CONCLUSION
Providing emergency humanitarian assistance to Colombians who are displaced by armed conflict in large numbers must remain a priority. However, the Victims Law presents an important opportunity to develop new and innovative strategies to help urban IDPs build new lives in their new communities. The Colombian government and its international partners – particularly the United States – must work to improve local capacity to register displacement victims, while also helping urban IDPs attain decent housing, find employment, and integrate into their local communities and the formal economy.

Marc Hanson traveled to Colombia to assess the situation of urban refugees and the implementation of the new Victims Law in July 2012.

RECOMMENDATIONS
- The Government of Colombia must prioritize urban IDP integration as a key pillar of the implementation of the new Victims Law, and devise and fund new, integrated programs that help displaced people in urban areas attain decent housing, formal employment, and self-sufficiency in their local communities.
- In consultation with the Government of Colombia, and in coordination with selected counterpart municipal authorities, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) should fund urban IDP baseline assessments, as well as design and pilot comprehensive urban IDP local integration programs.
- USAID must increase the share of funding dedicated to local integration initiatives for urban IDPs within its three-year plan to support the Victims Law, including support to local NGOs to conduct budget oversight and advocacy for displaced victims at the municipal level.
- The U.S. Government should immediately fund the first year of the joint UNHCR–UNDP Transitional Solutions Initiative for Colombia, and engage with program implementers to provide ongoing feedback on the initiative and evaluate the lessons learned.
- The U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) must continue to fund humanitarian relief for IDPs, as well as assess gaps in emergency response and provide technical assistance to central and municipal government officials and local NGOs – particularly in areas that the Government of Colombia cannot access or locations where displacement has increased significantly.
The Victims Law seeks to convert similar past attempts and promises into true progress for Colombia’s displacement victims. Successful implementation will require the Colombian government to design, pilot, and then to scale comprehensive programs to help IDPs integrate into their communities and the formal economy. Urban IDPs must be prioritized in Victims Law programming. The U.S. government should support the development of programs for urban IDPs by increasing funds for social and economic development and utilizing the additional resources to design and pilot urban IDP integration programs in several cities.

COLOMBIA’S DISPLACED PEOPLE IN URBAN AREAS

Forced displacement in Colombia largely occurs in the rural sector. Increasingly, victims of the conflict are forced to abandon their agricultural livelihoods, assets, and social networks to take refuge in cities. The majority of these can be found in just 12 cities.

The urban settlements where IDPs reside are often illegal subdivisions comprised of overcrowded homes of poor structural integrity, precariously situated in high-risk areas vulnerable to floods and landslides. In interviews, urban IDPs voiced frustration about high levels of violence and unemployment, streets running with raw sewage, and limited access to public services. Displaced women and girls are vulnerable to sexual abuse, and adolescents face forced recruitment into illegal armed groups that dominate marginalized neighborhoods. Nevertheless, RI did not encounter a single displaced person seeking to return to the place from which they were displaced.

Even when humanitarian assistance is available, its provision does not promote self-sufficiency. Upon registration, a displaced family can receive three months of government-provided emergency assistance, with the assumption that afterwards beneficiaries reach a “stabilization phase.” This timeframe is unrealistic, and IDPs regularly return to long lines at overwhelmed government offices to request additional assistance. In talking to RI, displaced families consistently raised three priorities: employment, housing, and access to social and health services.

Local officials told RI that displaced people will not work. However, IDPs consistently reported secure jobs and income as their most urgent need. Government-offered vocational training programs are oversubscribed and seldom result in employment, and are criticized by IDPs for often being incompatible with the local economy. Several displaced women cited lack of child care as the greatest impediment to pursuing full-time work. Apprenticeship programs should be expanded in coordination with large private sector employers to facilitate IDPs’ entry into the formal economy and reduce dependency on continued humanitarian support.

Housing subsidies available to urban IDPs seldom result in the acquisition of a home. Instead, such subsidies do not cover the market value of homes, meaning that IDPs must obtain mortgages to complete the purchase. However, lenders are unwilling to give mortgages to people without jobs, and unused housing subsidies are regularly returned to government coffers. Subsidized, long-term lending might prove a better way to promote access to safe housing options.

Urban IDPs who wish to remain where they have received little attention from the Victims Unit. The focus of the Victims Unit is on returns, even though local integration assistance is what the vast majority of urban IDPs need. The Colombian government should conduct a baseline study of urban IDPs to determine the population that prefers to integrate locally and to identify their needs. The assessment should pay particular attention to gender-specific urban IDP priorities to ensure that local integration programming takes into account the particular needs of displaced women. Baseline data, coupled with an understanding of the needs and priorities of IDPs, would allow the government and its international partners to more effectively design, pilot, and measure the results of urban IDP integration programs.

IDP ASSISTANCE IN TIMES OF TRANSITION

Registration with the new Victims Unit is the means by which IDPs can access benefits under the new Victims Law. Unfortunately, the Victims Law creates new coordination challenges between the national government in Bogotá and municipal governments – combined with the limited capacity of local authorities – have essentially made this impossible for tens of thousands of IDPs, if not more.

To register, displaced people go to a Unit for the Assistance and Orientation of IDPs (UAO) and make a declaration to either a municipal public attorney (personero), an official from the Ombudsman Offices (Defensoría del Pueblo), or an official from the Inspector General Office (Policía Nacional). The Victims Unit in Bogotá then is responsible for validating the declaration. If successful, the claimant is included in the Single Registry of Victims.

Once a declaration is mailed to Bogotá, the validation process should take no longer than 60 days. If validated, the central government assumes the cost of providing humanitarian assistance. However, between January and June of this year, with nearly 100,000 declarations submitted, not a single case was validated and local officials had received no responses. By August, some progress was being made on the backlog.

The Victims Unit told RI that the validation process was slowed by challenges associated with a new informational technology system, and that the remaining declarations would be processed by the end of September. In the meantime, the cost of providing humanitarian assistance is being covered by municipal budgets. In each of the municipalities RI visited, the team was told that local humanitarian resources were either nearly or entirely exhausted, and that assistance was being rationed only to the most vulnerable cases. The Victims Unit should supplement municipal funding of IDP aid so that local governments continue to provide assistance.
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Housing subsidies available to urban IDPs seldom result in the acquisition of a home. However, lenders are unwilling to give mortgages to people without jobs, and unused housing subsidies are regularly returned to government coffers – which obviates long-term lending programs that prove a better way to promote access to safe housing options.

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TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE: A ROLE FOR INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

Over the past dozen years, the U.S. invested billions of dollars in Colombia to strengthen its military and counter-narcotics institutions, while USAID largely supported Colombia’s counternarcostics strategy. The underlying drivers of Colombia’s internal conflict and the ramifications of intensifying the conflict received little attention. USAID funded programs to establish civilian government presence after military offenses cleared areas of guerrilla forces, creating so-called “consolidation zones.” Directed by the U.S. Congress, USAID invested small sums of money for Afro-Colombians, indigenous groups, IDPs, women, and in support of human rights, but poverty reduction and social inclusion remained a low priority for the Colombia mission.

In the last two years, however, the election of President Juan Manuel Santos, the passage of the Victims Law, and the arrival of new USAID personnel have galvanized a redesign of U.S. development programs. In July this year, USAID Colombia announced a three-year, $50 million agreement with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to support the implementation of Colombia’s Victims Law by strengthening institutional capacity, providing physical and psychological assistance to victims, providing assistance tailored to ethnic groups and women more severely affected by the conflict, and supporting the Transitional Justice Committees. While this is a substantial investment, more of the $170 million of Economic Support Funds directed to Colombia in this year should support the Victims Law. Specifically, consistent with the “USAID Forward” reform agenda to strengthen partner country capacity, USAID Colombia should increase direct assistance to municipalities with the highest concentrations of urban IDPs.

Creative programming across USAID Colombia sectors can support the Victims Unit as it designs and pilots programs to lift millions of urban IDPs out of poverty through self-sufficiency. While the Colombian government is investing heavily in high-profile return programs, most urban IDPs need assistance to thrive where they currently reside. The Victims Unit has not yet designed nor implemented comprehensive integration strategies as are called for under the new Victims Law. USAID Colombia should contribute the Victims Unit effort to assist urban IDPs by designing and piloting scalable local integration programming in selected cities that are among the country’s top 25 urban IDP receptors. Investments in pilot projects that focus on job creation, housing development, and education and health care access for IDPs should include results analysis in their program design to determine the most effective programming.

In tandem with these programs, USAID Colombia should invest in civil society organizations that can undertake budget oversight initiatives at the municipal level. With adequate training and funding, these local NGOs can provide quality control of programming for urban IDPs and ensure the funds included in mandated local action plans are spent effectively in support of displaced victims.

To undertake these activities, USAID Colombia must enhance its capacity to manage development programs. A combination of inconsistent leadership, understaffing, and inexperienced personnel has plagued USAID Colombia for a decade and threatens USAID Colombia’s ability to partner effectively with the Colombian government as it implements the Victims Law. The office has had several short-term mission directors over the past five years, and for more than a year has operated under an acting mission director. Staff tends to arrive in Bogotá with limited regional knowledge and experience. Supporting the implementation of the Victims Law requires that USAID Colombia has the capacity to conduct independent analysis and identify creative solutions for local integration of urban IDPs. In order to build capacity at the mission to design and pilot effective programs, USAID Colombia should hire additional staff, ideally with regional experience, and make Bogotá a four-year posting.

USAID Colombia’s support for local integration could be complemented by other efforts, like the new UNHCR–United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Transitional Solutions Initiative program. The initiative seeks to design and pilot local integration programs for urban IDPs in three communities, as well as rural returns in two others. Helping urban IDPs integrate into their communities will be an incredibly challenging task. Pursuing multiple efforts to design and pilot policy responses in the early stages of implementation of the Victims Law will greatly aid the Victims Unit as it develops a national local integration strategy. As of May 2012, the three-year, $26 million initiative was less than 10 percent funded. The U.S. State Department’s Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) should fully fund its work in Colombia.

RESPONDING TO HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCIES

The Victims Law replaces Acción Social – the national entity formerly responsible for providing emergency assistance to IDPs – with the Emergency Humanitarian Response subunit. However, the previous system’s response mechanisms have been largely maintained. Local authorities, local groups, and international NGOs remain the first responders,
CONCLUSION
Providing emergency humanitarian assistance to Colombians who are displaced by armed conflict in large numbers must remain a priority. However, the Victims Law presents an important opportunity to develop new and innovative strategies to help urban IDPs build new lives in their new communities. The Colombian government and its international partners – particularly the United States – must work to improve local capacity to register displacement victims, while also helping urban IDPs attain decent housing, find employment, and integrate into their local communities and the formal economy.

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BACKGROUND
Decades of internal armed conflict have displaced at least 3.9 million people within Colombia since 1997. This is the highest recorded number of IDPs in the world. CODHES, Colombia’s premier displacement monitoring NGO, estimates that nearly 5.5 million Colombians have been displaced since 1985. More than 90 percent of Colombian IDPs live in urban areas.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 95 percent of Colombia’s IDPs live in poverty – 72 percent in extreme poverty. Dispossessed of their belongings and driven from their homes, IDPs are three-times as likely as the average displaced person to take on new responsibilities for emergency assistance and local NGOs to advocate for effective IDP programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS
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- The U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) must continue to fund humanitarian relief for IDPs, as well as assess gaps in emergency response and provide technical assistance to central and municipal governments, NGOs, and local NGOs – particularly in areas that the Government of Colombia cannot access or locations where displacement has increased significantly.

COLOMBIA: TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE MUST INCLUDE URBAN IDPS
Colombia is home to the highest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world, the majority of whom live in urban areas. Armed conflict continues to displace more than 130,000 people annually. Once displaced, these Colombians frequently endure extreme poverty, live in unsafe settlements, and suffer social and economic exclusion. Helping urban IDPs move from conditions of sustained suffering and vulnerability to self-reliance and social inclusion will transform Colombia into a more stable and prosperous nation. The new Victims Law provides an organizing framework for achieving this goal. Although the Colombian government appears to possess the political will necessary to make real progress, coordination problems, excessive decentralization, and weak local capacity threaten to derail the implementation of the new law. Colombia’s central government must provide resources and active oversight of local integration programs for urban IDPs. The U.S. government and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) must invest the resources necessary to design and pilot local integration initiatives for urban IDPs, as well as deepen their engagement with local authorities and assist local NGOs to advocate for effective IDP programs.