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Colombian refugees' tent city a reminder of crisis

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BOGOTA -- A sprawling refugee tent city just blocks from the presidential palace has become a nagging reminder to residents of Colombia's cosmopolitan capital that a brutal conflict is being fought in far-flung provinces.

Since March, more than 2,000 people displaced by violence in rural Colombia have occupied the green hillocks and red-brick squares of Third Millennium Park, which was to be a jewel of Bogota's urban renaissance as a military crackdown on leftist rebels brought greater safety to the nation's main cities.

Instead, the park and its tent city are a reminder that the five-decade-long conflict still afflicts the countryside, causing hundreds of thousands to flee their homes and generating the world's worst internal refugee problem, according to United Nations statistics.

The occupants of Third Millennium Park are demanding that President Alvaro Uribe's government heed a court order to provide them with food, education and jobs.

An agreement was announced Friday in which authorities promised aid to those refugees who leave the park on Sunday. While the deal would remove an embarrassing eyesore, refugee groups say it doesn't begin to address a domestic crisis that has only worsened in recent years.

"Here, we are visible," said Esteban, a 33-year-old farmer who said he was forcibly displaced from Medellin in the 1990s and then again two years ago from the eastern plains. He wouldn't give his last name, fearing for his safety.

"We leave here, and we're thrown in the shadows," he said. "The displacement, the issues of war, don't exist."

The park has become a reconstituted puzzle of this conflict-fractured nation where right-wing militias and leftist guerrillas, both fueled by cocaine profits, engage in a dirty war in which the chief victims are the poor.

In one section of the park is the Pacific faction, Afro-Colombians from Choco state. In an adjoining plaza, accordion-driven music from the Caribbean coast blasted from speakers and Jesus Medina, 39, sat with his two-year old son, Gelvis, flipping through cumbia CDs he brought from Valledupar.

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"The songs relax you, because here, you've got a lot of stress," said Medina.

Afflicted by a brutal conflict in which poor farmers are routinely torn from their land, Colombia has more than 3 million internally displaced by U.N. count - the world's highest number last year, ahead of [Iraq](#) and Sudan.

Since President Alvaro Uribe was first elected in 2002, Colombia's cities have become safer and life has improved for many. But the refugee population of Bogota has swelled.

"All roads lead to Bogota," says Diana Rivera a researcher for the human rights group CODHES, which along with the Roman Catholic Church keeps the most trusted count of Colombia's internally displaced.

In 2008 alone, more than 56,000 new refugees arrived in this capital of 8 million, according to CODHES, the largest number since the organization began tracking the population a decade ago. Nationwide, it reported a 24.5 percent increase from 2007 to nearly 390,000 in new cases of internally displaced, a second consecutive yearly increase.

Most of the newly arrived refugees in Bogota are scattered about the city's poorest neighborhoods, crowded together with relatives or friends.

A 1997 law guarantees victims of forced displacement basic humanitarian attention, including the right to food, education and jobs. But Accion Social, the presidential agency charged with meeting those needs, says it simply lacks the funds to address the problem. It spent nearly \$500 million last year on the displaced and has over the past seven years built homes for 8,000 refugee families.

"Each day, 68 displaced families obtain housing in Colombia," the agency's director for the displaced population, Armando Escobar, said Friday. "But we need to find housing for 300."

The Constitutional Court has repeatedly found the state's response insufficient, and an economist on a panel it convened to study the issue, Luis Jorge Garay, estimates it would cost about \$25 billion to fairly compensate all the country's displaced.

The U.N.-mediated agreement reached Thursday night specifies payments of an average of \$465 per family for food and housing and \$2,700 beginning in November so they can establish businesses.

The accord was not the first reached with "desplazados," Spanish for displaced, who took up residency in mid-March between tarps and wood planks in this park created in 2002.

In May, several hundred squatters were relocated to two temporary city shelters. Many say, however, that promised jobs have yet to materialize.

In the tent city, 48-year old Miguel slipped a woolen poncho over silk slacks and a bulletproof vest.

After being displaced six years ago from the Arauca region that borders [Venezuela](#), said Miguel, he reported the far-right militiamen responsible to local prosecutors. That's when the death threats began.

The Bogota tent city, because it's so public, offers a certain comfort, he said.

"Here, we are safer than anywhere else."

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