidated their control on strategic corridors that connect these areas, such as Bajo Cauca in Antioquia. In addition, the dynamics of the conflict in urban contexts, such as Medellín, or in Pacific coast cities such as Tumaco and Buenaventura, are changing, implicating serious humanitarian challenges.

The Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) guerrilla and post-demobilization armed groups (PDAGs) that have arised or have strengthened their action after the demobilization of AUC paramilitary groups, are today responsible for the majority of human rights violations and international humanitarian law infractions. These actions are likely to continue in a post-agreement, as these actors are competing for territorial control and illicit economies before controlled by the FARC-EP. The presence and actions of these armed actors represent an obstacle for the consolidation of a sustainable peace.

These other sources of violence create challenges that should be approached decidedly in the post-agreement, to prevent that they become a risk to the peace process. In this sense, it is necessary to maintain a national and international humanitarian presence, particularly in regions where the risk is higher, including areas of concentration of demobilized.

The Government of Colombia and different responsible entities should work towards the strengthening of their monitoring system, deepening their knowledge of realities in the field, identifying critical gaps and acting so that the law applies in all areas of the country, thus guaranteeing the rights of all citizens. It’s important to strengthen the focus on the field, adapting the actions to the characteristics and dynamics of each region and their possible humanitarian consequences. This is of particular relevance in areas and collective territories of Indigenous and Afro-colombian communities, whose rights should be respected. Together with the primordial role of the State, local authorities should increase their capacities to act on these issues.

Perhaps our report3 illustrates a reality that is uncomfortable for some sectors. But humanitarians must communicate about it and, above all, prepare for a continuing commitment to the victims and to people affected by violence.

Armed confrontations create humanitarian consequences in Catatumbo, Norte de Santander

The main humanitarian impacts in Norte de Santander continue to be closely linked to the dynamics of the armed conflict with the ELN, the EPL action, natural disasters and the Venezuelan border situation. It is important to highlight the particular situation of Catatumbo, where the armed conflict between actors continues to lead to humanitarian consequences including mass displacements.

3 See: “The Humanitarian impact of the new dynamics of the armed conflict and violence in various regions of Colombia”. https://goo.gl/1VIMmU
Intra-urban displacement increase in 2016

Over the past year, forced displacement in Norte de Santander, particularly in the Catatumbo region, has been characterized mostly by an intra-urban dynamic, as a consequence of the increased intensity of confrontations between armed actors in urban centres. This kind of mass displacement follow a peculiar dynamic, since the families living in the urban areas displace at night to the houses of friends and family to avoid being kept in the middle of armed confrontation, and return to their home during day hours.

This situation is challenging in terms of monitoring and response. While families displace for a limited time and return to their homes, they live in the midst of an armed confrontation that creates mental health and protection needs.

Despite a 44 per cent reduction in the total number of mass displacement events registered by OCHA in Catatumbo between January and August 2016 (as compared to the same period in 2015), it is of note that the totality of mass displacements in 2016 (5 events) occurred in urban areas. These events largely occurred as the result of unilateral armed actions by non-state armed groups, such as harassing actions and attacks on military and/or police infrastructure, and to a lesser degree, due to combat between these groups and the Armed Forces, with more than 1,400 affected in Teorama, El Tarra, Hacarí, Sardinata and El Cármen. As a result of these actions, 71 homes were also damaged or destroyed.

Source: OCHA-UMAC Monitor (01/01/2015-31/08/2016)

El Tarra, Sardinata, Hacarí and Teorama were the municipality most impacted by mass displacement both in 2015 and 2016. The ELN and the EPL guerrillas make presence in these areas.

ELN and EPL, primary responsible of armed actions

Between January and August 2016, there was a 6 per cent drop in armed actions registered in Norte de Santander, as compared to the same period in 2015. During this period, OCHA did not register any armed action with the participation of the FARC-EP. The decreased participation of the FARC-EP in armed actions had a positive impact on humanitarian indicators for the department. However, the ELN and EPL participation in

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4 The Catatumbo región in Norte de Santander comprise eleven municipalities: Ábrego, Convención, El Carmen, El Tarra, Hacarí, La Playa, Ocaña, San Calixto, Sardinata, Teorama y Tibú
5 10 families or 59 people displaced in the same event
these actions increased. In the first eight months of 2016, OCHA registered on average 5 armed actions per month, including attacks on military infrastructure, harassing actions and blockades of roadways.

These dynamics, which represent a major challenge in terms of protection of civilians, may be associated with the reaccommodation and reconfiguration of other armed actors in this region.

While in 2015 combats represented 30 per cent of armed confrontations, in 2016 harassing actions and attacks on military infrastructure represented respectively 31 and 29 per cent of these events. This trend is in line with the dynamics of “urbanization” of armed violence in the Catatumbo region, where harassing actions and attacks on military infrastructure are the main causes of humanitarian emergencies such as intra-urban displacement.

These impacts had a high impact on civilians, creating widespread fear. Psychological impact on children, adolescents and the elderly is of particular concern. Thus far in 2016, some 1,980 children and adolescents were forced out of school due to armed confrontations that limited their access to education.

Social and environmental impact of attacks against oil infrastructure

During the first eight months of 2016, the Caño Limón-Coveñas oil pipeline has been the target of 29 attacks, five more than in 2015. According to Ecopetrol, the state oil company, the installation of illegal valves along the pipeline has compromised its structural integrity; these acts by and large are attributed to the ELN guerrillas. The main impacts due to oil spillage are on the Tibú river and the creeks of Cuaré, La Perdida, Medroza, Caño Veinte, Victoria Sur, Caño Techín, El Loro, among others.

Between 2015 and 2016, 51,500 square meters of soil and vegetation in the department suffered damage from attacks on oil infrastructure. About 25,000 people in Tibú municipality faced restrictions to access to water due to crude oil spills in the river.

The reconfiguration of armed actors other than the FARC-EP it’s likely to continue in the Catatumbo region and in the south of the department, including in Ragonvalia, Herrán, Toledo and Chitagá, causing new humanitarian emergencies in these areas. The humanitarian response to these situations, particularly in urban areas, will require improved coordination and preparation to provide a more opportune response to the specific needs of these types of emergencies.
Colombia hosts regional Earthquake simulation (SIMEX)

Knowing is not enough, we must apply. Willing is not enough, we must do (Goethe).

The Government of Colombia, as President of the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) for the Americas in 2016, will host the annual INSARAG regional earthquake response exercise – SIMEX 2016, which will take place from 26 to 30 September 2016 in Bogotá, Colombia.

This fifth edition of the SIMEX will be hosted by the Government of Colombia through the National Unit for Disaster Risk Management (Unidad Nacional de Gestión del Riesgo de Desastres-UNGRD), and co-organized by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in its capacity as Secretariat of the INSARAG, with the support of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).

The main objective is to put into practice plans, procedures, protocols and coordination methodologies between national and international actors that improve decision making and response capacities for large scale emergencies. The SIMEX 2016 bears a particular importance in the region due to the national and international response to the 16 April earthquake that struck Ecuador and the exchange of experiences and lessons learnt of this response.

SIMEX 2016 under the motto “A less vulnerable Colombia with more resilient communities” expects to bring together over 500 participants and observers from nearly 20 countries.

The SIMEX is divided into a series of thematic trainings followed by a practical exercise and real time role play simulating a large scale earthquake. The exercise will simulate a 7.0 Richter scale earthquake in Bogotá leaving over 10,000 dead and 50,000 injured. In addition to the corresponding local and national authorities, participation will include more than 30 national and international urban search and rescue teams (USAR), over 20 national and international emergency medical teams (EMTS), as well as representatives of the private sector and communities, members of the UNDAC Americas team, the Humanitarian Country Team in Colombia as well as OCHA.

Previous SIMEX events of this magnitude have been held in Chile (2015), Costa Rica (2014), Peru (2013) and Mexico (2012).

The SIMEX 2016 is an excellent opportunity to apply protocols, prepare and act together. When disaster strikes, time to prepare has passed.

For more information on the SIMEX Colombia please visit:
http://portal.gestiondelriesgo.gov.co/Paginas/SIMEX-Colombia-2016.aspx
https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/es/operations/columbia
In Brief

**Balance of the second rainy season**

According to the Unidad Nacional para la Gestión del Riesgo de Desastres (UNGRD), the second rainy season which began on 1 September, has to date led to 65 related events impacting more than 1,200 families (around 6,500 people).

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<th>Events</th>
<th>Families affected</th>
<th>Houses affected</th>
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<td>65</td>
<td>+1,200</td>
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In Brief

**Venezuelan border**

On 13 September was the one month anniversary of the reopening of the border between Venezuela and Colombia. According to the migration authorities Migración Colombia, during this period a total of more than 1,733,000 people were registered crossing at six points in La Guajira, Norte de Santander and Arauca, of whom around 70 per cent were purchasing food, medicine or cleaning products. The average number of people crossing daily was around 49,000. The number of exits from Colombia was over 1,728,000. Around 95 per cent of entrances and exits on the border occurred in Norte de Santander.

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1 UNGRD. *Balance de la II temporada de lluvias a los 16 días de su inicio.* Bogotá, 16 de septiembre de 2016. See: [https://goo.gl/mYqchH](https://goo.gl/mYqchH)

2 Migración Colombia. *Comunicado de Prensa No. 49. Se cumple un mes de la reapertura de frontera entre Colombia y Venezuela.* Bogotá, 13 de septiembre de 2016. En: [https://goo.gl/3Irg4P](https://goo.gl/3Irg4P)