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IDPs in Colombia: a joint needs assessment by the ICRC and the World Food Programme



Families displaced by conflict receive emergency assistance from the ICRC.

Executive summary

Forty years of conflict in Colombia and growing economic difficulties have led to a serious deterioration in the basic living conditions of several sectors of the population, in particular those affected by the conflict (internally displaced people and host communities). According to various estimates, between 1.8 and 3 million Colombians have been displaced since 1985, making them the third largest internally displaced population in the world. As the majority of the displaced cannot return to their place of origin, located in conflict-prone areas, they tend to flock to the poverty belts around the major towns and cities. There, they often face considerable difficulties when adapting to urban environments. Exposure to crime, lack of stable income, insecure housing, lack of access to health and education services, and poor sanitation are all factors that make displaced households increasingly vulnerable to food and livelihood insecurity. In coordination with the relevant authorities, the ICRC continues to support IDPs in rural and urban areas. In 2005, the organization has budgeted to assist 90,000 people in 2005.

This document reports on the outcome of a joint project by the ICRC and the World Food Programme (WFP) that began in July 2004 in Bogotá, Colombia. It is one of the first times that the two organizations, while pursuing their distinctive mandates (the WFP as the UN agency for food aid and the ICRC in the independent role conferred to it by the Geneva Conventions and additional Protocols), have worked together in the area of needs assessment.

Six departments of Colombia were chosen as the sample for the assessment: Antioquia, Caqueta, Choco, Cundinamarca, Cesar/Guajira, and Norte de Santander. The data collection was undertaken by the WFP and the ICRC in partnership with a national consultancy firm, Econometria.

The survey showed that, on average, 58% of an displaced household's monthly expenditure goes on food. After displacement, rural farming populations no longer have access to their primary asset – land. They can no longer grow their own food and must buy much of what they consume. Their income, however, is limited as it is hard for them to find work in cities, given that their skills are not easily transferable. While procuring food is of course important, this has negative effects for the household, as resources that would otherwise be used for education or health are increasingly being diverted towards purchasing food. This is a serious concern in a society where nearly two-thirds of the population are under 18. The current difficulties of the displaced households can limit the opportunities of future generations to escape poverty and destitution.

While it is not able to address certain fundamental problems faced by internally displaced people (IDPs), such as poverty, violence, or lack of social integration, humanitarian assistance, by bolstering IDP coping mechanisms in the early stages, can contribute to the implementation of sustainable solutions, provided clear and adapted policies and programmes are put into practice by the government. All the same, longer-term dependency solely on humanitarian assistance should be avoided.

Based on the results of the survey, the ICRC and the WFP have been able to present the Colombian authorities responsible for dealing with IDPs with an overview of the current situation and to recommend practical solutions for improving IDP living conditions. This will enable the Colombian authorities and other humanitarian organizations to better adapt the support they provide. The ICRC and the WFP believe that, although government policies to protect the civilian population exist, they need to be more thoroughly implemented. Furthermore, the mechanisms in place for assisting the displaced need to be strengthened and adapted to enable IDP households to get back on their feet, both economically and socially. There are still too many barriers to their gaining access to basic social services; these need to be removed and the focus and coverage of current social-protection programmes should be widened to enable displaced populations to benefit. Given the loss of livelihood when rural populations are displaced to urban areas, and the difficulty in affording education, methods of delivering humanitarian assistance should focus on human-capital development. Training for adults to build up a new skills-set can help improve livelihood security among IDP households.

Humanitarian situation

Displacement in Colombia

Forty years of conflict in Colombia and growing economic difficulties have led to a serious deterioration in the basic living conditions of the population in general, and those affected by the conflict (IDPs and host communities) in particular.

Colombia faces severe income disparities, poverty and inadequate social services. The World Bank estimates that 65% of the population live below the poverty line and rural poverty is especially acute. Displacement patterns suggest that most people are from rural areas; these people become more vulnerable to poverty in their new environment, usually urban settings.

It is estimated that between 1.8 and 3 million Colombians have been displaced since 1985, making them the third largest internally displaced population in the world. The exact number is a matter of considerable debate in Colombia. Lack of a standard methodology to track displaced populations over time makes it difficult to determine those who have returned to their place of origin, those who have settled elsewhere, and those who remain, or continue to be, displaced.

Despite such problems, the government and civil society agree on two broad types of displacement: massive and individual. The former involves large numbers of individuals or households being displaced en masse as a result of violence. Individual displacement involves movement in a more ad hoc manner, but nonetheless as a result of violent conflict. Since 2000, there has been a reduction in massive displacement and an increase in individual displacement. New displacements have averaged 300,000 per year since 2000, with a clear increase in 2002 (over 400,000 people) and a decline in 2003. The latest figures indicate that an estimated 207,000 were displaced in 2003¹.

Before displacement, rural populations may face threats or be targeted in killings, forced disappearances, direct attacks, or armed confrontation. Even after displacement, violence and intimidation may continue. As such, populations are reluctant to register as officially displaced out of fear stemming from the circumstances of their displacement.

In recent years, new ways of controlling population movements have been introduced, such as modern-day sieges known as restrictions. Restrictions control the movement—or isolation—of entire communities and affect the entry of certain goods, including humanitarian aid, and access to health services. From the outside, this dynamic creates the impression that isolated communities are party to the actions and objectives of armed groups. Civilians are, therefore, increasingly viewed as military targets, which precipitates further insecurity and instability. Blockaded zones not only influence displacement statistics but also indicate an increase in violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

Further impoverishment of displaced households

Colombians forced to flee from conflict in rural areas often head towards overcrowded city slums. In fleeing from violence, rural households abandon their primary asset: landholdings. Other physical assets such as livestock, equipment and housing are also left behind. Displaced households arrive into urban areas with only cash, valuables that can be easily turned into cash, and their own labour.

In relocating, IDP households become economically marginalized as their skills, which are mostly farming-based, are not easily transferred to an urban setting. Given that the urban economy predominantly uses cash as the basis for exchange of goods and services, IDP households are particularly at risk if they do not always have disposable income to hand. This then places constraints on their access to basic necessities such as food, housing, education, and health services.

¹ Based on latest estimates provided by the Consultancy on Human Rights and Displacement (*Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento* – CODHES)

Tension often occurs between the IDPs and the host communities because the society is already strapped for resources and the influx of IDPs puts it under even greater strain. IDPs vie for low-skilled jobs that are also sought by residents. This competition for jobs further forces down wages, which are already low, and gives rise to exploitation. Furthermore, the existing health and sanitation infrastructure in urban centres is further burdened owing to increased numbers of people requiring the services.

Government support structures for IDPs

In 1997, the Colombian government set up a national system – bringing together 14 government ministries and agencies covering various areas such as agriculture, social security, health and education – to provide an integrated response for people displaced owing to violence (*Sistema Nacional de Atención a la Población Desplazada por la Violencia* – SNAIPD). In 1999, after an evaluation of the progress made, the government designated the Social Security Network (*Red Social de Securidad* – RSS) as the agency responsible for all planning, coordination and delivery of services for IDPs.

While international and national agencies supplement government resources, all official assistance is targeted only towards the registered population. It is, therefore, estimated that all State aid earmarked for IDPs reaches only 17% of IDPs.² One of the reasons for low levels of assistance, apart from issues relating to registration, is that IDPs are not always aware of their rights, entitlements and obligations. IDP reception centres (*Unidades de Atención y Orientación*) attempt to bridge the gap between IDPs and support institutions by helping IDPs find their way through State bureaucracy.

Limited financial resources and technical capacity often result in services being poorly resourced, designed and implemented. This is especially true at the municipal level as local governments are unable to manage the large influxes of IDPs or provide them the necessary social and economic services. The trade-offs between meeting IDP needs and those of non-displaced populations are especially acute at the municipal level as budgets cannot cover the increase in overall demand.

The joint ICRC/WFP needs assessment

Rationale for rapid needs assessment

The IDP problem in Colombia is multifaceted and requires concerted action from the government, civil society, and the international community. A better understanding of the dynamics and characteristics of displaced populations is required to help these actors better respond to their needs.

Although the ICRC and the WFP have distinct mandates and operational procedures, their activities in Colombia directly contribute to improving the lives and livelihoods of the internally displaced. Both organizations have extensive experience in meeting the needs of populations affected by natural and man-made emergencies.

One area of common interest is better support for the government's efforts to implement sustainable solutions through clear and adapted policies and programmes. The continuing effects of the conflict in Colombia require short-term humanitarian assistance in conjunction with medium- and long-term policy development. The WFP and the ICRC are well placed to provide operational support and advice to the government for policy formulation and implementation vis-àvis displaced populations.

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² CODHES

In order to gain a better understanding of the problems facing IDPs, the ICRC and WFP carried out a joint needs assessment of displaced households in selected areas of Colombia. The information gathered will supplement the information used to justify food and non-food interventions, time-frames and working methods. The assessment focused on finding out more about:

- the socio-economic factors that contribute to food insecurity
- current risks faced by IDP households, especially concerning access to food, employment, other livelihood opportunities, and health and education services

The partnership had several distinct phases. The initial preparatory phase took place from July to August 2004 and involved studying secondary data and literature related to the evolution of displacement – and its effects – in Colombia. The result was a comprehensive literature review prepared by a national consultant and funded by the ICRC.

The second phase of the partnership, from August to September 2004, involved collecting primary data through household surveys and focus-group discussions in six departments of Colombia.

Methodology for the joint assessment

Given the level of complexity in determining the exact number of IDPs described in the previous section, and the time-frame allocated for data collection, entry and analysis activities, the findings of the needs assessment do not (and cannot) aim to be statistically representative of the entire IDP population in Colombia.

The departments selected for the needs assessment were chosen on the basis of certain criteria, and were all:

- areas in which the ICRC and the WFP were already providing assistance
- traditional reception zones departments which have large cities and urban areas that have historically served as primary destinations for IDPs (data provided by the RSS)
- hosting more than 5,000 IDPs who had been newly displaced during 2003/2004 (data from RSS and CODHES)
- subject to "restrictions" (limits on the entry of certain goods, including humanitarian aid)
- indicative of the average socio-economic status of households in terms of demographics, expenditure, poverty incidence, and level of access to health and sanitation (data from CODHES and national consultancy firm Econometria)
- favourable in terms of logistics (such as the number of cars and people available and the condition of roads) and security

Based on these criteria, the six departments chosen as the sample for the needs assessment were: Antioquia, Caqueta, Choco, Cundinamarca, Cesar/Guajira, and Norte de Santander. It should be noted that logistical and security constraints were the over-riding factors when selecting the final survey sites.

Data collection

The data collection was undertaken in partnership with a national consultancy firm, Econometria. Questionnaires were designed jointly by the WFP and the ICRC and shared with Econometria for conversion into a format that could be scanned. The teams carrying out the surveys comprised staff from the WFP, the ICRC and Econometria.

Teams of 10 people were fielded to each department for a period of seven days to conduct 80 household surveys and three focus-group discussions. Households were chosen at random in urban slums. Focus groups were organized in conjunction with government partners at the municipal level. Owing to an additional five households being interviewed in Caqueta, these activities yielded a total of 485 household surveys and 18 focus groups discussions.

Findings and conclusions

Displaced households face considerable risks when adapting to urban environments, the main destination of the displaced. In addition to security concerns, lack of stable income, insecure housing, lack of access to health and education services, and poor sanitation are all factors that make IDP households increasingly vulnerable to food and livelihood insecurity.

Although the findings from the six departments (Antioquia, Caqueta, Choco, Cundinamarca, Cesar/Guajira, and Norte de Santander) are not representative of the entire IDP population, they do offer an insight into current socio-economic trends among IDP households.

Demographic patterns reveal a young population

Across sampled households in the six departments, the average size of a household was six people. Taking the entire sample population (2,847 people) as a whole, 62% were below the age of 18. In Norte de Santander, this percentage increased to 77%, considerably higher than in other departments.

Of the children surveyed, 66% of those between the ages of six and 14 were, at the time of survey, attending school. Length of displacement greatly affects whether or not children within this age range are sent to school. Over two-thirds of the households that reported that their children were attending school had been displaced for more than three months.

Both women and men reported that the costs associated with schooling – uniforms, school fees, learning materials – placed a strain on their households. Young people are an additional source of labour that can be deployed to generate income that goes towards meeting basic needs. This trade-off increasingly influences parents' choice of whether to send their children to school and whether they can keep them there. In trying to meet other basic needs, education is one of the first things to be neglected, with sampled households allocated an average of only 3% of their monthly expenditures for education. This means that current needs can threaten the economic mobility of future generations and limit their opportunities to escape poverty and destitution.

Food security and livelihood security are intertwined

Prior to their displacement, IDPs are predominantly farmers. Such skills are no longer relevant, nor marketable in an urban setting. The loss of their land hampers their ability to meet food consumption needs, gain access social services and generate savings and assets. Of the households sampled, 67% said that the majority of their food was purchased.

Given that most of their food has to be bought, the only asset available to help them acquire purchasing power is their own labour. Gaining access to labour opportunities, however, proves difficult. At the time of the survey, 61% of the heads of households interviewed were not working. Moreover, 78% reported that they did not have access to formal or informal credit. Nevertheless, focus groups reported that food was often purchased on credit and that small loans were offered by local moneylenders, indicating that informal borrowing is much more common than reported in the household surveys

Only 42% of all households reported working in the last 30 days. In some cases the number of days worked was too few to generate sufficient income. The average numbers of days worked per month was 15 for the entire sample, though this ranged from seven to 17 days. Focus group discussions revealed that daily wage rates were extremely low, ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 pesos per day (US\$2 to 4).

There were no noticeable advantages in being displaced for a longer period of time in terms of the income sources available. Manual labour was the main activity for men, while women worked as domestic servants. In both instances, wages are likely to be low as IDP households are competing with each other for the same type of jobs in the same locations and employers will seek to pay as little as possible for services.

Other factors which had a direct bearing on food and livelihood security for IDP households

included: increases in the price of basic food items; illness of a family member; inability of the head of household to work/loss of sources of income. Of the households surveyed, 67% reported that a combination of the three had affected their households in the six months prior to the survey. At the same time, about two-thirds indicated that these risks affected their ability to obtain food for their own consumption.

In most cases the household responded to these problems by "consumption smoothing" – either reducing the number of meals eaten each day, or switching to lower quality and cheaper foods.

Household expenditure patterns are geared towards food

Expenditure patterns across the sample indicated that a household's average monthly outgoings were 214,000 pesos. Once again, expenditure patterns did not differ drastically among households displaced for different periods of time. On average, 58% of monthly expenditure went on food, with cereals and tubers accounting, on average, for 25% of all expenditure on food.

The remaining 42% of expenditure went mainly on housing and utilities, 12% and 9% respectively. Health and education were less prominent in monthly non-food outlays, averaging 6% and 3% respectively.

The focus-group discussions showed that both health and education were of concern to IDP households. Men and women noted that the poor quality of existing sanitation and sewage systems was contributing to illnesses among children, but that they were not able to afford treatments. In terms of education, fees were mentioned as being the major constraint to keeping children in school.

Food is, therefore, a major priority for IDPs as it consumed 58% of their monthly expenditure. Resources that would otherwise by used for education or health are increasingly being diverted towards purchasing food which, while important, has negative effects for the household, particularly for the children.

Finally, debt repayment is an important factor in monthly expenditure. The average monthly expenditure on debt across sampled households was 5%, which is more than the amount spent on education. It is likely that debt is related to food procurement as households are known to obtain food on credit from local shops. This practice may, however, create recurring cycles of debt for IDP households because their current income is not sufficient to buy adequate quantities of food.

Current food consumption patterns

Of the households surveyed, 43% fell into the categories of "lowest level" and "low level" consumption, meaning, respectively, that they do not consume any staple foods (i.e. rice, yucca, plantain), or that they consume only staple foods and at least one additional non-staple food item on a daily basis. This implies that both the quantity and diversity of food consumed is low. A total of 73% of the households in these categories stated that they had purchased their food, while 17% indicated that they had been given the food. Non-skilled labour, selling, and begging were the major income-earning activities, and heads of household who had worked in month preceding the survey reported that they had worked, on average, only 14 days.

There was "good level" of consumption in 35% of households, meaning that they consumed at least four main food items³ on a daily basis and all other food items on a regular basis. These households were more likely to benefit from external assistance programmes, have access to informal credit (cash and kind) from family and friends, and consume greater amounts of food received as gifts and donations. This implies that such households can draw upon several

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³ Cereals, tubers, milk and cheese, sugar/panela, meat/fish, eggs, pulses, vegetables, fruit.

sources of support to meet immediate consumption deficits. The opposite is true for households in the category of "lowest level" of consumption who are more likely to exhaust their own earnings as they do not have the same level of support.

Food consumption does not necessarily improve the longer a household is displaced. There is no indication that households who have been displaced for a long time have the ability to generate the income needed to obtain sufficient food. This is an important factor given that the majority of households purchase their food.

Social networks and external assistance

Of the households surveyed, 62% reported that they did not have access to external assistance. Two-thirds of these households had been displaced for more than three months. This suggests that such households are not able to gain access to non-humanitarian government programmes, especially those relating to economic stabilization, relocation and resettlement.

In the absence of official assistance, IDP households rely heavily on informal social networks that offer economic and social support. Such networks are extremely important insofar as they offer goods and services to which displaced households would not otherwise have access.

As mentioned, there appears to be little difference in the socio-economic welfare of IDPs displaced for less than three months or more than nine. The importance of food, housing and utilities is shown by their being priorities in household expenditure. Social networks fill in the gaps, especially in terms of food and housing.

Informal networks, however, can also have a negative impact. There is a tendency for such networks to encourage households to take on further debt that cannot easily be repaid. At the same time, there is a danger that taking on further debt, especially that which is food-based, will negatively affect households' access to other basic needs, notably health and education.



The ICRC and the Colombian Red Cross work together to bring vital aid to displaced families.

Recommendations

The government of Colombia has the overall responsibility for ensuring that IDPs are granted their constitutional rights and receive both humanitarian and non-humanitarian assistance. National and departmental authorities are obliged to respond in a timely and appropriate manner, ensuring at least minimum fundamental rights for the displaced. By contributing to the bridging of certain gaps, organizations such as the ICRC and the WFP can play an important supporting role in implementing policies and programmes geared towards sustainable solutions. On the basis of the results of the joint survey, the two organizations have made a series of recommendations which, it is hoped, will guide the government and its partners in their endeavours.

While it is not able to address certain fundamental problems faced by IDPs (such as poverty, violence, or lack of social integration) humanitarian assistance, by bolstering IDP coping mechanisms in the early stages, can contribute to the implementation of sustainable solutions, provided clear and adapted policies and programmes are put into practice by the government.

The ICRC and the WFP recommend the following:

- Existing policies need to be implemented to ensure that the civilian population is protected. Although there are legislative and institutional means to protect civilians from the ongoing violence, on many occasions it does not appear that these are enforced. The government of Colombia and armed groups should ensure respect for IHL, in particular the principles of limitation, distinction and proportionality, in order to avoid displacement, when feasible, and ensure the protection of the people who are displaced.
- Existing policies and mechanisms need to be strengthened and adapted to enable IDPs to get back on their feet, both economically and socially. While the emergency needs of assisted IDPs are generally met during the first months of displacement, existing programmes do not ensure sustainable solutions for the displaced population, particularly in terms of income generation, and access to land, credit, education, health, and housing. The government of Colombia should look into any discrepancies between what is provided for within its legal framework and what is current being implemented, in order to help IDP households become self-sufficient again and, therefore, less vulnerable.
- Current efforts to harmonize the manner in which IDPs are identified, characterized
 and supported need to be refined to account for recurrent displacement. The RSS is
 working on improving methods of tracking IDP households. While this is an important step,
 there is a danger that future methods will not account for evolving dynamics of
 displacement. A number of international and national organizations are currently grappling
 with how to take the changing nature of displacement into account when determining IDP
 numbers, characteristics, and relative vulnerability. The RSS should work with these
 agencies to ensure consistency and flexibility in their methodology.
- The focus and coverage of current social protection programmes need to be expanded. The government, in partnership with the World Bank, has embarked on an ambitious programme of social protection. There is a great deal of potential for expanding the focus of specific elements, such as health, education, and employment, to cover IDP populations. In essence, this would be a link between humanitarian and development assistance. One possibility would be to explore the feasibility of a burden-sharing agreement whereby a certain number of IDP households could be gradually incorporated into mainstream social-protection programmes.

- The barriers to gaining access to and benefiting from basic social services need to be removed. While IDP households are entitled to basic education and health services, their ability to take advantage of such opportunities is limited. Fees and costs are prohibitively high, especially for tuition, uniforms, and medicines. Communicable diseases are common among children of IDP households owing to high population densities and poor water and sanitation systems. To improve the efficiency and equity of social services in IDP settlements, the ICRC recommends that public expenditure on basic health and education be increased, and that labour-intensive public work to rehabilitate sewage and sanitation systems be promoted. These approaches offer a short term payoff in terms of meeting IDP needs, and also the longer-term benefit of improving health and educational opportunities for children.
- Standard methodology for conducting in-depth surveys of the socio-economic status of both IDP and resident households could be designed and implemented, and could be used as a reference by other agencies. To date, several surveys have been conducted on the socio-economic conditions of displaced and resident households. Different methodologies, sample sizes and objectives have, however, precluded any systematic comparison of trends. In order to better understand the characteristics of displaced and non-displaced populations, a more in-depth survey is required. The methodology should be shared and used, where feasible, by the government, civil society and the international community so as to build on current partnerships.
- An advocacy campaign highlighting the IDP situation could be launched. Displaced populations do not always have a voice or the ability to increase public awareness of their situation. An advocacy campaign could greatly strengthen national and international understanding of IDPs' needs and aspirations.
- The use of food consumption categories (see page 8), if and when appropriate, should be considered when deciding food assistance targets. Other criteria which could be used include: households with eight or more members; households where the majority of members are under 18; households whose members have worked for 10 days or less in the past month; and households with monthly outgoings of less than 200,000 pesos. Finally, food consumption categories need to be refined and updated according to the changing socio-economic situation of IDP households. Such changes can, for example, be based on the findings of an in-depth survey (see above). In this manner, food and non-food needs can be identified simultaneously.
- Methods of delivering humanitarian assistance need to focus on human-capital development. Humanitarian assistance, if targeted appropriately, can help strengthen the human capital of IDP households, especially in the area of health and education. Such assistance can help free up household resources that are normally devoted to food so that they can now be allocated to social services. It can improve water and sanitation systems and improve knowledge and awareness among displaced populations of nutrition, care practices, and reproductive health.
- Capacity development and skills training for adults can help build livelihood security among IDP households. Both humanitarian and non-humanitarian assistance should focus on building the capacity of adults in IDP households. Given the low levels of education and limited scope for transferring previous skills to the urban economy, existing livelihood strategies are unable to generate sufficient income. In terms of livelihood support, intervention should seek to facilitate productive employment that can generate income, savings and assets. Provision of group-based credit including a component for skills training for adults is one option. The one caveat is that any effort will need careful planning and design so as to ensure that initiatives are given enough time to generate returns and results.

ICRC activities in Colombia

The ICRC has been working in Colombia since 1969, striving to secure greater compliance with IHL by all armed groups – particularly regarding the protection of people not taking an active part in the conflict – and promoting the integration of IHL into the training and operational procedures of the Colombian armed forces. The ICRC visits security detainees, provides emergency relief to IDPs and other victims of the ongoing armed conflict in Colombia, and implements public health programmes in conflict-affected and remote areas. It works closely with the Colombian Red Cross, and other members of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, including the International Federation, to coordinate humanitarian activities in Colombia's conflict-affected regions.

In 2004, the ICRC:

- distributed emergency aid to almost 68,000 new IDPs and residents (assistance for 90,000 is budgeted for in 2005)
- launched 49 small-scale community infrastructure projects for residents affected by blockades and 10 agricultural projects for IDPs and residents
- improved the population's access to medical care by running mobile health units (8,018 consultations), accompanying local medical teams (3,618 consultations), and directing beneficiaries to the services provided by the national health system
- stepped up its visits to detainees, visiting some 6,600 and supporting collective health education and disease-prevention programmes
- made progress in integrating IHL into university curricula as well as into the doctrine, manuals and training of the Colombian armed forces
- completed, with the Colombian Red Cross, the integration of IHL into the police force
- reinforced the National Society's tracing service and its capacity to disseminate IHL

In order to adapt its setup to the changing humanitarian situation and to be capable of providing an extended range of services, the ICRC has reorganized its human and logistical resources into 12 larger structures as opposed to the 17 smaller ones it had previously.

ANNEX:

