

COLOMBIA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE SERIOUSLY THREATENED BY GOVERNMENT-REBEL CONFLICT

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Voicing new concern over Colombia's decades-long civil conflict, which has already displaced 2 million people, the United Nations refugee agencies warned today that the country's 1 million indigenous people are being badly affected, and entire communities could disappear after being forced to flee their traditional lands.

"This tragedy remains largely invisible," UN High Commissioner for

Refugees

(<http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&id=439961674>)>UNHCR)

spokesperson Jennifer Pagonis told a news briefing in Geneva. "Indigenous lands tend to be in remote and strategically important areas where irregular armed groups are heavily present.

"Crimes and human rights abuses against indigenous people often go unreported and stay unpunished," she added, citing a recent report of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC), according to which more than 19,000 indigenous families were forced to flee their homes and territories since the start of this year alone.

"This is the first time that such detailed figures on the impact of the conflict on indigenous people are available, thanks to the nationwide database and reporting system ONIC put into place with the support of UNHCR," Ms. Pagonis said in the latest of several warnings the agency has issued this year on the impact of the four decades of fighting between Government forces, leftist rebels and rightwing paramilitaries

"The findings highlight the extreme vulnerability of Colombia's indigenous groups to forced displacement."

According to ONIC, more than 1,600 indigenous people were murdered in the past 20 years, 60 per cent of them during the past five years. Some groups like the Wiwa people in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in the north lost up to 12 members in the first eight months of this year alone out of an estimated population of 1,850

The report cited the massive displacement of some 14,000 members of the Nasa people in western Colombia this summer, adding that many of Colombia's more than 80 indigenous groups are also at risk.

In October, hundreds of Qechwa people fled fighting in southern Putumayo department and fresh fighting and more displacement were reported this week. In Chocó, in the north-west, hundreds of Embera people are under constant and unrelenting threat of losing their ancestral homeland.

Displacement is “doubly catastrophic for indigenous communities,” Ms. Pagonis stressed. “Indigenous culture is closely linked to the land and displacement often leads to the total collapse of traditional authority and cultural patterns. Like many other displaced people, indigenous families often end up in big urban centres where they face huge difficulties making a new life in an alien environment.”

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