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Responses to Information Requests

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Colombia: Situation of Afro-Colombians, particularly in Medellin; municipal efforts to address crime and poverty in Medellin
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Background

According to Minority Rights Group International (MRG), "over 70 percent of [Afro-Colombians] live in urban and peri-urban areas" (MRG n.d), the area immediately surrounding a city (EioNet n.d.). The largest Afro-Colombian populations are found in the departments of Choco, Magdalena, Bolivar, and Sucre and in the region of Uraba (ibid.). According to Freedom House, Afro-Colombians represent 25 percent of the Colombian population while 80 percent of them live below the poverty line (17 June 2011). The authors of a study published by the United Nations (UN) Development Programme indicate that the household income of Afro-Colombians is 20 percent lower than that of those who are not descendants of Africans (UN 2010, 8). The authors also write that the living conditions of Afro-Colombians and their access to basic services are [translation] "worse" when compared to the rest of the population (ibid., 28; see also UN 3 Feb. 2011, para. 98). Illiteracy rates reach 11 percent compared to 7 percent in those who are not of African descent, and the unemployment rate is 5 percent higher than the rest of the population (ibid., 8, 32). *Semana*, a Bogota-based news magazine, reports that 82 percent of Afro-Colombians have [translation] "unsatisfied basic needs" and 76 percent live in conditions of extreme poverty (26 May 2007).

The UN Human Rights Council notes that the rights of Afro-Colombian communities are "disproportionately violated in the context of armed conflict. In particular, their rights to life, territory and culture" (3 Feb. 2011, para. 69). According to the Government of Colombia, which is cited in the United States' (US) *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2010*, 8.8 percent of the country's internally displaced population is Afro-Colombian (US 8 Apr. 2011, 28). However, the Association of Internally Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES) estimates that this percentage may reach as high as 25 percent (ibid.). Afro-Colombian communities are concentrated in regions where, given the presence of rich resources and the geopolitical importance of their lands, armed disputes are intense (MRG n.d). The implementation of economic development mega-projects "has been associated with brutal forced displacement, mass violence and [the] selected killings of Afro-descendants and their leaders by both legal and illegal armed groups," in some cases, with the acquiescence of government and private interests (ibid.). The UN Human Rights Council observes that some Afro-Colombian communities are not consulted about the implementation of such projects (4 Mar. 2010, 18).

Sources note that displaced Afro-Colombians experience social discrimination (Freedom House 17 June 2011; US 8 Apr. 2011; UN 4 Mar. 2010, 18), arbitrary arrest and exploitation (Freedom House 17 June 2011). According to the Global Justice and Human Rights Program (Programa de Justicia Global y Derechos Humanos) at the University of the Andes (Universidad de los Andes), the [translation] "precarious situation of ... Afro-Colombians reveals the existence and persistence of structural racism in Colombia" (Universidad de los Andes 2009, 7). *Semana* reports that racism affects the ability of Afro-Colombians to obtain employment and housing (26 May 2007).

Afro-Colombians in Medellin (Department of Antioquia)

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Director of the Antioquia government's Office for Afro-Colombians (Gerencia de Negritudes) stated that 1,500,000 Afro-Colombians live in the Department of Antioquia (Antioquia 15 Sept. 2011). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a representative of the municipality of Medellin's Ethnic Diversity Program (Programa de Diversidad Étnica), indicated that, according to the 2005 census compiled by the National Statistics Administrative Department (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadísticas, DANE), 138,000 Afro-Colombians live in Medellin (Medellin 22 Sept. 2011).

The Office of the Government of Antioquia states in its development plan for 2008-2011 that ethnic groups in Antioquia [translation] "are victims of violations of their civil and political rights ... because issues such as racial discrimination, intolerance and social exclusion persist" (Antioquia n.d.a). According to the development plan, the economic, social and

cultural rights of ethnic groups are affected by the poverty and exclusion that they experience (ibid.). It also notes that [translation] "their existence" is threatened by the armed conflict around them (ibid.).

The Ethnic Diversity Program representative indicated, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, that displaced Afro-Colombians living in the city come mainly from the region of Uraba, the Department of Choco and the region of the Pacific coast (Medellin 16 Sept. 2011). She added that this population tends to be concentrated in Commune 8 (Caicedo neighbourhood), Commune 13 (Las Independencias and Mirador de Calazans neighbourhoods), Commune 3 (La Honda sector), and the township of Belen Altavista (Nuevo Amanecer neighbourhood) (ibid.).

Crime in Medellin

In a humanitarian bulletin covering most of July 2011, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs notes that Afro-Colombians, indigenous people and children "remain particularly vulnerable in the context of armed conflict" (5 Aug. 2011). Sources report the imposition by local gangs of [translation] "invisible frontiers" in Medellin to mark off their territory (IPC 8 Sept. 2011; *El Espectador* 17 Aug. 2010). According to the Popular Training Institute (Instituto Popular de Capacitación, IPC), such "frontiers" have caused the deaths of an [translation] "indeterminate number" of young people, many of them not related to the armed conflict (IPC 8 Sept. 2011). The IPC is a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Medellin that conducts research and training, and consults with other NGOs as well as with state agencies (IPC n.d.).

Sources also report the cessation of public transportation services in different parts of the city as a consequence of criminal actions by local gangs (IPC 18 Feb. 2011; *El Espectador* 17 Aug. 2010). The IPC has documented six occasions that occurred between January 2010 to January 2011 in which public transportation companies stopped working due to extortion by local gangs, as well as the murder of bus drivers and the burning of buses (IPC 18 Feb. 2011).

In its *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Medellin* for the first semester of 2011, the Ombudsman of Medellin (Personero de Medellín) documents the continuing intra-urban displacement of residents in Communes 1, 2 and 7 (Medellin 26 Sept. 2011, 8). The report indicated an 81 percent increase in intra-urban forced displacement in the city (ibid.). AlertNet, a humanitarian news service run by the Thompson Reuters Foundation, cites the UN High Commissioner for Refugees as saying that "Colombia's growing problem of urban displacement is under-reported" (AlertNet 11 Nov. 2011). The Ombudsman's human rights report also notes that territorial disputes between local gangs have been [translation] "more intense" in communes 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 13, and 16, as well as the townships of San Antonio de Prado, San Cristobal and Altavista (Medellin 26 Sept. 2011, 8-9). The report indicates that a [translation] "generalized threat" has been made against Afro-Colombians in Commune 16 by illegal armed groups (ibid., 39).

The National Institute of Forensic Medicine and Sciences (Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses, INMLCF) reported 4,665 homicides in Colombia between January and July 2011 (Colombia Aug. 2011, 4). Of these, 1,085 occurred in Medellin (ibid.). According to the Ombudsman of Medellin, Medellin's homicide rate is among the highest in Latin America and the highest of Colombian capital cities (Medellin 26 Sept. 2011, 10).

Government efforts to address crime in Medellin

The IPC observes that the municipality of Medellin and the Colombian government have implemented several measures against crime in the city, including strengthening the numbers of police, imposing curfews on minors, restricting the possession of firearms by requiring permits and supporting peace treaties between local gangs (IPC 1 Feb. 2010). On 24 June 2011, the Colombian president signed the Citizen's Safety Law in Medellin (Medellin 24 June 2011). The new law will provide [translation] "new tools" to fight crime, including prison sentences for tampering with cell phones and the possessing firearms or ammunition without a permit (ibid.). *El Colombiano* reports that a new crime laboratory will be created in Medellin to facilitate the fight against crime in an [translation] "efficient and timely manner" (24 June 2011).

However, the IPC reports the confusion of NGOs, which noticed that, despite municipal investments, [translation] "structural problems such as unemployment, inequity and poverty have not been overcome" (IPC 27 July 2010). *El Mundo*, a Medellin-based newspaper, cites the Mayor of Medellin as saying that [translation] "the main problem of the State is its inability to exercise authority, [and] detain and prosecute criminals" (20 Aug. 2010). According to the IPC, security forces have been unable to generate trust in local communities and the investment of resources has not had an impact on those who need it the most (8 Sept. 2011). The Ombudsman of Medellin indicates that, despite the efforts by authorities to address the issue of security in Medellin, criminal groups have not disappeared because of their ability to adapt, which translates into obstacles to regaining control over conflict areas (Medellin 26 Sept. 2011, 9). The Ombudsman estimates that in Medellin there are 250 [translation] "illegal armed groups" (ibid., 7).

Services available to Afro-Colombians in Medellin

The Ethnic Diversity Program representative stated that as part of Medellin's 2008-2011 development plan, the municipality developed several programs to provide services to the inhabitants of the city, regardless of ethnicity (Medellin 22 Sept. 2011). She explained that the Ethnic Diversity Program was specifically designed to assist ethnic groups, including Afro-Colombians, in accessing all the programs that the municipality offers (ibid.).

Though not specifically designed for Afro-Colombians, the 2008-2011 development plan describes the following as being among the programs available to vulnerable persons:

- Medellin Is Supportive (Medellin Solidaria): a project that seeks to guarantee group and family support to vulnerable households so that they can achieve greater socio-economic independence;
- Economic Independence for Women (Auntonomía económica de las mujeres): a strategy to promote and facilitate income generation by women;
- A Good Start (Buen comienzo): a program for the protection, health, education, nutrition and recreational services of children who are from low income neighbourhoods and are under six-years old ;

- Dignified Aging (Envejecimiento digno): assistance to vulnerable seniors in meeting their needs for basic care, housing and specialized care;
- As We Get Home (Mientras volvemos a casa): support in accessing sport and recreational activities as well as spaces that promote social inclusion to persons in jail, the displaced and homeless persons;
- Population in Emergency (Población en emergencia): psychosocial assistance to vulnerable persons experiencing personal, family and social emergencies;
- Population in Situations of Displacement (Población en situación de desplazamiento): seeks to guarantee displaced persons access to services;
- Assistance to High Risk Youth (Atención a jóvenes en alto riesgo): seeks to prevent young persons from joining illegal armed groups through training and social reintegration, among other measure (Medellin c2008, 1-10-1-11, 1-13-1-17, 1-20).

The Ethnic Diversity Program representative also noted that the municipality of Medellín has been working with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to provide training to leaders from displaced Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities in Medellín (ibid. 22 Sept. 2011). The program lasts nine sessions and covers three areas: rights of displaced persons; the theme of the [translation] "previous consultation," which is the right they have to be consulted before a development project takes place on their land; and the [translation] "Roadmap of Rights," by which participants disseminate information and participate in developing mechanisms that lead to the better enjoyment of their rights (ibid.).

The Government of Antioquia also has the following programs for ethnic minorities in the department:

- Program 4: Social Infrastructure and Basic Health for Ethnic Groups (Programa 4: Infraestructura social y de saneamiento básico para los grupos étnicos): provides housing, roads, aqueducts and schools to better their lives;
- Program 6: Preservation of At-Risk Ethnic Groups in the Management of Displacement (Programa 6: Preservación a grupos étnicos en riesgo y manejo del desplazamiento): aims at mitigating the risks of displacement and provides housing, psychological support and food assistance as well as state protection in cases of displacement; and
- Program 8: Health Prevention, Insurance, and Care for Antioquia's Ethnic Minorities: (Programa 8: Prevención, aseguramiento y atención par alas minorías étnicas de Antioquia): seeks to provide health services as well as to affiliate them with the General System of Social Security (Sistema General de Seguridad en Salud) (Antioquia n.d.a).

The 2011 budget for these projects was of \$389,172 Colombian pesos (COP) [CAD\$208,619 (XE 23 Sept. 2011a)] (Antioquia n.d.b). Municipalities and other entities contributed with COP\$71,916 [CAD\$38,582 (XE 23 Sept. 2011b)] (Antioquia n.d.b).

Effectiveness of programs

The US Department of State cites, in its *Country Reports*, the UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues as saying that the implementation of laws that support Afro-Colombians is "inadequate, limited and sporadic" (8 Apr. 2011). In a 2008 publication by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, CEPAL), the authors contend that programs for displaced persons are [translation] "of little effectiveness due to the low budget assigned to these programs and the lack of political will" (Nov. 2008, 6).

The Ethnic Diversity Program representative indicated that despite the efforts of the municipality to address the living conditions of Afro-Colombians living in Medellín, these communities still have [translation] "a great number" of basic needs that have not been met (Medellin 16 Sept. 2011). She added that there are many Afro-Colombians with insecure and low-paying jobs, and that a [translation] "very low" percentage of them have access to education (ibid.). The representative further noted that the lack of specific statistics on Afro-Colombians in the city makes the effort to design targeted strategies and programs difficult (ibid. 22 Sept. 2011). According to the representative, the municipality is currently working with Afro-Colombian communities to quantify their population and understand their needs (Medellin 23 Sept. 2011).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact representatives from the following organizations were unsuccessful: Afro-Medellín, Asociación Nacional de Afrocolombianos Desplazados, Centro de Desarrollo Cultural de Moravia, Movimiento Nacional CIMARRON, Universidad de Antioquia, Universidad de los Andes, Universidad Nacional.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International, Asociación Nacional de Alcaldes de Municipios con Población Afrodescendiente, Defensoría del Pueblo, European Country of Origin Information Network, Factiva, Ministerio de Cultura de Colombia, Renacientes PCN Colombia, United Nations Refworld.

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