

ExCom Chair mission report to the 87th meeting of the Standing Committee

14 June 2023

Introduction

From 8 to 12 May, I visited UNHCR's operation in Colombia in my capacity as Chairperson of the Executive Committee. I was accompanied from Geneva by Marco Formisano, Senior Liaison Adviser in the Regional Bureau for the Americas, and Mercedes Jakupi, senior official from the ExCom Secretariat. It was also a pleasure to have Laura Arango, Counsellor at the Permanent Mission of Colombia to the United Nations Office at Geneva, join us on the mission.

From the outset, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to the Government of Colombia for the warm welcome with which I was received and to the Permanent Mission here in Geneva for facilitating my visit. I would particularly like to thank His Excellency Ambassador Gustavo Adolfo Gallon Giraldo, who took the time to brief me on the historical and actual context of the situation in Colombia prior to my visit and to discuss my observations upon my return. Thanks are also due to the UNHCR colleagues who ensured the success of my mission, particularly the Representative, Ms. Mireille Girard, and her wonderful colleagues in Bogotá, Necoclí and Buenaventura. The UNHCR team in Colombia is truly exceptional, and I wish to take the opportunity to recognize their commitment and service.

Before sharing my observations, I would like to note that, while the tradition of the Executive Committee Chairperson visiting UNHCR field operations dates back to at least 2000, there had not been a visit to the Americas region by the Chairperson of ExCom since 2007. The mission was all the more pertinent, given that Colombia is currently a co-convenor of the upcoming Global Refugee Forum.

With this in mind, the objectives of the mission were to:

- First, understand the complex humanitarian challenges in Colombia, including with respect to mixed movements of refugees and migrants, internal displacement, the impact of these phenomena on statelessness, and the specific protection risks faced by indigenous, Afro-Colombian and other vulnerable groups;
- Second, observe the work of UNHCR, in coordination with other UN entities and partners, particularly the co-leadership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in the context of mixed movements;
- Third, gain appreciation for the effective way in which Colombia has managed the situation of forced displacement, particularly with respect to inclusion and durable solutions, and how this experience can inspire other countries facing similar challenges; and
- Finally, help raise awareness about the need for enhanced support from the international community for the efforts of Colombia, particularly in the lead up to the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023.

Colombia's vision for total peace

I chose to visit Colombia because it represents a microcosm of challenges related to forced displacement, with a proactive and ambitious Government that is determined to address them. It is a country of paradoxes, which presents both trials and opportunities. It is both a producer of displacement and a progressive host country, which is providing temporary protection status for some 2.47 million Venezuelans. Its Government is politically courageous, but with limited resources to implement its vision. While suffering from nearly 60 years of armed conflict, the country is both vibrant and resilient.

This is a defining moment for Colombia, and I was pleased to have an opportunity to visit at this particular time. I was impressed to hear the commitment of the Government to address the situation of forced displacement through a sound public policy and legal framework to advance towards solutions, actions in defense of the victims of forced displacement, including reparation, and efforts that support inclusion, the enjoyment of rights and equality.

In Bogotá, I met with the Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ms. Elizabeth Taylor Jay, together with the Director of Cooperation, Mr. Álvaro Calderón; the cabinet of the Vice-President; and representatives of key Colombian institutions, including the Head of the Victim's Unit, the Delegate Attorney for Territorial Governance and the office of the Ombudsman. They outlined the Government's ambitions under the total peace strategy which, as the Vice-Minister said, "privileged human life". In this vein, the creation of a Ministry of Equality aims to strengthen public policies that guarantee the rights of Colombia's most vulnerable populations, including the victims of forced displacement and others who fall under UNHCR's mandate. The work of UNHCR in supporting the Government in these endeavours was highly valued. However, it was noted that the limited resources for implementation represented a major challenge.

Visit to Necoclí and Turbo in Antioquia Department

During my mission, I had the opportunity to visit Necoclí on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Urabá, where I saw the refugee and migrant situation firsthand, including transcontinental movements. I learned about the protection risks which refugees and migrants are exposed to, including exploitation and abuse, gender-based violence, theft and extortion by trafficking networks and "guides" who control the routes, physical violence, dehydration and drowning, family separation, tropical diseases, and recruitment by irregular armed actors. I witnessed groups of refugees and migrants of various nationalities preparing to take boats across the Gulf of Urabá, onwards to Panama through the Darién and northwards. Small children could be seen in life jackets, grasping the hands of their parents who were full of hope, but likely unaware of the dangers they were about to face en route. It was truly heartbreaking. One young couple had left several children behind with relatives, in the hopes that they would survive the ordeal, find safety and an opportunity to earn a decent living, and eventually send for them.

Having been briefed in Bogotá on the co-leadership of UNHCR and IOM of the inter-agency group on mixed migration flows – known by its Spanish acronym "GIFMM" – I saw firsthand how the two organizations are working together on the ground. The GIFMM coordinates the work of 16 UN agencies, 64 international and national non-governmental organizations and members of the Red Cross movement, working in various sectors such as protection, health, education, food security, integration and socioeconomic inclusion, and cash-based assistance. In Necoclí, under the umbrella of the GIFMM, UNHCR and partners, including the Colombian Red Cross, are providing legal support, medical attention and psychosocial support, translation and interpretation services, information

about the physical risks and hazards that may be encountered en route and alternative integration opportunities, and humanitarian assistance (including jerry cans, water purification tablets and high-energy bars) to help them survive their journey through the Darién. Free WiFi and mobile phone charging stations were made available to enable refugees and migrants to reach and update their loved ones back home. The coordination among partners was effective, and the assistance provided truly life-saving.

I also visited Turbo, where internally displaced Colombians are living in informal settlements on the outskirts of the port city. The Government is providing them with property titles, a process which UNHCR is supporting. The legalization of such informal settlements provides stability and solutions for the victims of forced displacement and will contribute to the aim of consolidating peace in Colombia. It also closes the gaps generated by legal insecurity over the land they occupy, leading to improved living conditions and access to public services. During my interaction with these communities, it was interesting to see how they were mindful of and also preoccupied by the preservation of the environment. They wanted me to bring this back to you, and I hope that we can listen to their concern and do something to address it.

Visit to Buenaventura

During my stay in Colombia, I had the opportunity to visit the port city of Buenaventura in the department of Valle del Cauca. A strategic corridor for the trading of legal and illegal goods, the department is impacted by the presence of gangs and irregular armed groups, leading to high rates of displacement, the confinement of populations and increased protection risks, with Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities being the main victims. I travelled by boat to see the challenges faced by displaced communities living in the Bajamar neighbourhoods, where the population is living in precarious conditions in houses on stilts over the sea.

I also visited the Santa Fé neighbourhood, which is home to approximately 22,000 victims of forced displacement and, to a lesser extent, refugees and migrants. While some internally displaced persons have been settled there for decades, they face legal insecurity, as the land they occupy is designated as public property. Furthermore, the presence of irregular armed actors has generated intra-urban displacement, making Santa Fé and surrounding areas both reception and expulsion zones. Despite the challenges, the resilience of these communities is remarkable. I spoke with community leaders who have been empowered to advocate for the rights of the population and saw how artistic, cultural and sports activities, which UNHCR is supporting but which are community-led, are reducing protection risks for youth, including recruitment, exploitation and other forms of violence.

In Buenaventura, I met with the Mayor, local ombudspersons and representatives of displaced communities. I learned about the pilot mediation efforts initiated by the Government in the context of President Petro's "total peace" policy and the ongoing negotiation processes with irregular armed groups. These efforts are taking place amid continuing large-scale displacement, and concern was expressed about the impact on institutional efforts to protect the rights of the victims of forced displacement. At the same time, there was hope that the efforts in Buenaventura will succeed and that it can be used as national model for peace.

Conclusion

Before leaving the country, I had a roundtable discussion with Ambassadors and representatives of several Embassies from the region to Colombia: from Ecuador, Ambassador Ortiz; from Mexico, Ambassador Ruiz Anchondo; from Panama, Ambassador Fernández Puentes; from Chile, Mr. Oschilewski Lucares, Minister Counselor; and from Brazil, Ms. Santos Delamonica, First Secretary and

Head of Political Affairs. They spoke about the shared challenges their countries were confronted with and highlighted that a regional response was necessary to find solutions to the phenomenon of mixed movements. As it was made clear from the discussion, “shared challenges require shared responses”.

I would be remiss if I did not mention one aspect that made me very proud, as Chairperson of UNHCR’s Executive Committee. In every discussion that I had – whether with the Government, UNHCR’s partners or community leaders – there was unanimous appreciation for the contributions of UNHCR, which was seen as a critical and vital partner. I would like to highlight in particular, a comment made in my meeting with organizations representing indigenous and afro-Colombian communities. I was told just how important UNHCR’s presence was in areas where these populations were living in fear of the irregular armed groups.

Throughout my visit, the key messages of “hope and determination” were palpable. They define the current moment in which Colombia finds itself. However, it was also clear that Colombia cannot shoulder the responsibility alone. We must accelerate support for Colombia, its institutions and civil society to succeed in its total peace plan and to advance solutions, while this critical window of opportunity remains open. And, also, in the hope that the communities affected will one day find justice, peace and equality.

I would like to conclude with a very simple but powerful message, which could be seen on the back of the shirt, which one of the community leaders in Buenaventura was wearing. It said:

“Porque solos podemos. Pero unidos, podemos más.”

[Because alone we can do it. But united, we can do more”.]

We can all do something to help. All of the ingredients for peace are there, but require our support. The public and institutional will is formidable, and I can confirm that it is stronger than the challenges on the road ahead.

Thank you.
