



Lutheran World Relief



LATIN AMERICA WORKING GROUP  
EDUCATION FUND

# NO RELIEF IN SIGHT

Report from Caribbean Coast of Colombia

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# **NO RELIEF IN SIGHT: REPORT FROM CARIBBEAN COAST OF COLOMBIA May 2011**

In April 2011, Latin America Working Group (LAWG) and Lutheran World Relief (LWR) staff visited Córdoba, Sucre and the city of Barranquilla in northern Colombia to evaluate ongoing violence, potential for land returns to displaced people, and protection for human rights defenders and communities. The trip focused on many of LWR's partners, from small farmer associations to nongovernmental groups providing services in poor urban areas. We visited Montería, Tierralta, Loricá, San Onofre, Sincelejo and Barranquilla. The information we gathered on the trip highlighted how distant the prospects are for an end to the conflict, how powerfully paramilitary successor groups have intensified their violent grip, and how inadequate governmental policies are to protect individuals and communities at risk. It also reinforced concerns about how difficult it will be to safely implement a positive plan by the Santos Administration on the immediate horizon, near-finalized legislation to return land to a subset of Colombia's 5 million displaced persons. Colombian authorities have no effective protection plan in place for rural communities that would return under the new law.

## **Paramilitary, Successor Groups Remain in Control of Many Areas**

Córdoba and Sucre were the epicenter of the paramilitary movement, where the feared AUC commander Carlos Castaño had his home base and Salvatore Mancuso ruled. It was the site of many of the most horrific war crimes, such as the 2001 Chengue massacre where paramilitaries beat to death twenty-three villagers with sledgehammers, then set the village on fire; the military, according to witnesses interviewed by the *Washington Post*, "provided safe passage to the paramilitary column and effectively sealed off the area."<sup>1</sup> "Chengue died that day," wrote *Semana* magazine.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the expansion of paramilitary control in the area in 1997, guerrilla groups exercised control over many areas, and still are present in some zones. Córdoba and Sucre are areas of tremendous concentration of land, where large landowners are constantly trying to expand their land holdings and peasant farmers are attempting to keep control of their small plots, which lack of clear titling and violence makes precarious or impossible. The Colombian government's Ombudsman's office (*Defensoría del Pueblo*) has highlighted the critical role of land in the conflict affecting Córdoba, explaining that "control of territory is the principal reason why the civilian population continues to be displaced from its land."<sup>3</sup>

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**Photo by: LWR Colombia, La Alemania farm in San Onofre, Sucre.**

<sup>1</sup> Scott Wilson, "Chronicle of a Massacre Foretold," *Washington Post*, January 28, 2001, <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/auc/chengue.htm>

<sup>2</sup> "The Law of the Fraud," *Semana*, August 21, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Defensoría del Pueblo, Resolución Defensorial No. 058, "Diagnóstico de la Situación de Acceso y Tenencia de la Tierra en el

With outlets on the Caribbean coast, the departments are corridors for arms and drug trafficking, as well as, in some areas, farms for coca production. Although drug trafficking fuels the violence, we were told, “The conflict is not really about drugs. It's about control, control of land, large-scale economic projects, mining, gold, nickel, coal, hydroelectric dams, political control.” The drug trade is a major profit-making scheme to fight for control over, but it is only one of many.

No area of Colombia is more infamous for the close ties of local government officials to paramilitary forces than Córdoba and Sucre. “The political class of the [Caribbean] coast was most tarred by the parapolitics scandal,” according to *Semana*.<sup>4</sup> We heard not only of mayors, members of Congress, and land notaries with paramilitary connections, but even of justice system representatives who tolerated or were colluding with paramilitaries.<sup>5</sup> Of course, there are dedicated local officials, such as one representative of the Ombudsman’s office we met who was diligently, creatively, indeed heroically, seeking to carry out her mission of defending communities at risk. Such officials face grave threats themselves.<sup>6</sup> However, an indigenous leader recounted an experience to us which chillingly

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reveals how the very institutions of the government that are most supposed to protect the citizenry often dramatically fail to do so. When this leader went to the local prosecutors’ office to report a crime against his community by illegal groups, he was asked, “Why are you reporting this to us? You know it’s only going to get back to them [the illegal groups].” When he went again to the prosecutors’ office, undeterred, to report a second crime, he was told, “You smell like a snuffed-out candle” [i.e., dead]. When he went back a third time, he was told, “You can’t register a third complaint, you already have two that have not been resolved.”

Today, still powerful paramilitary successor groups exert control, indeed rule by terror, over both rural and urban areas. We heard from communities still living in fear from Aguilas Negras, Paisas, Rastrojos, Urabeños, and other paramilitary successor groups. Again and again, we heard that “son los mismos,” these are the same paramilitaries as before. And the violent abuses they as well as guerrilla groups commit in the area has intensified from 2008-2010, according to the government’s own Ombudsman’s office.<sup>7</sup>

In the years since the partial paramilitary demobilization in 2005, the government has failed to respond to the newly escalating paramilitary violence in these areas of the country. After two biology students from well-connected Bogotá families were killed in January 2011 by paramilitaries while visiting the area to study its ecosystems, the resulting outcry finally led the

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Departamento de Córdoba,” December 29, 2010, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> “El tarjetón de la para-política,” *Semana*, May 16, 2009, <http://www.semana.com/nacion/tarjeton-parapolitica/124055-3.aspx>; see also León Valencia, “Así fue la infiltración paramilitar de la política en Colombia,” September 6, 2007, <http://www.semana.com/on-line/infiltracion-paramilitar-politica-colombia/106073-3.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Instituto Latinoamericano para una Sociedad y un Derecho Alternativos and MOVICE, “Desplazamiento forzado y legalización del despojo en San Onofre,” 2010.

<sup>6</sup> “Lluvia de amenazas contra funcionarios de la Defensoría del Pueblo,” *Semana*, August 13, 2009, <http://www.semana.com/problemas-sociales/lluvia-amenazas-contra-funcionarios-defensoria-del-pueblo/127369-3.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> Defensoría del Pueblo, Resolución Defensorial No. 058, “Diagnóstico de la Situación de Acceso y Tenencia de la Tierra en el Departamento de Córdoba,” December 29, 2010, p. 21.

government to send a special deployment of the army to Córdoba, in “Operation Troya.” Before those two high-profile murders, the Ombudsman’s office had issued several dire risk assessments in July and August 2010 calling for an “early warning” to be circulated to prompt government action, but this produced little in the way of results. “There were more than 500 people killed in Córdoba in 2010. **But where was the government when all of those other people were killed? They only care when it is one of their own,” a local campesino leader told us.**

**In rural areas, these paramilitary groups are often allied with or are in the pay of local large landowners who use them to terrify poor farming communities into abandoning their lands.** The illegal groups act like local authorities, demanding protection money or “taxes,” controlling the sale of agricultural products such as yucca, which they force farmers to sell at low prices, requiring residents to carry out forced unpaid labor to fix roads, establishing curfews, forcibly recruiting minors, outlawing homosexuality and demanding allegiance, on pain of death, to their band rather than competing bands. We heard about rape of young girls, and how families send girls 10 or 12 and over away to protect them. “No one dares talk about it, no one dares denounce it.” While the great majority of complaints we heard about were regarding the paramilitaries, we heard from one man who was being forced to displace, for the sixth time, this time by guerrillas who demanded protection payments out of his reach.

In the larger city of Barranquilla, after the 2005 demobilization, several thousand demobilized paramilitaries settled in the poorer areas of the city. There they took control of the drug trade and sought to expand local drug consumption in order to create a more profitable local market. In these neighborhoods, the Paisas and Rastrojos, drawn from demobilized paramilitaries, are competing for territory. They establish control over areas by recruiting local young men and involving young women in prostitution. They announce their control by graffiti and distributing pamphlets that establish curfews, single out individuals with threats, and call for LGBT community members, members of competing bands and others they view as undesirable to leave areas. The police either fail to act to arrest them or appear to be in collusion. “The SIJIN [police intelligence units], are all over this neighborhood where the groups operate, but they don’t do anything to stop it.”

**While these illegal groups focus on criminal activity, just like paramilitaries before the partial demobilization, they have a political agenda in that they target human rights defenders, rural community leaders, and others who organize for the rights of their communities.** “They know I am a defender,” said one human rights activist in Barranquilla. “They have me in their sight, I see them trailing me.” Their curfews and other restrictions make it difficult for defenders and community activists to do their work in the poor neighborhoods where these illegal groups rule. “And it wears us down, because then we have our families saying, why don't you just leave this kind of work.” One human rights defender told us she had received a threatening phone call on her cellphone, and when she returned the phone call, the police’s GAULA unit answered.

It was disheartening to hear social workers dedicated to neighborhood health and nutrition programs discuss the threats and intimidation with which they live. These individuals represent some of the best social interventions in poor communities, yet they are afraid to carry out their work. Many live in the same neighborhoods they work in, and so cannot easily leave when threats increase. Their vulnerability was notable, and official protection solutions for these social workers were nonexistent.

In Sucre, the Movement for Victims of State Violence, which champions the cause of victims of army and paramilitary violence, has been brutally attacked. “We have received more than 60 attacks and threats, and two of our leaders have been killed,” said a MOVICE leader. “And nothing has been done to stop it. We don't know where to turn.” The violence directed against MOVICE Sucre came in the wake of a public hearing that the Colombian Congress's human rights commission held in the town of San Onofre in which residents not only denounced paramilitary brutality but also the direct involvement of local leaders. Following the hearing, and as some local leaders were investigated for links to paramilitaries, threats escalated against MOVICE. One local human rights leader affiliated with MOVICE, Carmelo Agamez, who had denounced paramilitary crimes, was arrested on trumped up charges of being involved with paramilitaries himself.<sup>8</sup> He has served over two years in jail while waiting for his case to be tried, and LAWG and LWR were able to visit him in jail. “If at least we could reduce impunity for these crimes against us, that would help,” a MOVICE leader told us.

Indigenous communities in Córdoba have borne the brunt of much of the recent violence. The Zenú indigenous community has seen 3 members killed in 2008, 12 in 2009, and 16 in 2010.<sup>9</sup> According to the Ombudsman's office, members of this indigenous group “fear being recognized as Zenú by the illegal armed actors, because they can be murdered for the sole fact of being indigenous.”<sup>10</sup>

## **The Free Trade Agreement Will Escalate the Conflict**

We asked some of LWR's partners how the pending FTA would affect the situation in Sucre and Córdoba. “It will escalate the conflict,” we were told emphatically by small farmer leaders. Because the area has several ports that will benefit from expanded exports from the FTA, land will increase in value, and there will be incentives to expand crops like African palm and to expand mining. In theory that sounds like it could have a positive economic impact. But in an area still in intense conflict, with Mafioso-like bands preying on the population, some of those seeking to profit will employ the usual means to expand their access to valuable resources: brute violence. To spell it out: they will employ paramilitaries to terrorize communities to flee land or sell it cheaply so that they can expand their landholdings for large-scale production of export crops, cattle and extractive industries.

Meanwhile, the traditional crops planted by small farmers will be harshly affected by the flood of subsidized U.S. agricultural commodities. One study by Colombian economists estimates that small producers will experience losses of 16 percent of their net income from agriculture as a result of the FTA, but that those who depend more on products that compete with agricultural imports could experience a fall in income of between 48 to 70 percent.<sup>11</sup> Newly returning communities that had been displaced, unless they receive technical assistance and support to do otherwise, will grow the traditional crops that will be undercut by the FTA.

## **There is no adequate plan in place from either the Colombian or the U.S. government to**

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<sup>8</sup> See Human Rights First, *Baseless Prosecutions of Human Rights Defenders in Colombia: In the Dock and Under the Gun*, February 2009, <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/090211-HRD-colombia-eng.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Defensoría Delegada para la Evaluación de Riesgos de la Población Civil como Consecuencia del Conflicto Armado,” Sistema de Alertas Tempranas (SAT), Nota de Seguimiento No. 011-11, Sexta Nota al Informe de Riesgo No. 006-06 A.I., April 26, 2011, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Santiago Perry, Fernando Barberi, and Luis Jorge Garay, “Public Policy Proposals for the Development of the Small Farm Economy in Colombia,” January 11, 2011, p. 6.

## help small farmers weather the impact of the FTA.

### The State Is Barely There

In many parts of Córdoba and Sucre, the presence of the civilian state is barely felt. The police are limited to urban areas and in the countryside, the army may be the only representative of the government that interacts with the population. Even the few teachers and nurses who had staffed rural schools and clinics have been forced in many cases to withdraw because of violence. Although part of this area is a “consolidation zone” in which the Colombian government has announced it is expanding the presence of the civilian government, this has not yet become reality. For example, a local nongovernmental leader attended a meeting presided by the military regarding programs his organization runs to help with the resettlement of displaced persons. When he asked, “Where is Acción Social [the civilian government agency charged with addressing needs of the displaced]?” and indicated his desire to have Acción Social present, the military officer in charge answered, “We are

representing Acción Social,” and then reported the comment to Acción Social, which proceeded to withhold funds from the NGO. Even commenting on the absence of the civilian state can be risky.

“We have knocked on every door, but we have not gotten a single action.”

—Córdoba indigenous leader

The view of what the army’s role *should* be was complicated. We heard from several rural leaders that the increased deployment of the army in Operation Troya was somewhat helpful in temporarily decreasing paramilitary violence, although they worried that when the operation wrapped up in May, the violence would spiral back up. Some returned community members observed that while there is some level of security when military or police are present, as soon as troops leave paramilitaries enter. “It is like clockwork,” one farm leader noted. But the murders haven’t ended, said one indigenous leader. **“We are seeing bodies in the rivers and the vultures in the mountains eating the corpses.”** Other sources told us that when the army would increase its presence, paramilitary violence would actually increase. “When I see more army and police checkpoints, I know that people will be killed” by the illegal groups. “We don’t denounce abuses to the army and police,” said one organizer. The army resists playing the role of protecting communities and preventing displacement. **“Why should we make a base in that area,” one general reportedly said, “just to protect a bunch of mosquitoes and pastures?”**

Government inaction does not stem from lack of knowledge. Risk reports from the Ombudsman’s office for Córdoba, for example, document accurately and with great detail the presence of the illegal armed groups and the abuses inflicted on the civilian population. And local community leaders reach out to both local and national government agencies for help. “We have tried everything, we have knocked on every door,” said one indigenous leader, cataloging the appeals that he had made to local judicial authorities, national judicial authorities, the Ministry of Interior and Justice, and even the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights. “We have knocked on every door, but we have not gotten a single action.”

One community leader in a particularly abandoned part of Córdoba expressed how the government’s failure to deliver basic resources undercuts the social fabric. “We have four years of getting absolutely nothing from the state. I have to tell you the position this puts us

community leaders in. When we get absolutely no results, nothing for our community, people start to turn on us, when we come back [home] with empty hands. If the government doesn't assist us in the countryside, there will be more displacement. The protection I want is social investment. Then, people will have more faith."

A lack of trust in government institutions was underscored by every community with which we met. One local leader of a community affected by displacement and violence noted, "**When officials show up you have to say everything is fine. That's what hurts us the most, being in such a terrible situation and having to say it's all just fine,**" due to fear of reprisal. This lack of trust is particularly understandable for communities who returned to their lands under official government processes, yet have not received the services entitled to them or the protection they desperately need. At the same time communities call for social investment, services, livelihood projects and technical support. And they welcome the presence of local and international nongovernmental organizations, which provide, "a needed refuge," as one community leader explained. One leader of the returned community at Finca Alemania, referred to below, explained that after their leader, Rogelio Martinez, was assassinated, "Our first reaction was to not return but since [national and international organizations] called us together, accompanied us, had meetings with us, we were more energized to stay." "We see the return of international organizations [to Córdoba] as an important sign for our communities," one academic working with local organizations explained.

Meeting these needs in areas where the state is absent or mistrusted will require creative approaches to development, including direct alliances between local communities and international organizations. These alliances may serve as first critical steps toward rebuilding communities, building trust and ultimately engaging with state agencies. These alliances and interventions are also key to protection. Rural communities consistently elevated livelihood and development programs as equally important to their security and capacity to remain on their land as are more traditional protection measures.

### **Far from Safely Returning, People Are Still Being Displaced**

LAWG and LWR met with a number of communities that have returned to their lands or have been relocated after displacement but are in danger of being newly displaced. Some twelve such communities are grouped in a Córdoba land working group.<sup>12</sup> We found that these communities' grip on their land is perilous, as they are surrounded by illegal armed groups and landowners attempting to force them off their land. The lack of proper land titling, even in the cases of land granted by the government's land reform agency, makes them especially vulnerable.

In 2010 the Ombudsman's office issued an important resolution (058) exposing the continued

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<sup>12</sup> The Córdoba Working Group on Land and Territory consists of representatives from 12 communities that group over 14,150 families that occupy just over 130,000 hectares of land in the department. These communities have all suffered loss of land and displacement due to human rights violations as well as additional factors: 1. Burdensome credit incurred prior to displacement, unpayable due to the economic loss suffered as a result of such displacement; 2. Lack of land titles and / or formalized land titles; 3. Exploitation of resources on their land without prior consultation; 4. Lack of formalized status for families living within the perimeters of the national park "Nudo de Paramillo." The Working Group represents the major organized civil society effort around issues of land in Córdoba at this time. As such members are extremely vulnerable to threats and violence.

displacement, violence, and the links to insecure land titling in Córdoba. The experiences of the Córdoba land working group represent the bulk of case studies highlighted in the document and group members testified publicly in Bogotá at the resolution's launch. In the resolution the Ombudsman's office exhorts government agencies to address these urgent problems and lists a series of specific recommendations. However, to date the Ombudsman's office has not managed to use the resolution effectively as a tool to prod government agencies to action. Agencies such as the Ministry of Agriculture and the land titling agency Incoder, despite their awareness of the resolution, have failed to implement its recommendations.

Several of the more than dozen land leaders who have been assassinated since the start of the Santos Administration have been from Córdoba. After we returned from our trip, in May 2011, Martha Gaibao, the leader of a Córdoba movement of campesinos seeking to reclaim land, was assassinated. She was a leader among some 100 displaced families who were granted land in La Jagua by the government; when the community could not return there due to illegal armed groups, they relocated to another area in La Apartada where they continued to be threatened, and where Gaibao was then killed.<sup>13</sup> The national ombudsman, Volmar Pérez, lamented that "it seems to be a form of armed pressure to block the process of returning lands, and an act of intimidation directed against people who are demanding respect and guarantees for their land rights."<sup>14</sup> **In this context, implementing the land law to return land to displaced people, without providing real protection and security, puts the people the law intends to benefit at grave risk.** While the Colombian government recently agreed to work with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in developing a plan for protection for land leaders, our trip findings indicate that real protection for leaders and communities remains a distant prospect.

Even the most high-profile returns are not safe. After the paramilitary demobilization, the government's National Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (CNRR) made a show of returning land to displaced persons in the Costa de Oro farm in Tierralta, which was symbolically important, as it was the first land returned by Salvatore Mancuso as part of the Justice and Peace demobilization process. The land had been given to campesinos by Colombia's land reform agency, but Carlos Castaño's troops burned down their houses and then Salvatore Mancuso took over the farm. The CNRR returned the farm to community members in a ceremony attended by various government agencies, but then the state failed to protect the returned community, which continued to be terrorized by paramilitary groups and large landowners seeking to expand their holdings. Indeed, men claiming to represent Mancuso demanded that community members sell back their land, and when they refused, one of the community leaders was murdered. After a second murder, families began displacing again. "They [the state] abandoned us to the mercy of these groups."

LAWG and LWR visited La Alemania farm in San Onofre, Sucre. In 1997, the Colombian government provided land to an organized group of landless campesinos, who took out a loan for 30 percent of the property's cost and for cattle. "We were filled with happiness." In March 1998,

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<sup>13</sup> "Una nueva víctima que reclama por sus tierras," Verdad Abierta, May 5, 2011, <http://verdadabierta.com/component/content/article/199-nunca-mas/3238-una-nueva-victima-que-reclamaba-por-sus-tierras>.

<sup>14</sup> "Asesinan a líder campesina que reclamaba devolución de tierras," *El Espectador*, 11 mayo 2011.



however, paramilitary warlord Rodrigo Cadena arrived, and set up a base with a hundred troops in the middle of the farm. The paramilitaries killed five cooperative members and disappeared one, and killed four of their children, and forced some of the families to work for them. Finally, in 2000-01, the community displaced. The farm is the site of several mass graves, as the paramilitaries killed and buried some of their victims right on the farm. “Right here where we are sitting [in the community shelter], they killed them. I saw the blood.” Local politicians came to celebrate parties with the paramilitaries on the farm.

After the demobilization, some community members decided to return. But then their leader Rogelio Martinez was slain in May 2010,<sup>15</sup> allegedly by paramilitaries, in a high-profile crime that exposed the lack of protection for returning land leaders countrywide. The army is posting some soldiers near the farm, but they are not patrolling the perimeter of the community which would give the community greater protection. In the meantime, most community members are living elsewhere and traveling back to the farm to work, while a few live in the already-falling apart temporary huts that Acción Social provided. And community members are still liable for the loans that they took out for the land and cattle, before they were displaced and lost everything. The loan burden puts profitable farming out of reach for the community and dramatically lessens the chance they will remain on the land.

“I am keeping my head down. Anyone who wants to raise their voice on land issues will be put down with a bullet.” – leader of displaced community in Córdoba

In addition to increased protection by the military, members of Finca Alemania list a handful of reasonable interventions that would help ensure a full and safe return to the farm: Investment in a school, cancellation of the loan they acquired before displacement, technical and financial support for productive agriculture projects, improving the farm’s main access road which becomes nearly impassible after heavy rains, and electricity.

It is worth noting the quality of life at Finca Alemania before paramilitaries arrived compared to the farm’s current state of decline. Community members described their more comfortable homes on the farm, the multiple heads of cattle they owned and the long-lost luxuries of modern life that enhanced the farm. When asked what she missed most about her life on the farm before displacement, one woman—living in a small and deteriorating temporary shelter—answered, “Electricity! I miss being able to plug in the blender to make juice or have a television to watch like I used to.” When the paramilitaries left the farm they literally dismantled it, shipping out the roof tops of homes, raw materials and hundreds of valuable heads of cattle in trucks.

### **Lack of Protection for Human Rights Defenders**

As communities are lacking protection, so too are local human rights leaders. While the Ministry of the Interior has a protection plan to which individual human rights defenders as well as human rights groups can apply, it is slow and inadequate. Only those who are already registered

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<sup>15</sup> Oficina del Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos, comunicado de prensa, May 19, 2010.

can receive protection; according to one local government representative, “There are people who have been threatened for a year who we can’t get out.” One human rights lawyer who was receiving serious threats was told, “We won’t be able to do much for you, and if we do give you protection, it won’t be for long.” Typically, at best human rights defenders from Córdoba and Sucre are offered help relocating to Bogotá or another city. But many do not want to leave, and as more human rights activists leave, the population is left even more defenseless. “We want protection that allows us to continue to work for our communities.” And as MOVICE Sucre leaders pointed out, real protection starts not with bulletproof vests, or exile, but with serious investigations into the threats and attacks against them.

### **What Can Be Done?**

What can be done to address violence in such a lawless area? There are no magic solutions, but there are paths to strengthening the rule of law and protecting the civilian population.

### **Recommendations to the Colombian government:**

- Before implementing land return law, expand protection for communities that have already returned to their land and are in danger. This needs to be done in consultation with those communities, but solutions may include investigations into threats and attacks, army patrolling around perimeters of the community, investing in community-based rural development projects, greater presence of a local ombudsman, and properly legalizing land titles. Indeed, one important lesson from the Córdoba/Sucre area is that lack of clear titling invites violence, and must be resolved.
- Develop a plan to protect returning communities with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and UNHCR offices, the Ombudsman’s office, the Ministry of Interior and Justice, the Defense Ministry, the Ministry of Agriculture, and broad representation from internally displaced persons associations, small farmers’ associations, and associations of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, and human rights groups. Implement that plan locally in close consultation with the communities that have chosen to return.
- Regularly establish working groups between government agencies and local communities that are most at risk. Such working groups should include local and national representatives from military and civilian agencies, with decision-making power, thus avoiding the “pass the buck” situation that often results from ad-hoc appeals to one agency or another. These working groups should include representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, INCODER (land tenure agency), Ombudsman’s office, Defense Ministry, Ministry of Interior and Justice, among other agencies.
- Actively suspend, investigate and prosecute security force members—military and police—collaborating with paramilitary successor groups, making an example in areas of high paramilitary presence.
- Expand the presence of the Ombudsman’s office, but also ensure that its risk reports and early warnings compel government action by military and civilian agencies.
- Expand investigations, not only into the illegal armed groups, but into the local politicians and business owners who may be promoting violent land takeovers.
- Urge police and military to prioritize captures of paramilitary successor groups and protection of civilian population.
- Acknowledge the extent of the problem of paramilitary successor groups. If the national government were to consistently admit the extent of the problem, rather than denying it,

it would encourage government agencies to make steps to control it: the police to take action, or Acción Social to register new internally displaced persons instead of denying their claims because “paramilitaries no longer exist.” The Santos Administration should reinforce its tentative steps in this direction.

**Recommendations to the U.S. government:**

- Encourage the Colombian government to investigate, prosecute and capture paramilitary successor group members and their financial backers, as well as to systematically suspend, investigate and prosecute security force members who collaborate with or tolerate their abuses. Make clear that military assistance will be suspended if progress is not made on this urgent goal.
- Link assistance for implementing land return legislation to existence of a workable plan, with an associated budget, by the Colombian government to protect returning leaders and communities, and assertively advocate for its implementation.
- Encourage and fund programs to support development projects and protection initiatives chosen by returning communities. In USAID’s portfolio, prioritize sustainable productive projects in communities already returning to or newly returning to their lands. Measure the success of these projects, among other indicators, upon ability of community to remain on their land.
- Encourage the Colombian government to establish and implement a program for debt forgiveness for internally displaced farmers who never received reprieve from government loan programs for debt incurred before displacement.
- Do not approve the Free Trade Agreement which will exacerbate the conflict and undermine small farmers and returning communities.
- Urge the Colombian government to prioritize extension of civilian agencies of the government into conflict zones prioritized via the Consolidation Action (CCAI) program, which the U.S. government extensively funds. The CCAI programs are supposed to expand both military and civilian presence in conflict zones but in fact often appear to be military-led.