



HUMANITARIAN ACTION IN COLOMBIA ACTIVITY REPORT 2011

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Boris Heger / ICRC

Editorial

The other Colombia – heading for oblivion?

There is a Colombia that barely features in the news headlines. It can only be reached by canoe, by mule, on foot or by roads that resemble dry riverbeds. In this Colombia, people have trouble getting to a doctor, obtaining clean water and providing an education for their children. This Colombia is also closer than we might think, in neighbourhoods on the outskirts of big cities. It is the Colombia that suffers the worst repercussions of the armed conflict and other forms of violence, repercussions that are ever more remote and felt on the margins of society, but are nevertheless a very real aspect of life in the country today.

This Colombia is the antithesis of the one that first springs to mind; the one characterized by economic growth, development, consumerism and sophistication. But these distinct realities are two sides of the same coin. They coexist in the same territory as an embodiment of extreme contradiction and contrast – there are two Colombias that sometimes fail to see each other, that barely even acknowledge each other and often do not recognize each other.

A few figures about inequality and economic growth are enough to illustrate this contradiction. According to data from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Colombia is the country with the second worst income distribution in the region. On the other hand, its economic growth exceeded 5% in 2011, one of the highest in the region.

Unlike in previous years, the consequences of the armed conflict are now felt not so much in big cities, where safety concerns have given way to discussions about economic growth, employment policies and public transport systems.

In contrast, in the other Colombia, where the ICRC focuses its humanitarian work, the conflict often wreaks havoc on people's lives, whether through direct clashes or through the presence of armed groups controlling territories. Here, people are still worried about having enough to eat, getting their children treated if they fall ill, whether or not the teacher will turn up, and how to

remain neutral in the face of hostilities playing out on their doorsteps. The protagonist of our report is this other Colombia.

Having witnessed first-hand many of the humanitarian problems facing various parts of the country, we would like to remind people that the armed conflict and other forms of violence continue to claim new victims every day and to stress that respect for humanitarian rules is a matter of urgency.

We would also like to share our concern that the population, and the situation they face, are being forgotten. This slide towards oblivion gives rise to two specific concerns: a fall in international aid for the victims, and the absence of this other reality in the national public debate.

The ICRC applauds the government's efforts to drive through the Victims and Land Restitution Law, which should bring relief to thousands of families. We believe that this is a first step towards combating the oblivion and we are monitoring the law's implementation with interest and with a firm desire to do what is in our power to see that its benefits reach those affected.

We also think that it is important to ensure that the other Colombia has a greater role to play in seeking and developing proposals to put an end to decades of violence, some of which are starting to emerge in the public arena. Unless the full scale of this contrasting reality is factored in, it will be very difficult to award the recognition due to the victims of the conflict and to come up with far-reaching solutions.

We therefore urge you to take the time to read this report and to immerse yourself in the victims' accounts of this other Colombia, in the figures about the impact of the various humanitarian problems and in the ICRC's efforts to reduce human suffering.

A handwritten signature in white ink on a dark green background. The signature is stylized and appears to read 'Jordi Raich'.

Jordi Raich
Head of the ICRC delegation in Colombia



Boris Heger / ICRC

In 2011, acceptance of the ICRC's humanitarian work meant that it was able to carry out its activities in parts of Colombia affected by armed conflict and other forms of violence.

Introduction

2011: Calling for respect for humanitarian rules

In 2011, Colombians continued to suffer the effects of an armed conflict that has persisted for almost 50 years, the longest in the Western hemisphere. The impact of this conflict is as serious and significant today as it has always been. The call for compliance with and strict implementation of humanitarian rules, which runs through each section of this report, is therefore current, necessary and relevant.

During the year, the ICRC witnessed first-hand the harshness and horrors of the armed conflict and of other forms of violence in various parts of the country. It recorded more than 760 violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) and of other basic rules protecting human life, with a worrying rise in the numbers of people displaced, in sexual violence, and in attacks on civilian property.

The figures set out in the following pages are merely a reflection of the situation in more than 20 regions of Colombia where the ICRC's humanitarian activities are focused, but they may also be indicative of national trends.

In 2011, the ICRC registered an intensification of the fighting and its consequences for victims in the following departments: Cauca, Nariño, Antioquia, Córdoba, Putumayo, Caquetá, Meta and Guaviare and, in the final months of the year, Norte de Santander. In addition, in cities such as Medellín, Buenaventura and Tumaco, the effects of the armed conflict were compounded by other forms of organized violence, adding to the population's suffering.

Departments such as Cauca, Nariño, Putumayo and Caquetá have been the setting for fighting, military operations, and attacks. The same has been true of some towns in the Catatumbo region in Norte de Santander. As stipulated in international humanitarian law, the parties to a conflict have a duty to respect the principles of distinction, precaution and proportionality in order to spare civilians, their property, and other persons protected under IHL, such as those who are sick, wounded or no longer taking part in hostilities.

In addition to these areas, where the clashes were focused, there were others that, owing to the presence of armed fighters, suffered the indirect consequences of a long-entrenched conflict. Their inhabitants had trouble accessing basic services such as health care, education, water and transport and faced stigmatization for being seen to collaborate with one side or another. These areas are not the scene of daily clashes but they do experience murders, threats and sexual violence, among other violations, that go unreported. The humanitarian needs there are further intensified by the neglect, indifference and weak presence of State social institutions.

Despite the State's efforts to contain the problem, the consolidation of emerging armed groups (called "Bacrim" by the government) in Antioquia, Córdoba, Chocó, Nariño and several departments along the Caribbean coast have caused the situation to deteriorate in humanitarian terms. Other groups operating outside the law in cities such as Medellín and Buenaventura have exacerbated it further.

In these cities, there are neighbourhoods that are difficult to access and are controlled by armed gangs. Setting aside the lengthy semantic discussions of the distinction between "armed conflict" and "other situations of violence" (the latter mainly being the result of organized crime), the humanitarian repercussions of both phenomena are practically identical for the population. They include loss of life, displacement, disappearance, sexual abuse and recruitment of minors.



Oscar Iván Ordoñez / ICRC

Humanitarian response

This report describes the main problems affecting the population in 2011 in the different areas of Colombia where the ICRC operates. It also highlights the ICRC's concern for people deprived of their freedom, regarding both the well-being of those held by armed groups and the conditions of detention of those detained in State facilities.

Beyond describing the impact on victims, the report includes reliable accounts that underline the chronic nature of the violence and testify to the ICRC's humanitarian response aimed at relieving people's suffering and restoring their dignity.

The ICRC's humanitarian action is focused in three basic areas: protection, assistance and prevention. Protection work involves addressing direct violations of humanitarian rules by approaching the alleged perpetrators, which the ICRC can do thanks to the confidential dialogue it maintains with all armed actors. Assistance means delivering aid directly and facilitating access to basic services for victims and communities in areas affected by violence. Prevention is about promoting respect for and implementation of IHL and of other humanitarian rules.

These tasks could not be carried out without the support of the Colombian Red Cross, which is the ICRC's strategic partner in the country. By joining forces, the two organizations can extend the coverage of their activities and reach many more people in need.

Lastly, each section of this report makes reference to IHL and conveys a specific message, calling upon all armed actors to mitigate the effects of the conflict and other forms of violence. They are urged to spare civilians, those who lay down their arms, the wounded and the sick. In short, this report is an exhortation to abide by the international principles that have guided conduct in wartime since the end of the nineteenth century – IHL.

Medellín: More Space for Humanitarian Action, More Alternatives

In 2011, with the aim of mitigating the consequences of violence in urban settings, the ICRC worked hand in hand with the Colombian Red Cross, and in coordination with the local authorities and private and community bodies, to set up a four-year project in Medellín called More Space for Humanitarian Action, More Alternatives.

In some neighbourhoods, armed violence results in dozens of people being killed or injured, moving to other parts of the city and having their movements restricted by curfews imposed by armed gangs. The inhabitants sometimes get caught in the crossfire and suffer psychological wounds. Some children are so terrified by the noise of gunfire that they refuse to go outside in the playground at school. Obtaining access to health care is also difficult for these communities, despite living in a city known for the quality of its medical services.

The joint project conducted by the ICRC and the Colombian Red Cross is a comprehensive, cross-disciplinary response to the problem, encompassing various facets. It includes violence-prevention work in schools through lessons on peaceful coexistence, community first aid, and sexual and reproductive health. It also involves assistance work, with initiatives to help people obtain access to health care and set up income-generating activities. Protection work is undertaken as well to promote the implementation of standards governing the use of force, arrest and detention among the police and armed forces, and to engage armed groups in confidential dialogue that encourages them to respect civilians and basic infrastructure such as medical centres, schools and public spaces. The ICRC also visits juvenile detention centres with a view to improving the young people's conditions of detention and prospects for social reintegration.

W. Krassowski / ICRC



WHAT IS INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW?

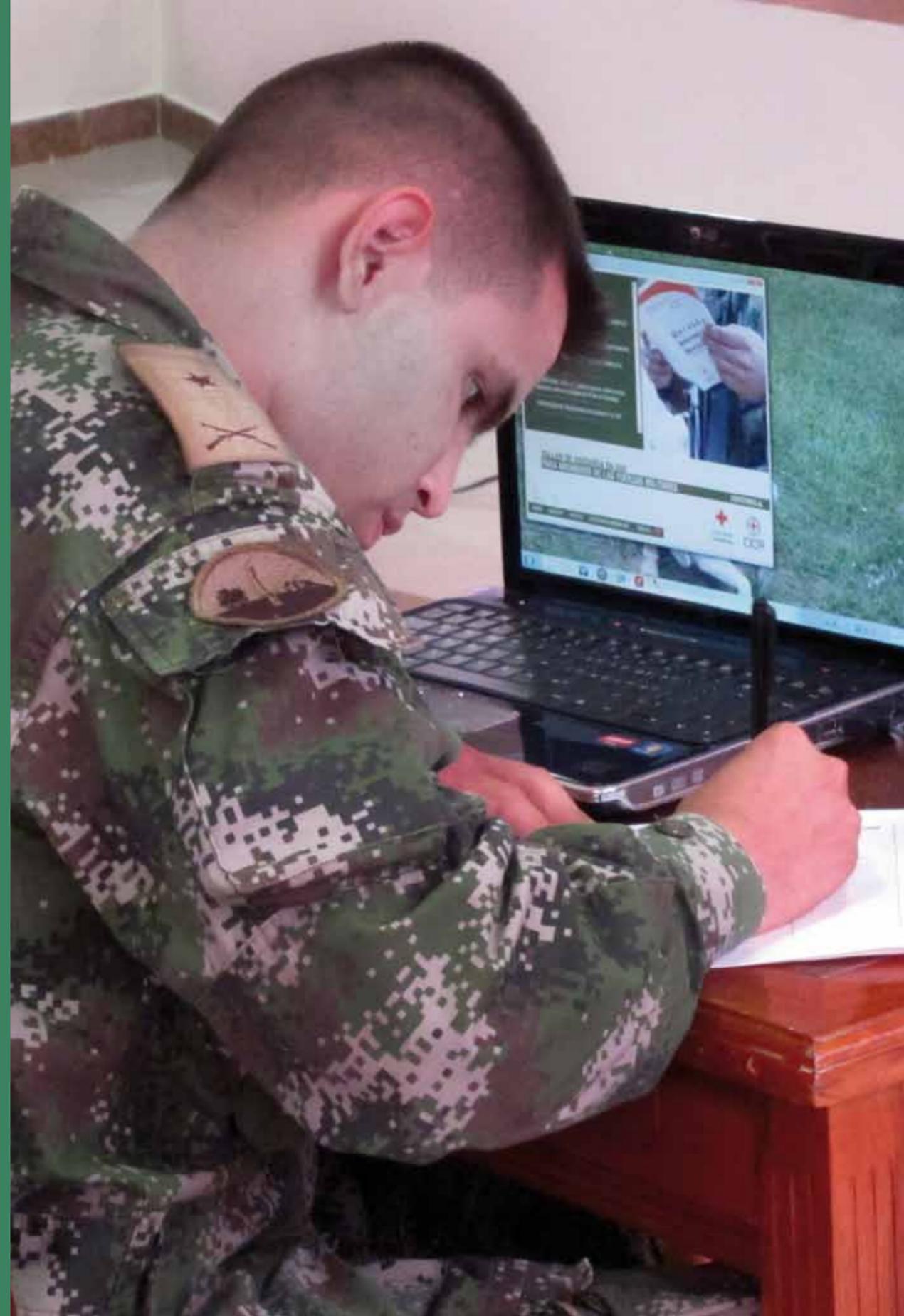
International humanitarian law (IHL) is a set of treaty-based and customary principles and rules that seek to limit the effects of international and non-international armed conflicts. It protects people who are not or are no longer participating in the hostilities and restricts the means and methods of warfare.

IHL has its origins in fundamental principles including humanity – preventing and alleviating human suffering wherever it may be found, distinction between civilians and combatants and between military and non-military targets, and precaution during attacks and against the effects of such attacks.

Those same principles underpin the main treaty-based IHL instruments. In the case of international armed conflicts, these are the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocol I of 1977. In the case of non-international armed conflicts, the applicable rules are found in Article 3 common to all four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocol II of 1977.

In addition to these treaties, there is also customary international humanitarian law, which reflects the general practice and customs of war and is binding on all parties to the conflict. In 2005, the ICRC published a study on customary international humanitarian law, which set out 161 rules that help limit the impact of non-international armed conflicts by enhancing protection for victims in terms of their well-being, dignity and health.

Since the conflict in Colombia is defined as a non-international armed conflict, all parties must comply with Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, with Additional Protocol II and with the relevant customary rules of international humanitarian law.



Clara Lorena Araújo / ICRC

The ICRC encourages parties to comply with international humanitarian law when planning and conducting their military operations.



**PROBLEMS
AFFECTING
CIVILIANS**

W. Krasowski / ICRC



Boris Heger / ICRC

MURDER AND DEATH THREATS

Murder and threats are used to intimidate people. This often drives individuals and communities to flee their homes. In addition to civilians, the wounded and those no longer taking part in hostilities also fall victim to this scourge.

People living in areas where parties to the conflict are based, or where fighting and military operations take place, are the most exposed to violations of international humanitarian law, such as murder and threats.

When fighting breaks out, the parties to the conflict sometimes make no distinction between civilians and fighters. In 2011, the ICRC knew about dozens of cases of civilians killed in this way. Civilians also often become direct murder victims because they are caught in the crossfire. Many such incidents occurred because fighters failed to take the necessary precautions to avoid civilian losses or to check whether they were really attacking a military target.

In addition to civilians, others protected by international humanitarian law were victims

of murder and threats. These included fighters who were no longer taking part in hostilities, i.e. those who were wounded, captured or had surrendered.

Armed actors also use threats and murder to selectively target the population living in territory they wish to control. When civilians were stigmatized as belonging to the other side, this also led to countless threats and deaths.

In most cases, when a family member was murdered or threats were made against civilians, there were other consequences, such as individuals, entire families and communities fleeing their homes. The repercussions were therefore cumulative and lasting for those affected.

The ICRC's humanitarian response

Through its confidential dialogue with all parties to the conflict, the ICRC strives to promote respect for the lives, well-being and dignity of civilians and all those protected under international humanitarian law.

Wherever possible, it approaches the parties concerning violations, documents those cases and monitors them closely in conjunction with the alleged perpetrators, thereby endeavouring to change their behaviour. The ICRC only documents cases of which it has first-hand knowledge and where it can help, even though the official murder toll in the country is much higher. In 2011, the ICRC was aware of 52 civilian deaths tied to violations of international humanitarian law. It also helped 139 families with the funeral costs for their loved ones killed as a result of the conflict.

The ICRC strives to mitigate the impact of the violence and reduce the risk of mistreatment and threats for the most vulnerable civilians. In 2011, 684 people whose lives were threatened received financial assistance to relocate somewhere safer.



Erika Tovar / ICRC

Victims' voices

"The whole town knew they wanted to kill me, except for me"

They came to my home and destroyed my belongings, throwing things everywhere, breaking down the door. They even stole the money I had earned from selling my homemade tamales. It's a good thing I wasn't at home or they would have killed me there and then. They threatened me because I lived next door to a member of an armed group. The whole town knew they wanted to kill me, except for me. They came after me because I had sold food to the other side. But that's how I earn a living. People come and buy my food. What am I supposed to do? Refuse to sell to them? Because of this, I had to flee the town. I try to get by with my son, but it's very hard leaving your home behind.

A victim of death threats who had to flee her home.

WHAT IHL HAS TO SAY

Rule 2. ICRC study on customary international humanitarian law

Acts or threats of violence the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population are prohibited.

DISAPPEARANCE

Disappearance is a source of constant pain for families who never stop searching for their loved ones. Unsolved cases, the persistence of the problem and the neglect of many affected families are a cause for serious concern.



Daniel Reina / Revista Semana

There may be no trace of those who are missing, but each has a story. Behind each missing person lies the uncertainty and anxiety of a family tirelessly searching, suffering constantly and in silence. Their pain is only eased when they discover the fate of their loved ones.

The exact number of missing persons in Colombia is not known, but we do know that there are many more than the 51,000 names on the State's national register. This is a cumulative, large-scale problem. Every year, more names are added to a long list whose first entries date back more than half a century.

There are two specific scenarios that result in people being declared missing: forced disappearance in connection with the conflict and other situations of violence (when the perpetrator intends to make the person disappear); and disappearance as a result of

bureaucracy, lack of information or oversight. The latter category includes those who die in combat or other violent circumstances, without any explicit intention to make them disappear. In some cases, bodies are simply left behind on the battlefield when the fighting ends. Due to shortcomings with the procedures for recovering, identifying and burying bodies, many have been buried in unmarked graves bearing no information whatsoever, or in mass graves in cemeteries around the country, thereby drawing out the search and uncertainty of their families.

Although in recent years there have been major advances in searching for and identifying missing persons (thanks to inter-organizational agreements and harmonized forms, protocols and procedures, among others), there is still a great deal of concern about the number of unsolved cases, the persistence of the problem and the neglect of many families of missing persons.

Although the missing persons are the direct victims of the violation, their relatives, who suffer their loss and embark on a campaign in search of them, are also victims. Another factor compounding the situation in Colombia is the fact that families experience innumerable difficulties when navigating the complex legal and forensic procedures in pursuit of their loved ones. In many cases, they are unfamiliar with the system and with their rights, or they get lost in all the bureaucratic steps.

Apart from this lack of knowledge, relatives may also be afraid to report a disappearance. This fear arises from suspicion and from the ongoing underlying threat, since the search goes on against a backdrop of persistent armed conflict and may result in the disappearance of more people. Their search is therefore not made official, denying families the chance to receive proper State assistance to ascertain the fate of their relatives. Families of missing persons have the right to know the truth about what happened to their loved ones.

Victims' voices

"I want them to help me find him, whether he's alive or dead"

My eldest son is missing. He went out with three friends to sell glass photo frames in La Guajira on 7 October 2004. I've heard nothing since. I didn't want to report his disappearance as I was hoping he'd turn up alive, because he wasn't a criminal. I only reported it two years later when I had looked everywhere for him, knocking on doors, and found no trace. I still have hope, but sometimes it wavers. I'm tired of taking papers to and fro, giving DNA samples and so on. I long to find my son alive, but if he's dead I want to recover the remains so I can give him a Christian burial. I want them to help me find him, whether he's alive or dead. I depended on him to feed and clothe me. Now I struggle to get by; I make cakes and soup and take in ironing. This is how it started. Where will it end?

Dora, whose son is missing.



María Cristina Rivera / ICRC

WHAT IHL HAS TO SAY

ICRC study on customary international humanitarian law

Rule 117. Each party to the conflict must take all feasible measures to account for persons reported missing as a result of armed conflict and must provide their family members with any information it has on their fate.

Victims' voices

"It is painful, very painful"

My son has been missing since 6 February 2006. He was 18 years old. He went out at 6 o'clock in the evening, saying 'I'm going to run an errand. I'll be right back'. At 10 o'clock he still wasn't back and I went to bed as I was tired. I got up just after 5 o'clock. I always look in on my children when I get up. But I couldn't see him. Dario wasn't there!

We started by looking for him at the police stations. I went to the authorities to report him missing. I am still looking. What I want is justice and the truth. I want to know what happened. It is painful, very painful – to lavish so much care on your children and then end up searching for them. All I do is ask God to grant me strength. At least if I knew one way or the other, but you don't know what it's like to go to sleep every night with that uncertainty, to get home from work and not find him there.

Margarita, whose son is missing.



Yesid Castiblanco B. / ICRC



The ICRC's humanitarian response

The ICRC tries to help ascertain the fate of missing persons and to prevent new cases from occurring through its confidential dialogue with armed actors, by providing support and guidance to the families, and by constantly advising the relevant authorities.

Over the years, the ICRC has documented more than 5,160 cases. In 2011 alone, a further 138 missing persons were registered. Over the year, 82 cases were broached with the alleged perpetrators on one or more occasions in pursuit of answers about the fate of the missing persons.

The ICRC also offered support and guidance to more than 170 families in the search and identification process, and helped several of them by making available the funds to travel to exhumation sites or to collect the remains of their loved ones. Its assistance includes psychological support, advice on accessing State services and liaising with forensic and legal authorities. In six specific cases closely monitored by the ICRC, the remains were successfully returned to the families.

Supporting State institutions

With a view to improving the efficiency of identification processes, the ICRC organized two meetings of national forensic experts. These meetings were opportunities to brainstorm and work out practical recommendations for responding more swiftly to identification requests and fostering dialogue between families and local authorities. The ICRC also organized a seminar with 26 public prosecutors to share those recommendations and to stress the importance of diversifying identification methods beyond DNA evidence.

The fact that many bodies are buried in different regional cemeteries around the country complicates the identification process. In most cases, cemeteries located in remote areas are not managed by the authorities, and the officials in charge do not comply with burial protocols. The bodies are buried in mass graves and unclaimed identified bodies are mixed up with unidentified bodies. In Olaya Herrera municipality, in Nariño department, the ICRC, with the support of the local council, helped to identify mass graves and is currently working on refurbishing the morgue and blocks for unidentified remains and building cold rooms in which to store the bodies.

Identifying mortal remains in the laboratory of the National Institute of Forensic Science.



María Cristina Rivera / ICRC



Nelson Sierra / El Espectador



Boris Heger / ICRC

THE TRAGEDY OF UNMARKED GRAVES IN CEMETERIES

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The cemetery merges unexpectedly into the houses and shops of this small town on the Pacific coast. It is not clear where exactly the houses and warehouses end and the tombs, mausoleums and graves begin. Nor can you tell where you might be treading on unmarked graves – those nameless remains that abound in so many Colombian cemeteries.

In Bocas de Satinga cemetery in the Olaya Herrera municipality of Nariño department are buried, according to gravedigger Chaín, the bodies of 51 unidentified people (and there may be many more) which were swept down the river and ended up in the town. These people have no known parents or spouse. Their bodies were collected by Chaín and prepared for burial in the small cemetery's morgue with no light or resources of any kind. Most were buried in the cemetery grounds without being identified, separated or protected.

Although the names of the deceased are not known, there is information collected by the gravedigger that could one day help to identify

their bodies and return them to their families, who must be searching for them somewhere in Colombia. In order to preserve this information, the ICRC, with the support of Chaín and the local council, has started laying blocks of cement to mark the locations where the bodies are reportedly buried. This is the first step in the identification process.

In addition, by studying the death certificates and the autopsy reports of more than 20 people, as well as information collected during fieldwork, the ICRC has gathered data that could be useful for the subsequent identification work. The idea is not just to mark the graves but also that the forensic authorities will record, exhume, identify and, finally, return the remains to the families. The ICRC has also taken on the task of refurbishing the morgue, fitting out blocks to process unidentified remains and building cold rooms.

CIVILIAN OBJECTS: ATTACKS, USE AND SEIZURE

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When parties to a conflict carry out attacks on or make use of a civilian object, they put the people inside or nearby in serious danger of injury or death. In 2011 there was a worrying rise in damage to civilian objects as a result of attacks.

Hospitals, schools, fields and other public or private property are defined in international humanitarian law as “civilian objects” and, as such, they may not be targeted or used by armed forces or groups in the conduct of hostilities.

As a result of wrongful use (such as seizure) by the parties to a conflict, these objects may lose the protection to which they are otherwise entitled under the law, thereby putting the civilians inside or nearby at serious risk. Nonetheless, such wrongful use does not exempt the adverse party from its duties to exercise precaution when attacking, in order to minimize damage to civilians and civilian objects. All parties must take every feasible measure to avoid endangering civilian objects and the civilians that inhabit or use them.

In 2011, incidents of seizure of civilian objects and damage to public and private infrastructure continued to occur. The ICRC documented 99 cases in which such property was seized by different parties to the conflict and 66 cases in which it was destroyed deliberately or as a result of clashes that hindered people's access to basic services, including health care and education. Another 28 cases were recorded of theft of civilian property by armed actors.



Jaime Saldarriaga / ICRC

In Toribio municipality in Cauca department, the ICRC supplied materials to rebuild the infrastructure damaged in the attacks.

HELPING TO REPAIR OVER 100 HOUSES DAMAGED IN ATTACKS IN TORIBÍO, CAUCA

It rained the whole weekend following the attacks with explosive devices that destroyed the roofs of several houses in the town. More than 100 homes were left with cracks in their walls, windowless and peppered with the metal shards that had descended upon Toribío and come to rest in living rooms, kitchens and yards. Many other houses were destroyed. The attack, which took place on market day, was the worst carried out by an armed group in the town's memory. It caused major damage to people's homes and injuries among the inhabitants.

"Since the attack, my wife has been behaving strangely, such as putting the base of the blender in the fridge. Since the bomb went off in the park in front of our house, she's just not the same," said one resident, in some distress. "My five-year old son refuses to go outside to walk around the town or play in the park," added another.

Seeing that the State was struggling to deal with the scale of people's needs, the ICRC rapidly stepped in. It supplied tarpaulins to patch the broken roofs and distributed emergency supplies and dressings to treat some 250 injured people. A few days later, the ICRC delivered tiles and windowpanes to help repair the damaged infrastructure. It also worked with the Colombian Red Cross to offer counselling to the community.

The ICRC's humanitarian response

The ICRC maintains a confidential dialogue with the various parties to the conflict, in which it raises the cases it has documented and tries to persuade them to spare civilians and civilian objects.

In some cases, the ICRC supplied the materials required to rebuild or repair property damaged in the fighting and attacks. More than 1,600 people in Cauca and Norte de Santander departments received building materials to repair their houses or damaged community facilities.

WHAT IHL HAS TO SAY

ICRC study on customary international humanitarian law

Rule 10. Civilian objects are protected against attack, unless and for such time as they are military objectives.

Rule 22. The parties to the conflict must take all feasible precautions to protect the civilian population and civilian objects under their control against the effects of attacks.

DISPLACEMENT

Displaced people lose everything when they leave behind their homes and their land to begin a new life in an unfamiliar place. The humanitarian crisis caused by displacement in Colombia is of immense proportions, with cases on the rise in 2011.



Displaced people have to leave everything behind: their land, their home, their family, their neighbours and friends, their crops and their livelihood. They lose their roots, and their whole world tumbles down when they flee in fear of their lives.

In Colombia, the humanitarian crisis caused by displacement has reached mammoth proportions: almost four million people have been uprooted from their homeland in recent years, which is almost 9% of the country's population, according to figures provided by the Department for Social Prosperity (DPS).

Although official figures had been showing a gradual downward trend in recent years, this changed in 2011, and there was a worrying increase in massive displacement of over 50% compared with the previous year, according to the DPS. This situation adds to the challenges faced by the Colombian State.

Most displaced families have not returned home, and big cities continue to receive a constant trickle of new families and sometimes whole communities fleeing from their homeland en masse.

There are many reasons for displacement, but the main causes are threats, fighting, the murder of a family member, sexual violence and the recruitment of children. In the face of such violations of the law or the likelihood of them occurring, many individuals, families and communities have no choice but to flee to protect themselves.

Although in most cases people flee from the country to the city, from remote areas where armed conflict is taking place to population centres, there are also people who are forced by some form of violence to move from one part of a city to another. Regardless of who causes displacement, the consequences and suffering that it entails for those affected are the same in the city as they are in the country: poverty, fear and anxiety about starting a new life in an unfamiliar place.

The ICRC's humanitarian response

In 2011, State institutions improved and stepped up their programmes to assist displaced people in most of the country's cities, allowing the ICRC to focus its efforts on the more inaccessible areas.

The ICRC, with support from the Colombian Red Cross (CRC), continued to tackle the problem in areas where government bodies do not have access and closely monitored the situation in other places. In 2011, the ICRC assisted around 11,000 people in 24 cases of massive displacement. It also distributed food supplies, personal hygiene products and essential household items to some 25,000 people in cases of individual displacement. Displacement still affects ethnic minorities, women, the elderly and children more severely.



Maria Cristina Rivera / ICRC

Victims' voices

"Fleeing and leaving our home behind was the hardest thing."

We lost everything, absolutely everything: the farm, the bus stop stall, the hens. We even had a wood stove with six burners. We also left behind two mules, a billy goat, a horse, onion fields and blackberry patches. It's really tough. We've been in the city for a month. I came on my own with my seven children. One day – it was a Sunday – armed men came to the house and said to us: 'We don't want to hurt you, but you must go; we know your husband is a snitch'. They came back eight days later and I also received a notification in writing telling me to leave. That same day, we gathered our things and fled. We took what we could: what we were wearing, a few blankets, three changes of clothes for the little one. This is so hard for us, because there in the country we were used to having our onions, our tomatoes. Here we have to buy everything. Fleeing and leaving our home behind was the hardest thing. We put in electricity and water. I don't know what I'm going to do now. When my youngest son goes to nursery, I suppose I'll go and get work ironing and washing; without any qualifications, what else can I do.

Testimony of a displaced woman who fled to the city with her seven children



Jacques Gay Grosier / ICRC

Distribution of emergency humanitarian relief on the Pacific coast

Departments with the highest rates of displacement

In 2011, Cauca, Antioquia, Nariño, Caquetá and Putumayo were the departments with the highest rates of forced displacement recorded by the ICRC. It is important to clarify that ICRC figures do not tell the whole story, as there are other organizations apart from the ICRC providing assistance to victims. They do, however, provide an insight into displacement trends, as the ICRC is present in the areas of the country most affected by the armed conflict.

Based on the cases recorded by the ICRC, the Pacific coast continues to be the area most affected by this problem. Cauca was the department that registered the greatest outflow of displaced people, with a reported 9,760 people displaced, followed by Antioquia, with 8,883 and Nariño with 7,998. The municipalities that registered the greatest exodus of displaced people were Argelia, El Tambo, Suárez and Bolívar, in Cauca, Anorí in Antioquia (massive displacement), and Tumaco and El Charco in Nariño.

Assistance provided in cases of individual displacement, in cooperation with the Colombian Red Cross, included psychosocial support to help the displaced people adapt to their new place of residence. They were given information about services provided by the State to enable them to obtain government benefits and received training in income-generating activities, values and the principles of peaceful coexistence.

WHAT IHL HAS TO SAY

Protocol II additional to the Geneva Conventions

Article 17 Prohibition of forced movement of civilians

1. The displacement of the civilian population shall not be ordered for reasons related to the conflict unless the security of the civilians involved or imperative military reasons so demand. Should such displacements have to be carried out, all possible measures shall be taken in order that the civilian population may be received under satisfactory conditions of shelter, hygiene, health, safety and nutrition.
2. Civilians shall not be compelled to leave their own territory for reasons connected with the conflict.



Erika Tovar / ICRC

YOUNG VOLUNTEERS LEARN FROM DISPLACED FAMILIES

While they are waiting to receive assistance at the ICRC sub-delegation office in Cali, displaced people are accompanied by Colombian Red Cross volunteers, who organize workshops for them on nutrition, values, sexual education and communication. "The idea is to give them some of the tools they will need to cope better in their new social environment," explains one of the young volunteers.

With the support of the International Committee of the Red Cross, these young people taking part in the PACO programme (peace, action and peaceful coexistence), run by the CRC, are taught about values. They then pass on what they have

learned to people in their communities, friends, fellow students, family members and, in this case, the people who come to the ICRC office in a constant flow to receive assistance to ease their economic hardship.

"We hold a workshop for children in which we teach them about good hygiene practices, healthy habits, values for peaceful coexistence and respect, using drawings, games and role playing. For example, when two children want to use the same crayon, we teach them to share, negotiate and find a solution that suits them both." The volunteers admit that, in practice, they often learn more from these people, who have been affected

by the armed conflict, than they teach them: "After being with these people, I stopped complaining about fleeting material problems and began to focus on the more fundamental things in life".

This initiative and the psychological support provided by a psychologist from the CRC Valle branch at the ICRC facilities are just two of the many activities that the two organizations carry out in close cooperation with each other.



Marçal Izard / ICRC

SUPPLIES BROUGHT BY MULE TO EL TAMBO, CAUCA

It took five lorries, two carts, three hundred mules and over eight hours on the road to assist 1,114 displaced people in the municipality of El Tambo, Cauca.

The families had moved to the village of La Playa, situated at the end of a canyon on the slopes of the Cordillera Occidental mountains, after fleeing their homes because of the grenades, mortars and bullets – fired from the mountains on either side – which rained on their land.

Leaving behind their crops and animals, these 1,114 people walked for four or five hours until they reached the Playa Rica sports centre

and shopping centre in the municipality of El Tambo, where they were assisted by the ICRC in overcrowded, unhygienic conditions in the midst of a diarrhoea and flu outbreak.

The families were given food, kitchen utensils and hygiene items. Workshops were held to teach them about good hygiene practices to prevent the spread of diseases. They also received guidance on services provided by the State and psychological support. In coordination with the local hospital, four pregnant women, who were at risk, were evacuated to receive emergency care.

Working with State institutions

In order to improve assistance for victims of forced displacement in Colombia, the ICRC makes representations to government bodies, in particular the Ministry of Public Affairs, local authorities and the Department for Social Prosperity (formerly Social Action).

In 2011, the ICRC highlighted the importance of the process whereby the statements of displaced people about the circumstances of their displacement are submitted on line and recorded in the displaced population information system (SIPOD). This expedites their inclusion in the unified register of displaced persons, so that they can receive emergency assistance sooner. The ICRC provided support to facilitate this process by donating computers, printers and scanners. Around 25,000 people in Bogotá, Florencia, Ibagué, Quibdó and Tumaco were able to submit their statements on line.

As part of this work with other institutions, the ICRC approached the Ministry of Public Affairs offices and the City Hall in Montería to clear the backlog of displaced families who had been waiting to give their statement for up to six months. The ICRC provided support over three

days to carry out a massive statement taking operation, during which the details of some 3,780 people were registered, as part of the process required to make displaced persons eligible for services that the Colombian Government provides for people in this situation.

The ICRC also took steps to help municipal authorities and international cooperation organizations improve the delivery and coverage of emergency assistance to victims of displacement who had submitted their statement. As a result, some 2,000 people received assistance in the cities of Ibagué and San José del Guaviare, for example.

Overall, the steps taken by the ICRC in 2011 to support State institutions in 20 Colombian cities contributed to improving the State's response to the needs of victims of forced displacement. Almost 30,000 households benefited indirectly from these efforts.

An indigenous family applying for inclusion in the unified register of displaced persons (RUPD) to become eligible for State benefits.



Boris Heger / ICRC



Boris Heger / ICRC

ACTING AS AN INTERMEDIARY BETWEEN NEEDS AND RESPONSE IN BOGOTÁ

The Colombian capital is one of the main destinations for displaced people, and some parts of the city are plagued by different forms of violence which also claim victims.

According to figures provided by the Department for Social Prosperity, around 300,000 displaced people live in Bogotá. There is a considerable range of State services available in the city to assist those affected by displacement, although many people do not know about them or what procedures they must follow to apply for these benefits. The ICRC therefore works closely with the communities and the authorities to ensure a timely response to needs and to act as an intermediary between the concerns voiced by the community and the response of the authorities.

In 2011, the ICRC focused its activities on the Paraíso neighbourhood of Ciudad Bolívar to assist some 1,200 families. "The arrival of the ICRC in our neighbourhood was a blessing from heaven. They came just at the right time and helped us a great deal with all the formalities. Now the authorities listen to us, and the ICRC talks on our behalf, at meetings at the community hall, for example," says Mercedes, a community leader in Paraíso. An immediate relief centre was also built with a view to improving the security of households in the neighbourhood. The ICRC provided support to help displaced families find employment and contributed to equipping the community hall, which is of particular benefit to the elderly and children.



Maria Cristina Rivera / ICRC

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN NARIÑO IMPROVE THEIR DIET WITH THE HELP OF CANOES

"We fled from the reservation because first one group arrived, then another. One group thought that we were with the others, and the first group thought that we had sent for the others". This situation forced 304 people from the Eperara Siapidara community in the municipality of Olaya Herrera (Nariño) to move to Bocas de Víbora in 2010.

The families received emergency humanitarian assistance from the ICRC, which consisted of food supplies, personal hygiene products and essential household items. As they were unable to return home and were facing great economic hardship in their new place of residence, the ICRC decided to support them in 2011 by providing them with three sets of fishing equipment, each consisting of a canoe, a 40 horsepower outboard

motor and two fishing nets 200 and 180 metres long. "To begin with, we barely had one and half meals a day of rice and plantain, but with the help of the ICRC, the situation improved and we now eat three or even four meals a day; now we can have fish with our plantain," explains Armenia, a community leader.

Apart from fishing, the canoes have also proved very useful for other purposes in the community. "We needed the canoes, because we are isolated here and didn't have any means of getting around. It is the best thing that our community could have been given. We have used the canoes to transport sick people, reunite families and find products that we didn't have here," remarks another of the reservation leaders.

Preventing displacement by supporting communities in their homeland

The ICRC provides assistance to communities in their homeland to reduce displacement and its effects and alleviate the problems caused by restrictions on movement, the explosive debris that litters some areas and the presence of armed actors.

In 2011, the ICRC distributed food supplies, personal hygiene products and essential household items to over 3,000 people living in areas affected by armed conflict and violence. It also supported the implementation of income-generating projects in various communities.

Income-generating projects

In addition to relief supplies distributed directly, the ICRC also supported ten agricultural projects, which contributed to improving the population's nutritional and economic situation in five of the country's regions: Guaviare, Nariño, Cauca, Caquetá and Putumayo.

These projects benefited 4,340 people living in remote areas and were developed in consultation with the communities to meet their most pressing needs.

The ICRC supported the implementation of three cocoa projects, one in the lower Caguán area. "Cocoa is very marketable and there is very good demand for it. We began with 500 trees, which were given to each family by the ICRC, and are now waiting for them to grow. What we hope to do is produce organic cocoa and have it certified, so that we can sell it for a good price and help the community and our families; there are four of us in my household who depend on this crop," observes Fabio, one of the project beneficiaries in the lower Caguán area.

The ICRC also provided support for projects to produce sugarcane, rice and traditional food staple crops and to raise cattle, chickens and pigs.



Boris Heger / ICRC

A COMMUNITY IN GUAVIARE MILLS GOOD QUALITY RICE

Puerto Nuevo is situated on the banks of the river Guayabero, two and a half hours from the department's main city, San José del Guaviare, by fast motor launch. The main crop grown by farmers in this fertile area is rice.

In order to improve the diet of the people in the area and increase their income, the ICRC provided support to implement an agricultural project, with the distribution of seeds, other inputs and technical assistance, to grow five hectares of communal rice crops. A mill was also installed and the necessary infrastructure built.

"Rice is a staple in this community's household consumption basket. People used to have to take it somewhere to have it milled, but now we can do it right here and more cheaply. People are motivated and enthusiastic about sowing more rice, which guarantees food supplies for people in the area," explains Édgar Arias, president of the village's Community Action Board.

Thanks to the training provided, the local people learned how to manage rice crops efficiently. They were also taught how to set up and operate the rice mill, which is used by 350 people.

"The rice that we have milled is good quality and is being used for self-consumption. We also sell it to nearby villages and provide milling services to anyone requiring them," says Édinson Moreno, coordinator of the Puerto Nuevo Rice Association.



Yesid Castiblanco B. / ICRC

LEGAL CROPS AFFECTED BY AERIAL SPRAYING OF COCA

"The spraying sometimes kills off all our crops – bananas, sugarcane and cassava. We have to replant and go hungry while we wait for new growth." With these words, a resident of Nariño department sums up the damage he believes is caused by the aerial spraying of illegal crops using glyphosate. He admits that there are coca plantations in the vicinity, but not on his land.

Farmers in parts of Colombia affected by the armed conflict have voiced their concerns to the ICRC. These complaints come from people already living in precarious conditions who are seeing their legal crops destroyed. The ICRC has been trying to document this problem and its consequences throughout the country, especially in the departments of Nariño, Caquetá, Antioquia and Guaviare, in order to ascertain the real impact of aerial spraying on these communities.

It is not for the ICRC to comment on the government's policy on tackling illegal crops; the organization's sole concern is the humanitarian impact of aerial spraying on legal crops grown by communities in remote areas.

In the course of its many visits to the places concerned, the ICRC identified the main problem as being the lack of precision of the spraying that is damaging legal crops. Inaccurate spraying has also had consequences for alternative development projects run by several international organizations, including a cocoa project set up by the ICRC to help communities in Guaviare affected by the armed conflict.

In addition to the impact of aerial spraying on legal crops, the ICRC is concerned about the difficulties experienced by farmers who try to claim their rightful compensation for the damage done. The red tape of the complaint-and-compensation system deters many farmers from exercising their rights. Many who embark on the process see their applications refused because it is so difficult to meet all the requirements.

The ICRC brought these concerns to the attention of the authorities in a report in 2011.

WEAPON CONTAMINATION

Improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war affect the everyday lives of many people living in rural areas and claim direct victims, who have to cope with the loss of a limb, disability or pain from injuries.



Boris Heger / ICRC

People living in areas contaminated by improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war live in constant fear of this explosive debris and cannot walk along footpaths, harvest their crops, go to the health post or send their children to school without dreading an explosion. Sometimes, their worst fears are realized and they become direct victims of an explosion: the loss of a limb, deep and painful wounds, the psychological trauma of the blast or the death of a member of their family or community.

The term “weapon contamination” is used by the ICRC to refer to the presence of improvised explosive devices, known as anti-personnel landmines; explosive remnants of war, such as unexploded ordnance left behind after an armed conflict and abandoned or insecure ammunition

stockpiles; and small and light arms. Although this problem is more evident in rural areas where armed clashes take place, it should not be forgotten that weapon contamination also affects urban environments, largely as a result of the proliferation of small arms.

Weapon contamination has been a problem in Colombia for many years, and new areas are being contaminated every day. Explosive debris is increasing in areas where fighting, attacks, bombardments and military operations are taking place, and there is an even greater concentration in areas where illegal crops are eradicated manually, along drug trafficking routes and in places with access to natural resources.

The ICRC’s humanitarian response

The ICRC carries out prevention activities in communities in high-risk areas, advises victims of their rights, so that they know how to access the services that they are entitled to by law, provides technical guidance to humanitarian organizations and government bodies and provides support to victims of weapon contamination in the form of health care and physical rehabilitation.



Pascal Jequier / ICRC

Victims' voices

"This is not our war:"

This is where we have always lived, because our grandparents, great grandparents and other ancestors are buried here. It is sacred territory, and we don't want to move away because we own this land.

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The community is very close-knit, but our indigenous people cannot live here in peace, because others are laying anti-personnel landmines everywhere and the land is littered with explosive devices. We want to go and harvest our plantains, corn, cassava and rice, but there are mines on our farmland and it is dangerous for us. It is a terrible situation and we need more help.

We hope that the ICRC will continue to visit us, so that we aren't left on our own with our projects. What they have taught us is important; we are learning little by little, and the workshops help us to understand better. I didn't know anything about mines, but thanks to the ICRC now I know something about how to stay safe.

We indigenous people are victims of a war waged by others, one that has nothing to do with us. This is not our war. All we want to do is raise our children, maintain our families and work.

José Vicente Domicó Pernia, Cabildo Mayor (local indigenous government), Río Verde - Alto Sinú, Tierralta (Córdoba)

WHAT IHL HAS TO SAY

Rule 70. ICRC study on customary international humanitarian law

The use of means and methods of warfare which are of a nature to cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering is prohibited.



Erika Tovar / ICRC

"WE NO LONGER FEEL UNPROTECTED"

"When I woke up, I didn't know where I was and I couldn't see. I had also lost an arm and an ear and had to have several operations". Julio did not want to go on living and was in no state of mind to deal with the formalities required to get the care and assistance he needed. However, he was eventually persuaded that he could get better and should claim what he was entitled to.

"I am from the country and was very uneasy when I arrived in the city. I was wary about the intentions of the people who said that I was entitled to assistance. Now I know that they are helping people to get the assistance they need; they are like angels."

At the beginning of 2011, with the help of the ICRC, Julio received a prosthesis and therapy, which have enabled him to "write, sweep, wash and pick things up again. When I am not wearing it, I feel as though I am missing something".

He has also had surgery to reconstruct his ears and eyes and has recovered his sight. He will soon receive State financial benefits and is claiming permanent disability compensation from the government.

He no longer feels alone. The phone calls that he and his mother received and the guidance, constant care and advice provided by people from the ICRC and the Colombian Red Cross have changed his attitude. Now he is motivated and optimistic. "It was all so sudden; leaving the country and coming to the city," his mother remarks. "I had to leave my husband and my other son working on the farm to come with him to the city, and we don't know our way around here."

Julio will not be able to work on the farm any more, but he is going to study and look for work in the city. "Now I have to try and help other people, so that they don't lose hope, but to do that I must be well myself". It is clear that he is now well on the road to recovery.

Prevention and risk reduction

The ICRC and the Colombian Red Cross hold safe behaviour workshops for communities, provide first aid training and explain what rights direct and indirect victims have.

Over 10,500 community members and local authority representatives attended 423 workshops on staying safe and victims' rights, organized by the ICRC and the Colombian Red Cross. These workshops taught the participants what measures they could take to prevent accidents caused by improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war and explained to them what they would be entitled to if they suffered such an accident.

On some occasions, the ICRC approaches the parties to the conflict with a specific request for the benefit of the communities, such as allowing ambulances to pass through restricted areas, facilitating the access of communities to sources of water or clearing the land after fighting has taken place.

The ICRC's risk reduction activities also include infrastructure projects. For example, it built a school boarding house in a municipality in the department of Caquetá, an area contaminated with explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices. Thanks to this project, over 50 children in the area no longer have to travel to and from school every day along weapon-contaminated paths. The construction of the boarding house has lessened the risk of accidents, gives parents greater peace of mind and reduces the number of students dropping out of school.

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Pascal Jequier / ICRC





Yesid Castiblanco B. / ICRC

"I AM HELPING PEOPLE WHO NEED MY SKILLS"

We have been waiting a long time in Colombia for the orthotics and prosthetics training course for technicians given at the National Learning Service (SENA). For me it is very important, because it gives me the opportunity to specialize in my field, so that I can help people who need my skills.

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I also have my own business in this sector, which allows me to maintain my family. It is very rewarding, not only in financial terms, but also because I provide a service and have the satisfaction of seeing how patients are successfully rehabilitated. It is immensely gratifying to see how happy these people are when they are able to stand or pick things up again.

At the SENA school, I have learned a lot, particularly about improved techniques in orthotics and prosthetics. The ICRC has supported us by donating machinery, and we now have a fully equipped thermoforming workshop. It also provided academic instruction in the form of talks and courses on anatomy and biomechanics, among other subjects.

Óscar Bejarano, SENA student

Assistance for victims

Some 26,819 disabled people, including victims of weapon contamination, received assistance at six physical rehabilitation centres which receive support from the ICRC in the form of equipment and technical guidance.

These rehabilitation centres supplied 976 prostheses and 6,610 orthoses to disabled people around the country. A further 146 patients received wheelchairs.

For the first time in Colombia, the ICRC held training workshops on orthotics, prosthetics and physiotherapy for students and representatives of private and public physical rehabilitation centres and non-governmental organizations. Training was also provided for experts from the Military Hospital in Bogotá and from the Navy. Over 90 people from 15 different organizations participated in 14 courses on these subjects.

The ICRC assisted Ministry of Social Protection and SENA representatives in attending the United Forum of the Americas held by the International Society for Prosthetics and Orthotics in Costa Rica.



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María Cristina Rivera / ICRC

The safe behaviour workshops teach communities how to prevent accidents caused by improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war. The photo shows a boy from Monserrate in the lower Caguán area.

INVOLVING MINORS IN CONFLICT

Concerns over how this problem affects minors are not restricted to forced recruitment, but extend to using them as guides or messengers, which places them in serious danger.



Boris Heger / ICRC

Children and teenagers are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of armed conflict and other forms of violence. They are often direct victims of serious violations of international humanitarian law such as murder, sexual violence and forced recruitment. But they also suffer indirect consequences, such as being unable to attend school, which in turn increases their vulnerability.

In Colombia, concerns are not restricted to forced recruitment, but extend to minors frequently being used as guides or messengers by the parties to the conflict, placing them in danger of reprisals by the other side. For example, minors are enticed to provide information about the enemy in exchange for gifts or promises. This might seem harmless but can result in serious threats against them and their families. This situation also arises in cities where minors are used by gangs or armed groups.

There are also cases of teenagers, some of whom are very young, who get involved with fighters without being aware of the risks. In addition to the threat to their safety, they are also exposed to sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies, among other risks. The attitude of the higher ranks, who are aware that this goes on and indulge what they see as “natural” behaviour, often encourages this type of behaviour.

A challenge when it comes to measuring the effects and impact on minors is the difficulty of establishing how many people are victims of the various violations. It is also hard to pinpoint the scale of the problem of forced recruitment, in part because victims’ families are afraid to report these cases.

Victims’ voices

“They came into my home and took my son away”

They took my son when he was barely a young man. He must be 27 by now. Armed men came to the farm and took him away. During all this time I have seen him only rarely, when neighbours helped us meet in secret. I last saw him three years ago and the last time I had news of him was in 2010, when I received a phone call telling me that my son had been captured. That was many years after he was taken away. I have been looking for him ever since but nobody can tell me anything.

ICRC study on customary international humanitarian law

Rule 135. Children affected by armed conflict are entitled to special respect and protection

Rule 136. Children must not be recruited into armed forces or armed groups.

Rule 137. Children must not be allowed to take part in hostilities.

WHAT IHL HAS TO SAY

The ICRC's humanitarian response

In 2011, the ICRC dealt with this issue by maintaining a direct, confidential dialogue with the various parties to the conflict. In addition to addressing the recruitment of minors, the ICRC also looked at situations in which armed actors tried to take advantage of the naivety of minors to obtain useful information or intelligence that could then have been used to give them a military advantage over the enemy.

The ICRC also helped reunite 35 minors with their families.



María Inés Cardona / Cruz Roja Colombiana

The Colombian Red Cross works closely with the ICRC on educational programmes

promoting peaceful coexistence. These are run in schools in the city of Medellín as part of a violence-prevention strategy in urban settings.

"From my perspective, I think it has really helped the students develop their skills," says a teacher at Kennedy school in the city's district 6, one of the establishments where the Peace, Action and Coexistence (PACO) programme has been introduced. "Every Friday, my students can't wait for the Red Cross to arrive. The programme means a lot to them. It teaches them values and positive life lessons and helps them grow as people."

Along the same lines, a mother whose two sons are enrolled at Independencia school in district 13 of Medellín compares the behaviour of her son Jorge, who participates in the programme,

with that of Jonathan, who does not. "The change in him is clear. He is more disciplined, his attitude is more positive and he is more willing and keen to do things."

In 2011, 279 fifth-grade primary-school pupils from districts 6 and 13 of Medellín took part in events run by Colombian Red Cross volunteers. These programmes are part of the wider More Space for Humanitarian Action, More Alternatives project, which includes violence-prevention activities in schools to help minors protect themselves and encourages armed groups to spare educational establishments.

"I HAVE GOOD NEWS FOR YOU: YOUR SON IS SAFE AND WROTE YOU THIS LETTER"

Six young people aged between 13 and 17 were taken in by the Colombian Family Welfare Institute after being recruited by an armed group. The Institute asked the ICRC to try to contact the families of the young people who live in a remote rural area of the Pacific rain forest.

ICRC delegates interviewed the minors in Bogotá to ascertain where they were from. This was not an easy task since the minors had never gone beyond their district and its surrounding area. With the help of colourful drawings done by several of the children showing the details of houses, rivers, ravines, trees, farms and crops, the delegates were finally able to pinpoint where they were from, which happened to coincide with an area where the ICRC worked regularly. Since they all came from the same village, this speeded up the process greatly. The young people wrote letters to be delivered to their parents once the ICRC delegates had found them.

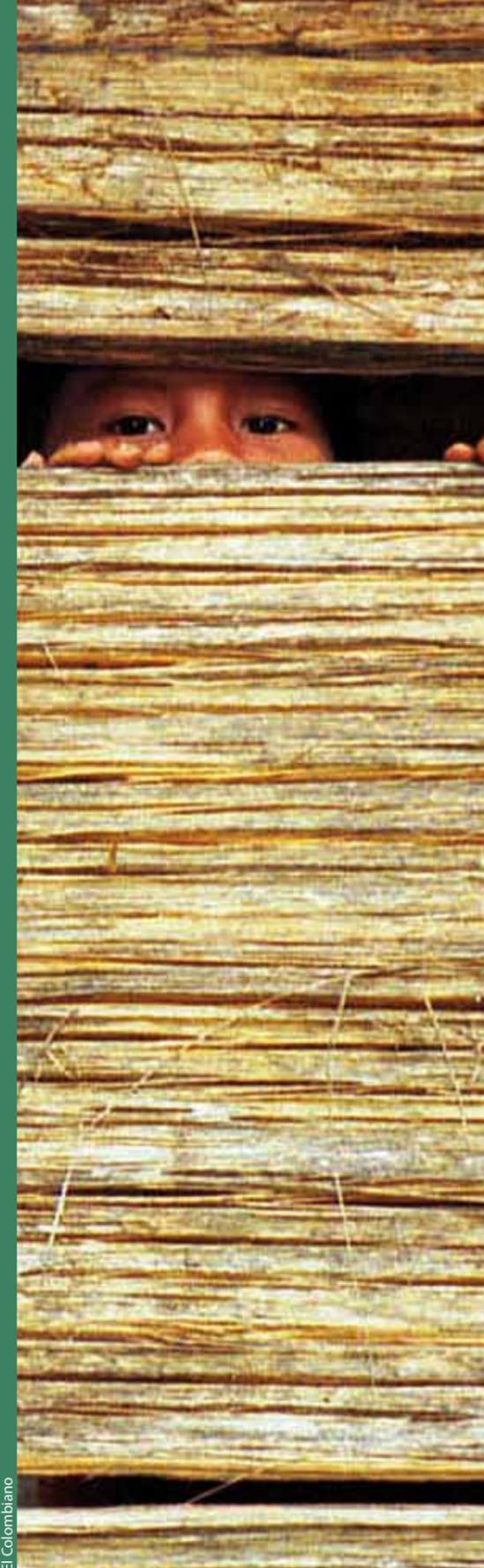
A delegate travelled to the district where their families were believed to live. In the course of his visits, one father of a missing youngster recounted how he had been looking for his son for months, to no avail: "I don't know where to begin. I have completely lost touch with my son. The war took him away from us. His mother and I were wondering if the Red Cross could help us."

The delegate asked him what his son was called and consulted the folder containing the information about the minors' cases. On one of the sheets of paper, he found the son's name. "I have two pieces of good news for you. The first is that your son is alive and well. The second is that I have here a letter that he wrote to you himself."

The father was speechless. He ran out of the house in search of his wife, the boy's mother. Then he handed the letter back to the delegate. "Please, could you read us the message?"

By candlelight, the delegate read aloud the words written by their son. Over the next two days, ICRC staff were able to locate another four families and to deliver the Red Cross messages addressed to them. Good news at last after so many months of uncertainty and suffering.

El Colombiano



SEXUAL VIOLENCE

In the immediate aftermath of sexual violence, victims struggle to obtain treatment that addresses both the physical consequences and the psychological trauma.

41 Most victims of sexual violence suffer in silence. They experience physical pain, but they also endure trauma and scars that go far beyond the physical. They are ashamed to tell their story, afraid to reveal who is responsible for such a terrible act, and terrified that their family and community will shun them. Most victims are women or teenage and young girls, but boys and men are also affected.

Sexual violence threatens the safety of its victims and can drive them to flee their homes. The motive might be reprisal or punishment. The aim is to stigmatize the victims by marking them out as family members or collaborators of one of the parties to the conflict or another armed group. It also a way to terrorize whole communities.

In the immediate aftermath of sexual violence, victims struggle to obtain treatment that addresses both the physical consequences and the psychological trauma. Because victims of rape often fail to speak up, they do not receive the care they need. They are often unaware of their rights and do not know where to turn.

The area along the Pacific coast, particularly the departments of Nariño and Valle del Cauca and the Urabá Antioquia region, is one of the worst affected by this kind of violence.



Franco Paqueti / ICRC

The ICRC's humanitarian response

In 2011, 130 people who were subjected to sexual violence in connection with the armed conflict and other violence received medical and psychological care as part of an agreement between the ICRC, Profamilia and the Colombian Red Cross.

The ICRC also distributed aid in the form of food, personal hygiene kits and household items to 76 people who were forced to flee their homes and communities after suffering sexual violence.

In Medellín, the ICRC ran workshops on sexual and reproductive health in eight neighbourhoods affected by violence. These workshops were attended by 812 people. The goal was to improve sexual health in these neighbourhoods with a view to preventing unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and domestic violence.

Victims' voices

"After what happened to me, we had to leave"

Armed men came into the house. I was alone with my 10-year old son. My husband was out. They started to accuse me of collaborating with the other side and told me that I had no choice but to speak. They made me say things I didn't know. Then three of them raped me. The others did nothing, they just stood there watching. After that, we had to leave.

We walked for 12 hours with our son until we reached the city. The ICRC helped us. It's very difficult and I still have nightmares, but the main thing is that we're together and doing everything we can to get through this.

A victim of sexual violence who was forced to flee her home.

WHAT IHL HAS TO SAY

Rule 93. ICRC study on customary international humanitarian law

Rape and other forms of sexual violence are prohibited.

POOR ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE AND VIOLATIONS AGAINST MEDICAL PERSONNEL AND SERVICES

Health care is a right that is denied to many communities in rural areas. The delivery of health services is hindered by their remote location and the lack of medical personnel and facilities. This situation also affects the treatment of the sick and injured.



María Cristina Rivera / ICRC

Health care is a right that is denied to people living in many of the country's remote areas. The distance from urban centres and the presence of armed actors, coupled with a lack of resources and facilities, make it extremely difficult for many inhabitants to see a doctor and get medicines and for pregnant women and the chronically ill to have regular checkups.

"We don't have the right to be ill." These are the words used by many people living in remote areas to sum up their situation.

Structural deficiencies in the public health system, including a lack of medical personnel and facilities, a lack of financial resources, short-term contracts and delays in paying health care workers, further exacerbate the situation of these communities. As a result, illnesses or accidents that would be easily dealt with in a city can prove fatal in these remote areas.

Added to this, attacks and threats against medical personnel, vehicles and facilities have made doctors, nurses, dentists and health promoters afraid to visit these areas, where their work is difficult and dangerous. In many areas, the attacks and violations against medical services continue to hinder the safe, timely access of communities to health care.

The ICRC's humanitarian response

The ICRC accompanies medical teams from regional hospitals to ensure that they have safe access to remote areas where armed actors operate. In 2011, the ICRC accompanied ten mobile health units deployed in Antioquia, Córdoba and Caquetá to provide State health care services to over 32,800 people in rural areas.

In four cases in which it was not possible to ensure safe access by State health care personnel, the ICRC organized health care days, during which its own medical personnel saw 7,500 patients and vaccinated around 1,850 people against diseases.

The ICRC paid the travel, food and accommodation expenses and arranged doctor's appointments for 815 people from remote areas with serious illnesses or injuries, so that they could be treated by specialists.



Boris Heger / ICRC

Victims' voices

"It's very difficult when you get ill, because there are no doctors here."

My son is six months old and has been very sick for four days. We had to walk for an hour to get here. The health promoter said that he had a temperature of 39. They did a thick blood smear to test for malaria, but it was negative, so now we have to go into the town to find out what is wrong with him. Now we have the problem of getting to the town. We could pay to go on the launch, but it doesn't come every day, so all we can do is wait until daylight and see if someone can help us to take him. It's four hours to the town. It's very difficult when you get ill here in the village, because there are no doctors, no health post, not even a health promoter. When someone is bitten by a scorpion, a snake or a spider, they can be cured with herbs, but for what the baby has, we need to see a doctor and be prescribed medicines.

Alexa, who lives in a rural area in Roberto Payán municipality, Nariño.



María Cristina Rivera / ICRC

HEALTH CARE DAYS ON THE RIVER CAGUÁN

In 2011, the main source of health care for people living in villages along the river Caguán, situated about six hours by launch from Cartagena del Chairá (Caquetá), was the service provided by the mobile health units organized by the ICRC in the area.

"It's a very complicated situation when you get ill here; they won't let any medicines through the reservation. What happens when people get sick is that the community gets together, collects money and sends them on a seven-hour journey up river. Otherwise, we have to cure them with home remedies or creams we have here," explains a man living in Santo Domingo, in the lower Caguán area.

The medical team, which visited eight places along the river Caguán between the villages of Santa Fe and Peñas Rojas, was formed by two doctors, two nurses and a dentist and saw over 7,500 people. The most common complaints in the Caguán villages are respiratory infections and chronic disorders, such as high blood pressure. There are also high risk situations, such as early pregnancies with no prenatal care and delivery by traditional midwives.

"When my daughter Francy became pregnant, I didn't want her baby to be delivered by a village midwife, because it's very dangerous, so I had to pay for her to be taken on the express launch and for the delivery. I had to sell my animals to pay the 1,240,000 pesos it cost," explains a man living in Monserrate, in the lower Caguán area.

Protocol II additional to the Geneva Conventions

Article 10. General protection of medical duties

1. Under no circumstances shall any person be punished for having carried out medical activities compatible with medical ethics, regardless of the person benefiting therefrom. (...)

Article 11. Protection of medical units and transports

1. Medical units and transports shall be respected and protected at all times and shall not be the object of attack.

WHAT IHL HAS TO SAY

Evacuation of injured people

Injured people must receive the medical attention they need as soon as possible, whether or not they have taken part in the hostilities. The ICRC evacuated ten people wounded in clashes or injured by improvised explosive devices or explosive remnants of war, transporting them from the conflict zone to the nearest hospital.

Training

The ICRC and the Colombian Red Cross trained 1,291 people in community-based first aid in 12 areas to provide communities with the skills required to deal with emergencies and treat neighbours and relatives when necessary.

Additionally, 70 surgeons and 115 physicians from regional hospitals were trained by national and international experts in war surgery. The training was based on the *Guía para el manejo medicoquirúrgico de heridas en situación de conflicto armado* (guide on the surgical and medical treatment of casualties of armed conflict) published by the ICRC and the Ministry of Social Protection in 2011. Part of this training took place with doctors from the Military Hospital and the Navy.

The ICRC gave two courses on treatment of the war-wounded for 12 members of armed groups, who are also required to treat people injured in fighting and clashes.

Working in Medellín's neighbourhoods

The ICRC and the Colombian Red Cross held 11 first aid workshops in eight neighbourhoods in the city, which were attended by 238 people. The purpose of the workshops was to provide communities affected by armed violence in Medellín's neighbourhoods with the skills required to respond effectively in emergency situations.



Pascal Jequier / ICRC

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN CÓRDOBA LEARN FIRST AID

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“When our children fall out of trees, are bitten by a snake or are injured, we don’t really know what to do. When my daughter hurt her arm, I put some cream on it and bound it with a cloth,” says Edilsa Mahoreymi, a 44-year-old mother of seven. Edilsa is proud of her traditional dress and body painting and she endeavours to live in harmony with nature in keeping with her ancestral culture. She is one of 6,000 members of the Embera community who have lived for many generations in the Nudo del Paramillo national park on the banks of the rivers Verde, Esmeralda and Sinú in the department of Córdoba.

As there are no medical personnel in the area, anyone needing medical attention has to go down river by canoe and cross the artificial lake to get to a doctor in the municipality of Tierralta. Apart from common complaints and everyday injuries from working in the fields, these communities are also at risk from improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war left on their land, which is in an area where clashes between different armed actors take place.

At a wooden schoolhouse built for the 68 children on the reservation, the Río Verde community met for three days, the men on one side and the women on the other, to listen to talks given by the ICRC, translated into the Embera language, about first aid and how to stay safe in weapon-contaminated areas. The whole community participated in practical exercises, such as applying splints and bandages, making a stretcher with materials to hand and transporting an injured person. The ICRC donated an emergency kit to the community, so that first aid can be given to the seriously ill and injured before they are taken to Tierralta.

“Thanks to the first aid course, I now know that a fractured limb must be immobilized. I have learned a lot and would like to learn more,” says Edilsa Mahoreymi.

WHAT IHL HAS TO SAY

Protocol II additional to the Geneva Conventions
Article 9. Protection of medical and religious personnel

1. *Medical and religious personnel shall be respected and protected and shall be granted all available help for the performance of their duties. They shall not be compelled to carry out tasks which are not compatible with their humanitarian mission.*
2. *In the performance of their duties medical personnel may not be required to give priority to any person except on medical grounds.*



Boris Hegger / ICRC

Increase in violations against medical personnel and facilities

The ICRC noted with great concern that threats and attacks against medical personnel and facilities increased in 2011 in different parts of the country.

The number of such violations reported rose from 31 in 2010 to 50 in 2011, an increase of over 60%. In addition to this quantitative increase, the ICRC was also concerned by the seriousness of the incidents, for example, patients being murdered while being taken to hospital by ambulance. The violations affected medical personnel directly and, by extension, the population in these areas, as such incidents resulting in them receiving less or no medical attention. The departments most seriously affected by this problem were Cauca, Norte de Santander, Arauca, Nariño and Antioquia.

The ICRC’s humanitarian response

With a view to contributing to reducing such incidents, the ICRC maintained an ongoing dialogue with the parties to the conflict to remind them of their duty to respect medical personnel and facilities.

The ICRC and the Colombian Red Cross provided training to over 3,700 health care workers in rural areas on respect for medical services and the rights and duties of medical personnel. They also provided training on safe behaviour to reduce vulnerability to armed violence. In remote areas, 46 health posts were marked with the distinctive emblem to increase protection and recognition as civilian facilities.

The ICRC, the Colombian Red Cross, the Ministry of Health and the Office of the Vice-President of the Republic are working in different parts of the country to implement mechanisms to increase protection and reduce the vulnerability of medical personnel.

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LACK OF BASIC SERVICES

Communities in remote areas of the country struggle with economic and social hardship in their day-to-day lives. The lack of infrastructure and resources hinders their access to education, health care, water and other basic services.



Christophe Von Toggenburg / ICRC

Living conditions are precarious for communities in remote areas of the country, affected by fighting or the presence of armed actors. There is often no infrastructure, equipment or staff to provide basic services such as education, health care, water and sanitation. The communities struggle with economic and social hardship far from public view, because access to these areas is difficult and State presence is limited.

If communities are lucky enough to have a health post, it is often in poor condition and lacks equipment, supplies and personnel. In their schools, there are classrooms without doors, roofs or school materials. Very often they do not even have a permanent teacher. This makes it difficult for children to attend school, which increases their vulnerability to armed actors and other problems, such as the improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war left in many areas.

These remote areas of Colombia, where the ICRC is present, often do not have drinking water supply systems. The aqueducts that do exist are often made by hand, and the poor quality of the water is detrimental to the health of the population. In most cases, however, people are left to their own devices and obtain water from rivers and other unsafe sources or collect rainwater in unhygienic conditions. They consume the water without treating it in any way, which can lead to health problems.

Basic infrastructure is often seriously affected by the hostilities and direct attacks on civilian objects.

Displaced communities also often face problems in the place that they move to, including poor sanitary conditions and lack of access to basic services, such as water and decent housing.

The ICRC's humanitarian response

The ICRC seeks to alleviate the difficult conditions facing these people and improve their quality of life by implementing projects to develop basic infrastructure.

In 2011, the ICRC supported the construction and renovation of community infrastructure, including wharfs, health posts and community centres, directly benefitting over 1,160 users.

It contributed to the construction and renovation of school boarding houses, classrooms, canteens and sanitary facilities, which benefited over 1,980 children in 14 schools in 10 of the country's municipalities.

The ICRC also facilitated the access of people living in isolated areas to safe drinking water and basic sanitation with the distribution of

supplies and equipment, including water tanks, filters and piping. It implemented strategies for a healthy environment, which help communities to identify hygiene and sanitation deficiencies and problems, with a view to designing solutions with the support of the ICRC. This programme assisted over 6,000 people.

In the specific cases of the departments of Cauca and Norte de Santander, where the homes of civilians and community infrastructure were affected by constant clashes and armed action, the ICRC distributed materials for the emergency rehabilitation of damaged buildings, benefitting over 1,600 people.

Water, basic sanitation and emergency shelter projects were carried out to support displaced communities, benefitting over 2,600 people, mainly in Nariño, Cauca, Valle and Córdoba.



Boris Hegger / ICRC



Marino Loaiza / ICRC

WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE FOR COMMUNITIES IN NARIÑO

The only way for women in the communities of Sande, Conquista and Negrito (five hours by canoe from the town centre of Roberto Payán municipality, Nariño) to have water in their homes for cooking, washing food and drinking was to go down to the river Ispí, fill their buckets with water and carry them on their shoulder uphill to their house. "It was difficult and exhausting; even the children had to drink this water, which wasn't clean," explains Solangie, who lives in Conquista.

Water collected in unhygienic conditions became a breeding place for mosquitoes, which transmit malaria and other diseases. Diarrhoea, respiratory infections, parasitic diseases and other health problems affected these communities on a daily basis, owing to poor water supply and storage conditions and deficiencies in basic sanitation.

These displaced communities left their homes in 2010 because of clashes associated with the manual eradication of illegal crops. When they decided to return home, the ICRC helped them to improve their quality of life there, encouraging them to stay in their homeland and lessening the risk of displacement in the future.

A total of 157 families were given water tanks fitted with a tap to store water in their kitchens for direct consumption, tanks for storing rainwater and rubbish containers, which each household installed using local materials and with the support and guidance of the ICRC and Colombian Red Cross volunteers. This water and sanitation project benefits more than 670 people and over 150 children who eat at school canteens in the three communities. Community leaders were trained using the participatory strategy for a healthy environment and undertook to teach their neighbours what they had learned, with a view to improving hygiene conditions and thereby preventing diseases.

"It used to be difficult to get water and keep the house clean. It was a long way down to the river, but the main problem is our health. We have always lived a long way from civilization," explains Marina, a community leader in Sande. "We have managed to reduce diseases. We are never without purified water in my house now, and the whole experience has been very valuable, because I have learned a lot and I like to learn".

A NEW SCHOOL BOARDING HOUSE IN PUERTO NUEVO

Santa Helena school, in the village of Puerto Nuevo, in the municipality of San José del Guaviare, has students, ranging from pre-school to ninth grade, who come from seven nearby villages. There is a boarding house which provides free food and board for students and also has sanitary and laundry facilities.

The ICRC supported the school with the implementation of two projects, aimed at providing decent facilities for the boarders. The first project consisted in renovating the premises currently used by the 70 students who board at the school. "The remodelling included changing the roof of the boarding house, which was in poor condition, and painting the building. It changed the children's lives, because the facilities, as they were before, were not suitable for children to sleep in," says Marino Loaiza, a teacher at the school. The second project consisted in building a new boarding house, so that the children would have more space and better accommodation. The new boarding house has solved the problem of overcrowding and has two separate sanitary blocks for boys and girls.

"The ICRC built more rooms for us. We had had to stop taking children because there was no more room. We had nowhere to put any more children, and conditions were very uncomfortable. Now all the children who want to stay can, because we have enough room and beds for over a hundred students," observes Derly Guevara, treasurer of the boarding house parents association.

Work is also being carried out to improve the water supply system, as the existing one is an open system built by hand. "I have been here since I was little and am now in seventh grade. The atmosphere at the boarding house is great, because it is tidy and well organized. The ICRC has helped the boarding house a lot; it gave us beautiful, comfortable bedrooms and now we have more privacy. The new bedrooms are more spacious, which benefits us all," remarks Alejandra Betancur, a fifteen-year-old student.



Christophe Von Toggenburg / ICRC

PEOPLE DEPRIVED OF THEIR LIBERTY

PEOPLE HELD BY ARMED GROUPS

The ICRC facilitates the release of people held by armed groups by acting as a neutral intermediary and coordinating the logistics of release operations. It also offers psychological support to their families.



Christophe Von Toggenburg / ICRC

The situation of people held by armed groups is a source of concern for the ICRC, whether they are civilians or members of the police and armed forces. Through its ongoing dialogue with the parties to the conflict, the ICRC tries to ascertain what has happened to them, passes on news from their loved ones when possible, and participates in release operations while also providing psychological support to their families.

Although the ICRC still does not have regular access to people being held by armed groups, it has on several occasions succeeded in putting them in touch with their families thanks to Red Cross messages, which it delivers to the leaders of armed groups in the course of their confidential dialogue.

The ICRC participates directly in release operations as a neutral intermediary between parties, provided that all parties request its involvement. It facilitates the coordination of all the logistical and security arrangements for the release. In many cases, the ICRC conducts these operations itself, using its own vehicles, at the armed group's request. In other cases, the ICRC coordinates with other agencies and receives logistical support from governments and organizations invited to take part by the parties.

WHAT IHL HAS TO SAY

Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions

In the case of armed conflict not of an international character occurring in the territory of one of the High Contracting Parties, each Party to the conflict shall be bound to apply, as a minimum, the following provisions:

1. *Persons taking no active part in the hostilities (...) shall in all circumstances be treated humanely (...)*
To this end, the following acts are and shall remain prohibited (...) with respect to the above-mentioned persons:
 - a) *taking of hostages; (...)*

ICRC study on customary international humanitarian law

Rule 124 B

In non-international armed conflicts, the ICRC may offer its services to the parties to the conflict with a view to visiting all persons deprived of their liberty for reasons related to the conflict in order to verify the conditions of their detention and to restore contacts between those persons and their families.



The ICRC's humanitarian response

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In February 2011, the ICRC facilitated the release of five members of the police and armed forces and two civilians held by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP). They were handed over to a team made up of members of the organization Colombians for Peace and delegates from the ICRC, with the logistical support of the Brazilian government, which supplied the aircraft and crew that made this operation possible. The releases took place in the departments of Caquetá, Cauca, Meta and Tolima.

The ICRC also facilitated the release of a civilian held by the National Liberation Army in Chocó department, using a helicopter that it chartered for the operation. Similarly, the ICRC was involved in bringing about the release of a minor in Arauca department.

Over the course of 2011, the ICRC started offering psychological support to the families of the hostages due for release. The aim of this work is to prepare and support the families in the lead-up to the release and to deal with the emotional shock of being reunited with their loved ones. This support is also available after the release for the former hostages and their families if they wish. The ICRC shared the results of its visits to the families and former hostages with the Ministry of Defence, which is responsible for monitoring the reintegration of members of the police and armed forces in such cases.



"THE UNCERTAINTY IS THE WORST"

"Knowing that my husband wasn't there was extremely difficult – it really threw me. But God gives you strength and I learnt to take life calmly and to do things I'd never done before. I also had to be strong for my three sons, to keep them on the rails and in school."

That is how Nubia Segura describes her ordeal during the 22 months that her husband Armando Acuña, former councillor of Garzón, Huila, was in the hands of the FARC-EP. He was released on 11 February 2011 in an operation involving the ICRC, Colombians for Peace and the Brazilian government.

"The overwhelming uncertainty is the worst. Plus it all happened during the boys' most difficult teenage years," says Nubia, recalling that time. She says that she never received a phone call, letter or message of any kind. She didn't know whether her husband was dead or alive. Nubia transmitted messages on the radio, not knowing whether her husband was receiving them.

On 8 December 2010 – the feast day of the Virgin Mary – Nubia received the news that her husband was going to be freed. "Then we got a phone call from a delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross, who offered us psychological support to prepare us for the release. That was really important because we were able to talk about it and prepare ourselves to see him again. After all, people change, especially in those circumstances."

Nubia describes how the family has overcome their ordeal and is gradually mending the wounds, one step at a time. Although it was very tough, the experience made Nubia stronger. As a result, she became a regional leader and entered politics. Now she is the councillor.

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PEOPLE DEPRIVED OF THEIR LIBERTY IN STATE DETENTION FACILITIES

The ICRC visits more than 70 detention facilities in Colombia to check that the conditions of detention comply with international humanitarian law and other minimum standards. The findings of those visits are shared with the authorities in confidence with a view to improving the detainees' situation.



Christophe Von Toggenburg / ICRC

In accordance with its mandate, the ICRC regularly visits state detention facilities in Colombia. Having made 137 visits to 71 such facilities in 2011, the ICRC is a privileged observer of prison life and the problems faced by Colombia's prison population as a whole, and specifically by detainees imprisoned as a result of the conflict.

The goal of the ICRC's visits is to get an overview of the prison situation, to help improve detainees' conditions, to facilitate contact with their families, and to check that their treatment and the legal safeguards in place comply with international humanitarian law and other minimum standards recognized at the national and international levels.

The ICRC emphasizes the Colombian government's proposal to completely overhaul the prison system in order to dramatically improve the current situation in prisons. If this reform is planned

and implemented carefully, incorporating the recommendations of civil-society organizations familiar with the issue, this could be an excellent opportunity to roll out a comprehensive detention policy that will make a real difference in prison life and foster respect for the rights of detainees.

Today it is well known that detainees endure overcrowded, difficult conditions. Their situation deteriorated further in 2011 owing to a rise in the prison population, which had direct repercussions on their quality of life.

Overcrowding deprives inmates of the minimum living space stipulated by international standards, as well as hampering their access to health care and water and exacerbating sanitary conditions. Overcrowding also jeopardizes the detainees' rehabilitation and reintegration prospects by limiting their study and employment opportunities, and is a major source of tensions and violence in prisons.

In many cases, being separated from their loved ones has an impact on detainees' state of mind. When they are transferred to prisons located far away from their places of origin, regular contact with their families becomes difficult. This loss of family ties also hinders their reintegration into society once they are released.

Efficient and timely access to specialized health-care services and medicines is still sorely lacking. This situation hits the most vulnerable detainees hardest, such as those with chronic illnesses, and pregnant women.

"There is a lot of bitterness and resentment in prison"

Prison is a tough place to live because bitterness and resentment flourish in the difficult conditions. I have had some really bad days and my drug problem made things worse, but I was lucky enough to join a therapeutic community, where I rediscovered the will to live.

Carlos Andrés,
inmate at Bellavista prison in Medellín.

WHAT IHL HAS TO SAY

ICRC study on customary international humanitarian law

Rule 118

Persons deprived of their liberty must be provided with adequate food, water, clothing, shelter and medical attention.



Christophe Von Toggenburg / ICRC

The ICRC's humanitarian response

During their visits to detention facilities, ICRC delegates hold private interviews with detainees, in which they discuss their treatment and conditions of detention. As well as seeing the situation firsthand, they talk to the prison authorities and staff to get a better understanding of the problems encountered in the course of their duties.

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The ICRC documents the problems and makes verbal and written recommendations that are shared with the authorities in confidence. The aim is to find effective, practical solutions through a constructive dialogue. In 2011, the ICRC paid regular visits to more than 4,700 detainees imprisoned in connection with the conflict and other armed violence in 71 prisons in Colombia. Some 2,700 detainees were monitored individually.

Over the course of 2011, the ICRC submitted 20 reports to prison authorities setting out the findings and recommendations resulting from its visits. Those reports brought about specific improvements for all the inmates of the prisons visited. Numerous other cases of detainees whose health or safety was a cause of concern for the ICRC were monitored through individual verbal and written representations.

The ICRC submitted detailed recommendations to the authorities regarding the reform of the penal code and organized a round-table meeting at which civil-society organizations with expertise in this field put forward their proposals.

The ICRC also called a meeting of experts from the Ministry of Justice and the National Prison Institute to discuss the standards governing the planning and construction of new detention facilities and the maintenance of prison systems and services.

An assessment of the prison health-care system nationwide was carried out by the ICRC, including an in-depth look at two detention facilities in particular. This led to a series of recommendations being addressed to the national and regional authorities. The ICRC also worked with national and international organizations on key health issues, such as preventing and treating tuberculosis and caring for mentally ill detainees. Training on health and hygiene issues was given to 18 staff members from the National Prison Institute who work in 13 detention facilities. They passed on what they had learnt to inmates, who then became a driving force for better health practices in the prisons. In this way, 258 detainees received training in 2011.

Restoring family links

The ICRC delivered Red Cross messages to 32 detainees, enabling them to stay in touch with their families. In addition, more than 1,740 people received visits from their families thanks to funds provided by the ICRC and to the support of the Colombian Red Cross.



Christophe Von Toggenburg / ICRC

“WHEN I FOUND OUT THAT MY FATHER WAS ALIVE, I WAS OVERJOYED”

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Angie had to wait 19 years to find out that her father was alive. Her mother hadn't forgotten him, even though 13 years had passed since they told her he was dead.

Resigning herself to widowhood, Mayerlín, who often felt rejected because of doubts over her partner's disappearance, always talked to her daughter about her father. He had had to flee because of threats made against him when she was three months pregnant. "I was never able to see him again because I was being followed in the hope that I would lead them to him. They wanted to kill him." That was when she lost touch with him.

"One day in December I got a phone call from a woman saying that someone was looking for me. I asked who it was and she said my father's name. I was overjoyed! She asked me how long it had been since I had last seen him, and I replied that I had never met him," recounts Angie, recalling the moment when the ICRC delegate contacted her with the news. "She

said that she could deliver a letter to him so I wrote one straight away. Then she said that she would look into arranging for me to visit him."

ICRC delegates had come across Angie's father during one of their regular visits to a prison in Santander. He had known that his partner was pregnant when he fled. When he found out about the ICRC's programme to restore family links, he decided to tell them his story in the hope that one day he would be reunited with his partner and daughter.

For nine months, ICRC delegates scoured the country from one end to the other, until at last they found Mayerlín and her daughter Angie in a town in the country's main coffee-growing region. "I'm very grateful. I longed to see him again. He was everything to me. It's as though nothing ever happened. I want my daughter to get to know him," says Mayerlín, who is looking forward to being reunited with her companion after 19 years apart.



Improving knowledge of, respect for and the application of humanitarian rules

Dialogue with the armed forces, the police, armed groups, the authorities and civil society



Clara Lorena Aratijo / ICRC

ARMED FORCES AND NATIONAL POLICE FORCE

The ICRC maintains ongoing dialogue with the police and the armed forces to promote the implementation of international humanitarian law in armed conflicts and of standards governing the use of force in other situations of violence.

The ICRC maintains fluent, ongoing dialogue with the armed forces and the national police force to promote respect for the rules of international humanitarian law, specifically applicable in armed conflict situations, and international human rights law and standards governing the use of force applicable in other situations of violence.

In 2011, the ICRC held 16 workshops, which were attended by 900 members of the police and armed forces.

The purpose of five of these workshops was to review lessons learned. Real-life cases were examined to identify the possible causes of violations and grave breaches of the rules of international humanitarian law, human rights law and domestic legislation, with a view to formulating preventive and corrective measures to stop such violations and breaches from happening again. Seven workshops were held on international humanitarian law and international human rights law, with a view to strengthening the implementation of the rules of these bodies of law in military and police operations.

The ICRC, in conjunction with the Colombian Red Cross, held workshops on issues relating to medical services, highlighting the importance of protecting and respecting medical personnel and health care workers, as required by humanitarian law.

The ICRC also made a contribution in the academic field, with its participation in courses given as part of the master's degree in international humanitarian law and international human rights law at the Escuela Superior de Guerra (war college) and the specialized course on the law of armed conflict at the Escuela Militar de Cadetes (cadet military academy). It participated in two courses for 90 operational legal advisers, who are responsible for advising the commanders of military units on the implementation of international humanitarian law in the planning and conduct of military operations.



Ricardo Angarita / ICRC

Use of force in urban environments

The ICRC continued its dialogue with the police and armed forces in Medellín, aimed at promoting the implementation of standards governing the legal use of force, arrest and detention.

In 2011, the ICRC provided support for the organization of eight workshops on this subject, including “lessons learned” exercises. They were attended by around 250 members of the national and military police operating in Medellín’s urban districts.



ICRC



Yesid Castiblanco B. / ICRC

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ARMED GROUPS

One of the main areas in which the ICRC's humanitarian action delivers added value is the confidential dialogue it maintains with armed groups. It enables the ICRC to discuss the consequences of armed conflict and other situations of violence directly with armed groups.

The ICRC maintains ongoing dialogue with the different armed groups, with a view to securing commitments from them to respect international humanitarian law and other humanitarian standards, improving care and assistance for victims, guaranteeing the safety of its teams in the field and ensuring the organization's effective presence in over 20 areas affected by the armed conflict and violence.

This confidential dialogue with armed groups takes place in areas where the impact of the hostilities and violence is greatest, the areas in which the ICRC's humanitarian action is concentrated. Conducted in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, it enables the ICRC to discuss the consequences of the armed conflict and other situations of violence directly with those allegedly responsible for the situation.

In 2011, the ICRC remained in contact with all the armed groups operating in the areas where it carries out its humanitarian work, including, in some cases, members of emerging armed groups.

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NATIONAL AUTHORITIES

The ICRC provides the government with technical assistance in fulfilling its duty to respect and ensure respect for humanitarian rules and principles.

The ICRC provides the Government of Colombia with legal advice on fulfilling its duty to respect and ensure respect for humanitarian rules and principles as a State party to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and other important international humanitarian law treaties. Legal advice is given to a number of different government bodies, with a view to promoting the adoption of measures to ensure the effective implementation of international humanitarian law in the country.

In 2011, the ICRC provided technical assistance to the Colombian Government and Congress on care and assistance for victims, in particular during the legislative process that culminated in the adoption of the Victims and land restitution law (Law 1448 of 2011).

After the law had been passed, the ICRC presented a document containing recommendations for its implementation. The aim of these recommendations was to highlight the importance of ensuring that the definition of "victim" is based on the principle of non-discrimination, the necessity of increasing the period of time during which displaced persons are eligible to receive assistance and the need to develop a sound basis for the design of victim consultation mechanisms. The ICRC's main concern is for the benefits of this law to reach people living in remote areas. Some of the ICRC's recommendations were incorporated in the implementing regulations issued by the government.

The ICRC put forward its comments on the bill concerning declarations of absence of missing persons. In coordination with the interinstitutional panel on assistance for the victims of enforced disappearance, it provided the government with guidance and technical assistance during the process undertaken to formulate implementing regulations for the Law concerning victims of enforced disappearance (law 1408 of 2010).

In June 2011, the ICRC submitted a working paper to the government containing suggestions and recommendations on the implementation of international humanitarian law treaties and the restructuring of the Intersectoral Commission on Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law. The ICRC hopes that the introduction of the national system for human rights and international humanitarian law (Decree 4100 of 2011) will result in its recommendations being taken into account and implemented by the authorities.

In coordination with the Colombian Red Cross, the ICRC provided the government with technical support for the participation of its representatives in the 31st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent held in Geneva, Switzerland, in November 2011. Colombia was one of the States that played a very active role in the analysis and discussion of the study conducted by the ICRC on the current status of international humanitarian law and the challenges it faces.



Equipo Colombiano de Investigaciones Antropológicas Forenses (ECIAF)

The ICRC provided the government with guidance and technical assistance during the process undertaken to formulate implementing regulations for law 1408 of 2010, which pays tribute to the victims of enforced disappearance and establishes measures to locate and identify them.



Yesid Castiblanco B. / ICRC

THE MEDIA

The ICRC organizes courses for journalists on the basics of international humanitarian law, ensures that victims and their needs and concerns receive media coverage and maintains contact with journalists to facilitate their work in reporting on these issues.

The media plays a crucial role in spotlighting the impact that armed conflict and violence have on the everyday lives of individuals and communities. Media exposure contributes to ensuring that victims are recognized and that solutions are devised to address the humanitarian problems facing them.

The ICRC endeavours to ensure that news coverage includes accurate references to international humanitarian law, with a view to promoting the protection of and respect for victims through news reporting. To this end, the ICRC, with the support of the Colombian Red Cross, gave the course Journalists, armed conflict and international humanitarian law in six cities: Medellín, Buenaventura, Cali, Bucaramanga, Montería and Bogotá. Over 240 journalists from different national and regional media outlets attended these academic sessions. The course has been held 43 times over the last nine years.

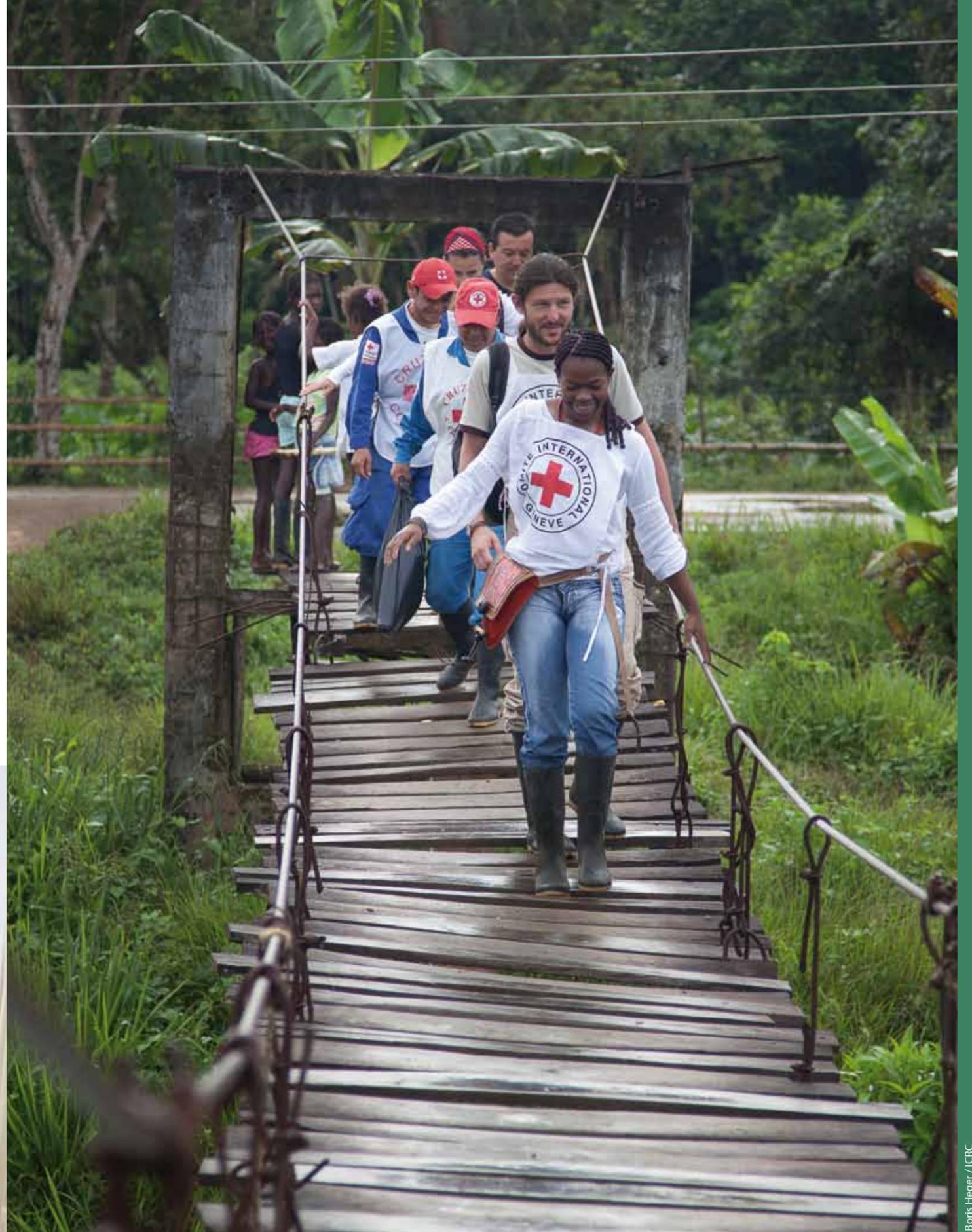
Increasingly, the humanitarian consequences of the fighting and violence are affecting remote areas located far from urban centres, which are more inaccessible to journalists. The ICRC therefore works with the media to facilitate access to the victims. It also produces a constant flow of information for the media to draw attention to the humanitarian problems that it witnesses, with the focus on the interests of the victims and the affected civilian population.

In 2011, the ICRC assisted journalists from various national and international media outlets, including reporters from the newspaper El Espectador, the magazine Semana and the BBC, in accessing remote areas. The ICRC also maintains ongoing contact with all journalists and communicators concerned with humanitarian issues and public interest stories in order to provide them with newsworthy information to use in their reporting.

A BBC film crew had access to a mobile health unit set up by the ICRC in the lower Caguán area, Caquetá.



María Cristina Rivera / ICRC



Conquista, Roberto Payán municipality, Nariño. The ICRC works closely with the Colombian Red Cross, and this enables it to extend the coverage of its humanitarian activities to reach a larger number of victims and communities in need.

Boris Heger / ICRC

THE ICRC IN COLOMBIA

Agreements with the Colombian government enabling the ICRC to pursue its humanitarian work

March 1969. The Colombian government authorizes the ICRC to visit people detained in connection with the internal armed conflict.

May 1980. The Colombian government and the ICRC sign a headquarters agreement, which is approved by Law 42 of 1981.

November 1990. The Colombian authorities agree to let the ICRC facilitate the release of members of the police and armed forces held by armed groups.

August 1991. The Colombian police undertake to provide the ICRC with the details of people detained in connection with the internal armed conflict.

November 1994. The Colombian government authorizes the ICRC to make contact with armed groups.

February 1996. Protocol II additional to the Geneva Conventions enters into force in Colombia. The government and the ICRC sign a memorandum of understanding enabling the ICRC to carry out visits to all those deprived of their liberty, to move freely around the country, to maintain contact with all the parties to the conflict, and to provide emergency humanitarian assistance to civilians affected by the armed conflict.

February 1996. The Colombian Ministry of Defence undertakes to provide the ICRC with the details of all the people detained by the police and armed forces in connection with the armed conflict, and to grant it access to temporary and permanent detention facilities.

September 2001. The ICRC and the Social Solidarity Network, now the Department for Social Prosperity, sign a document of understanding for the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance for displaced people.

January 2006. The ICRC and the Social Action Agency, now the Department for Social Prosperity, sign a new agreement on the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance activities for families displaced by the violence in Colombia. This replaces the 2001 document of understanding.

June 2009. The ICRC and the Social Action Agency, now the Department for Social Prosperity, sign an appendix to the agreement, which amends aspects related to mass displacement and sets up coordination bodies.

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For more information about the ICRC in Colombia and worldwide, visit the ICRC website www.icrc.org for:

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- publications
- the Family Links network
- articles from the International Review of the Red Cross
- a link to the website of the Colombian Red Cross (www.cruzrojacolombiana.org).

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MISSION

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.



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