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SPECIFIC GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

Written statement\* submitted by Pax Christi International, a non-governmental  
organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[3 February 2003]

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\*This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

PROTECTING THE HUMAN RIGHTS INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS AND  
SUPPORTING CIVIL PEACE INITIATIVES, ESPECIALLY IN COLOMBIA

Pax Christi International expresses grave concern over the condition of internally displaced persons (IDPs) throughout the world and the violation of their human rights, especially in situations of conflict like that of Colombia.

While recognising the sovereignty and autonomy of each member state, Pax Christi also affirms for every person the inherent right to life, regardless of citizenship or national origin, under the protection of law (Principle 10 of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement). It also asserts that national governments have the duty to ensure this right not only for their own citizens but for IDPs residing within their borders as well.

A September 2002 Pax Christi delegation, meeting with groups of displaced persons in the Chocó region of Colombia, witnessed the subhuman conditions under which many people are living, some since 1996. Newer arrivals had fled the region of Bojayá after a bloody confrontation between paramilitary forces and FARC guerrillas on 2 May 2002, leaving about 119 civilians dead. As the fighting continued, surviving townspeople could not bury their dead loved one and neighbours for several days, leaving their bodies to decompose in the hot climate, thus contaminating the water supply and creating dangerous sanitary conditions.

Ongoing attacks by armed groups have left Bojayá a ghost town, its population largely evacuated to Quibdó and other nearby areas. More displaced persons were expected to arrive as the conflict continued, putting an even more impossible burden on the Chocó region's scant infrastructure. The Pax Christi delegation observed at two locations the lack of basic sanitation, food and privacy, particularly for women and children, in contravention of clear standards for living conditions, including a minimum standard of access to essential food and potable water, basic shelter and housing, appropriate clothing, essential medical services and sanitation (Guiding Principle 19 on Internal Displacement).

Pax Christi International calls on national governments and the international community to ensure the protection of civilians in areas of known risk such as this one. The Bojayá massacre was but another incident in the ongoing conflict in exactly the same area as previously documented in the 28 February 2002 report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (E/CN.4/2002/17). The High Commission report specifically refers to occurrences in this region, including the massacre of 15 passengers on a bus in early December 2001, allegedly by paramilitaries. Earlier visits to the area by the ombudsman for human rights, signalling the seriousness of the situation, were also documented. However, "national and departmental authorities have shown an alarming lack of interest in taking supportive or preventive action" (231).

Pax Christi International notes the High Commissioner's observation on this occasion that "the degeneration of the conflict, combined with the lack of a comprehensive strategy, has led to an increase in internal displacement" (223). The report had gone on to recommend further research on preventive measures and strategies to bring peace to the region and an end to this extended conflict.

Local analysts in Quibdó observe that the violence occurring in these rural areas is not random but rather occurs precisely where there are outside interests in the region. They identify four “mega-projects” as having probable links to recent violence: the mono-cultivation of the African palm for the palm oil industry, the expansion of illegal crop production, the development of a trans-oceanic replacement for the Panama Canal in the region and opening up a highway from the north which would allow for easier transport of drugs, guns and other materials.

These links lead Pax Christi International to also call on non-state actors, who are developing projects in the region, to be responsible to implement the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement in their efforts to promote such projects.

Finally, Pax Christi International recognises the promising peace initiatives that are being developed at a local level and even in the context of the violent struggle and displacement. These kind of civil initiatives are often the only way civilians can resist pressure by armed groups. Such peace initiatives can also motivate civilians to question and resist the presence of armed groups in their communities. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that communities working on local peace initiatives often undergo a social process whereby incentive is provided for the strengthening of local democratic structures, social cohesion and the formation of local leadership.

Outstanding examples of this kind of initiative include the movement of Civil Non-Armed Resistance in the indigenous communities of the department of Cauca. Also, the Cauca government’s efforts to promote the social and economical development of rural communities are of great value for the process of peace building in the region.

We, therefore, call upon the members of this Commission to recommend that:

1. National governments and the international community take every measure to ensure the safety of civilians in areas that are of known risk.
2. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement be widely promoted wherever violent conflict exists and communities are uprooted, along with a firm commitment by all actors to implement them.
3. Non-state actors, in their development of projects in areas of known conflict, ensure the implementation of said Principles in all their efforts to promote such projects.
4. Efforts continue for the development of comprehensive programs for the physical protection of civilians and the assurance of their human rights, particularly where key parties in the conflict are non-state actors.
5. Careful study of the causes of violence in these regions be carried out with a view toward preventing such violence in the future.
6. The international community support effective and locally based civil peace initiatives, both politically and economically, as much as possible.