As Colombia Emerges from Decades of War, Migration Challenges Mount

APRIL 13, 2017  PROFILE  |  By Dayra Carvajal

In December 2016, Colombia formally brought to a close a 52-year civil war that resulted in the deaths of more than 220,000 people, the flight of more than 7.6 million within and beyond the country’s borders, and an incalculable cost to the economy and public well-being. Approved by Congress after four years of negotiations between the Colombian government and the left-wing rebel group known as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the historic peace deal ended the longest-running civil conflict in the Western Hemisphere, one that has taken a huge toll on Colombian society, most profoundly in the area of migration.

Violence-driven displacement in rural areas has given Colombia the dubious distinction of hosting the most internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world, with 7.3 million individuals registered as of 2016—more than 15 percent of the national population. In addition, hundreds of thousands of Colombians are estimated to live abroad as refugees, primarily in neighboring countries. Ongoing violence by other guerrilla and paramilitary groups is making return difficult for these refugees.

Historically known for large-scale emigration, Colombia experienced little immigration during the 19th and 20th centuries as a result of conditions including political violence, recurring economic crises, excess labor, and poor infrastructure. Instead, millions of Colombians sought refuge abroad or emigrated in search of better opportunities during that period. Faced with a sizeable diaspora, the Andean country has slowly adopted a comprehensive migration system targeted at improving services for emigrants. In recent years Colombia has worked to attract highly skilled foreign labor, in line with an economic model that prioritizes foreign investment.

As the country enters a post-conflict phase and turns its focus to peace and stability, addressing the main causes of internal displacement and developing effective strategies to improve immigration services will be key. Colombia is also grappling with a number of international migration issues, including transiting flows of irregular migrants from beyond the continent and a humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. This country profile outlines the historical trends that have defined Colombia’s migration history and policy, and examines the current and future migration challenges facing a country unsteadily emerging from war.
New World Gateway

Considered a strategic gateway to South America, the area now encompassed by Colombia began experiencing migration from Mesoamerica as early as 14,000 BC, providing a passage for hunter-gatherers to gradually populate other parts of the continent in the pre-Columbian era. In the early 16th century, a leading indigenous group in the area called the Muisca became the inspiration for El Dorado, the gold-rush legend that would fuel immigration and Spanish conquest of the continent for centuries.

Spanish colonization proved to be a defining event in Colombian history. By the 17th century, 95 percent of the indigenous population had been killed off by settlers or newly introduced diseases. A major slave market emerged and Spanish colonists brought an estimated 120,000 African slaves. The vast majority of settlers were of Andalusian and Basque descent, as immigration of non-Spaniards was highly regulated. Otherwise, Colombia was not a recipient of large migratory flows between the 16th and 18th centuries.

Immigration to Colombia remained limited following its independence in 1819. Over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, occasional migrant flows arrived from Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Germany, Italy, Spain, France, and Japan, but Colombia did not experience the same large-scale immigration seen elsewhere in Latin America.

Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian immigrants first arrived in Colombia in the 1880s. An estimated 5,000 to 10,000 Middle Easterners settled between 1890 and 1930, making them the second-largest immigrant group. These communities transformed commerce and trade in Colombia and had significant political involvement in the first half of the 20th century. Although the flow of Arab-Christian immigrants decreased in the late 1900s, a large number of descendant communities remain active.

European immigration to Colombia increased between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries. Two waves of Jewish immigrants settled in Colombia between 1830 and 1938, contributing significantly to regional financial sectors through trade and business. Germans arrived in the mid-1800s, and by the early 1900s were leading revitalization of the coffee, tobacco, and banking industries. After World War II, many European technicians and agricultural experts migrated to Colombia. Other immigrant communities that developed successful enterprises were the Spanish, French, Italians, and Americans, who settled in the capital of Bogotá for the most part, and the Japanese who settled in the Cauca Valley region.

Regional and hemispheric migration flows have prevailed in Colombia since the 1960s. Venezuela, the United States, and Ecuador have been the leading countries of origin for immigrants in recent years (see Figure 1). According to the United Nations, more than 133,000 immigrants lived in Colombia in 2015, representing 0.2 percent of the population of 47 million. A substantial number are returning migrants holding dual citizenship.

Figure 1. Top Ten Origin Countries for the Immigrant Population in Colombia, 2015
Civil War Deters Immigration

Despite efforts beginning in 1953 to promote immigration by offering tax exemptions and land to foreign settlers, most would-be immigrants were deterred by violence and the uneven economy. Political violence has been present through much of Colombia’s history. Rooted in high levels of inequality and the concentration of land in the hands of a small group of elites, conflict was exacerbated by the political exclusion of nontraditional movements, government neglect of underdeveloped rural areas, the privatization of natural resources, and drug trafficking. Rebels aimed to represent the rural poor against Colombia’s wealthy families, who for decades have controlled the government and much of the private sector.

The protracted fight for political and economic control led to La Violencia (1948-58), a civil war that instigated the emergence of armed guerrillas in the 1960s. Guerrillas rose up to fight the power-sharing agreement between the Liberal and Conservative parties, which ended the war and eliminated political competition while failing to address land reform and social justice. Conflict escalated during the 1980s and 1990s due to the rise of drug cartels and paramilitary groups. The FARC, one of Colombia’s strongest and oldest guerrilla groups, and others have used profits from drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, and natural resource exploitation to finance their fight.

After four years of negotiations, the Colombian government reached a peace agreement with the FARC in 2016. In early 2017, it also initiated peace talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN), the second-largest guerrilla group. Although the peace agreement symbolizes unprecedented progress, the country has a long way to go to achieve stability. And addressing internal displacement will be a fundamental challenge throughout implementation of the peace deal. Among the key issues: Recognition and protection of the rights of victims, and allowing them to participate in implementation of the accords.
Highly Concentrated Emigration Flows

Large-scale emigration from Colombia began in the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century, owing to lack of jobs and economic opportunities and the armed conflict. Venezuela, the United States, and Ecuador were the leading countries of destination for migrants in the late 1960s and early 1970s. An estimated 557,000 Colombians migrated to Venezuela, the United States, Ecuador, Panama, Canada, Peru, Chile, and Bolivia between 1963 and 1973, according to the Administrative Department of National Statistics of Colombia (DANE). In the late 1990s, as the armed conflict progressed, Spain and other European countries also became popular destinations for Colombians. Approximately 80 percent of Colombian emigrants in 2012 lived in the United States, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Spain. More recently, immigration restrictions and changing socioeconomic conditions have encouraged Colombians to move to other South American countries such as Chile, which experienced a 47 percent increase in Colombian immigrants between 2010 and 2015.

Emigration to Venezuela and Ecuador

A boom in oil production and economic growth drew many Colombians to Venezuela and Ecuador in the 1970s and 1980s. Amid the armed conflict, an estimated 1 million Colombians migrated to Venezuela during the last four decades, making them the largest immigrant group there. Many have returned to Colombia since the start of Venezuela’s economic and humanitarian crisis in 2015. In Ecuador, nearly 90,000 Colombians accounted for half the total immigrant population and 98 percent of refugees in 2011. As more Colombians return and Venezuelans flee poor conditions at home, traditional migration dynamics in the region are shifting.

Emigration to the United States

Facilitated by the U.S. Immigration Act of 1965, which abolished national-origin quotas favoring European migration, approximately 150,000 Colombians had migrated to the United States by the early 1970s. The first large wave included low- and highly skilled workers who would facilitate future Colombian migration. In 2014, an estimated 1.2 million residents claiming Colombian heritage resided in the United States, making them the seventh-largest Hispanic group in the country. Colombian immigrants, who numbered 699,000 in 2015, represented the largest group of South Americans in the United States, accounting for roughly 25 percent of all South Americans.

Emigration to Spain

Starting in the 1990s, Spain attracted a large number of Colombian migrants energized by the shared language and growing economic opportunities there and elsewhere in Europe. More recently, Spain’s sagging economy and high unemployment have driven some Colombians to return or migrate elsewhere in Europe. Some 136,000 Colombians lived in Spain in 2016, down from approximately 145,500 in 2015, according to the Spanish National Center of Statistics.

Figure 2. Top Ten Destinations for Colombian Immigrants, 2015

[Figure 2]
Migration in a Conflict and Post-Conflict Landscape

Colombia’s migration policy and institutional framework have evolved slowly. Despite various efforts to regulate migration and develop initiatives to promote immigration, it was not until the early 2000s that Colombia adopted far-reaching migration policies.

Moving Migration from a National-Security Lens

Historically, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs oversaw the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of migration policy, while the Administrative Department of Security (DAS), Colombia’s national security and intelligence agency, served as the main migration control and statistical agency. DAS regulated migration flows and gathered data from a national security perspective, using intelligence and criminal investigations to identify risks and threats to the state.

DAS retained control of migration management for decades, until corruption scandals led to its dismantling in 2011. In 2009, the government began to divorce migration regulation from the national security apparatus. And in 2011, the national migration system was created by law, and Migración Colombia emerged as the leading migration management agency, responsible for controlling and overseeing population flows into and out of the country. The 2010-14 National Development Plan and Integral Migratory Policy set further guidelines for migration management in border areas, promoted bilateral labor migration, encouraged return of Colombians abroad, and improved services for immigrants.

Connecting with the Diaspora

Today, Colombia remains a country of emigration and the largest sending country of migrants in South America. Some 4.7 million Colombians lived abroad in 2012, according to Ministry of Foreign Affairs
estimates. In 2015, Colombia received US $4.6 billion in remittances, making it the fourth largest recipient in Latin America (after Mexico, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic), and the second fastest-growing recipient in the region. The government has set up a number of programs to reconnect with and provide services to the Colombian diaspora, including Colombia Nos Une, RedEsColombia, Plan Comunidad Exterior, and Colombiano Seguro en el Exterior. These and other programs provide guidance on social security, housing, banking services, remittances, and degree recognition, and foster connections among the Colombian diaspora.

**Internal Displacement and Colombian Refugees**

Meanwhile, far more Colombians are displaced by violence within their own country than live abroad. There are 7.3 million registered IDPs in Colombia, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). At least half of those displaced, primarily from rural areas, have fled to slums of the 27 largest cities. An estimated 340,000 Colombians live as refugees abroad, primarily in Venezuela, Ecuador, the United States, Canada, Panama, and Costa Rica. While many refugees and IDPs are formally registered with UNHCR, a large number of Colombians living abroad remain unregistered and as a result are unable to access basic services in their host countries.

As Colombia continues to emerge from civil war, a number of migration-related issues have emerged to test the country’s newfound migration management capacity.

By taking control of vast portions of territory over the course of the war, rebel groups forced millions to flee their homes. Fighting between rebel groups, paramilitary organizations, and Colombian armed forces caused an uptick in displacement over the last two decades. As the FARC now abandons its long-occupied territories, remaining rebel groups have stepped into the vacuum, resulting in further displacement and violence in areas where state presence is almost nonexistent. In the first three months of 2017, more than 3,500 people were displaced along the Pacific coast as paramilitary groups such as the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia continue fighting for control of territories where Afro-Colombians and indigenous peoples live.

Efforts to protect the millions of IDPs have led to the creation of mechanisms to support humanitarian response, reparation, and integration. Several programs and laws, shaped in cooperation with international organizations, have been adopted to provide sustainable solutions:

- **Law 387 of 1997:** Recognized the existence of internal displacement and sought to adopt measures to prevent forced displacement, including attention, protection, and socioeconomic stabilization of displaced peoples.
- **In 2011,** the Law of Victims and Restitution of Land for the first time incorporated a judicial mechanism for the restitution of land seized from or abandoned by victims of the conflict. Since then, it has provided financial assistance, reparation, and a pathway to land restitution for victims. By 2015, the government had restored land to 4,127 families, of a total 81,050 requests. Many land restitution processes must await better conditions.
- **In 2012,** UNHCR and the UN Development Program launched the Transitional Solutions Initiative, a joint program intended to restore communities and facilitate humanitarian assistance for IDPs.
- **Government-provided emergency assistance is available for IDPs in urban centers,** for a three-month period. Many IDPs are not aware of their rights, and as a result, do not register for assistance. This has
led to the establishment of informal settlements which sometimes become hotspots for drug trafficking and extortion. Despite precarious conditions in urban settings, most IDPs in cities expect to establish permanent residence there and are reluctant to return or relocate to rural areas.

While the flow of refugees to neighboring countries has decreased in recent years, the need for protection remains high. Continued violence in some parts of Colombia makes voluntary repatriation unpopular for most refugees.

**Colombia-Venezuela Migrant Crisis**

Although Colombians have been migrating to Venezuela since the 1970s, this pattern began to reverse in 2004. The first wave of Venezuelan immigrants was comprised of oil industry professionals who migrated in the aftermath of mass layoffs from the state-run oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA). A second wave, starting in 2010, included Venezuelan executives and investors seeking to protect their assets from rising inflation, currency devaluation, and state nationalization policies. A third wave of professionals and students arrived following widespread antigovernment protests in 2014. The Association of Venezuelans in Colombia estimates 1.2 million Venezuelans reside in Colombia, legally and illegally.

Amid Venezuela’s rapidly deteriorating economic and political situation, which brought hyperinflation, unemployment, and food shortages, migration flows have sharply increased over the past two years. The current wave is mostly comprised of Colombian returnees. The Venezuelan government closed the border in 2015 and deported hundreds of Colombians, after accusing Colombians of causing shortages by smuggling goods across the border. Thousands of Colombians and Colombo-Venezuelans returned voluntarily due to the state of emergency declared in Venezuela. Upon the reopening of the border in July 2016, an estimated 200,000 people rushed into Colombia to buy food and medicine and access health services no longer available to many in Venezuela.

Official data show an uptick in numbers of arrivals from Venezuela. Some 379,000 Venezuelans entered Colombia in 2015, up from 251,000 in 2012. While most were temporary stays, a growing number have remained, with almost 67,700 Venezuelans who entered in 2016 remaining, up from 13,500 in 2012. Applications for permanent residency have more than doubled since 2012, increasing from around 7,000 to 15,500 in 2016.

Local authorities in Colombia have raised concerns about the numbers of immigrants and returnees seeking access to basic services. Some of the most pressing challenges include reallocating limited resources to accommodate the needs of migrants, returnees, and the local population. At the national level, the Colombian government has increased oversight of irregular migrants from Venezuela and has issued special border transit cards (Tarjetas de Tránsito Fronterizo) to facilitate and track migrant flows between Colombia and Venezuela.

**Irregular Migration from Beyond South America**

Due to its strategic location, Colombia has also seen increases in irregular mixed migration flows from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, making it a major transit country for extracontinental migrants in recent years. Migrants from Africa and Asia often fly into countries with relatively lax visa policies such as Ecuador, then travel by land through South and Central America toward the United States and Canada. As the only land gateway from South America to Central America, Colombia receives a considerable amount of
Unauthorized migrants who arrive via Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador. In 2016, Migración Colombia deported 34,000 unauthorized migrants, the highest number since tracking began in 2011.

Figure 3. Top Five Countries of Origin of Unauthorized Migrants in Colombia, 2016

Irregular migration often coexists with criminal activity in remote border areas where state presence is limited. Most irregular migrants use smuggling networks to pass through Colombia without being intercepted. Smugglers often recruit and use migrants to smuggle drugs over the border. Some migrants request asylum, allowing them to move freely within the country and across borders.

Triggered by the rapprochement between the United States and Cuba and anticipated end of U.S. policies that are uniquely preferential to Cubans, a surge of Cuban migrants arrived in northwest Colombia in 2016, causing a crisis. Key border crossings in the region were closed, leaving hundreds of Cubans and other extracontinental migrants stranded.

Figure 4. Irregular Migration Routes through Colombia
Colombia is also a source of illegal immigration. Major migrant smuggling networks are responsible for facilitating the transit of Colombians with counterfeit visas to North America and Europe. Unauthorized Colombians are also found in large numbers in South America, including Venezuela, Ecuador, Chile, and Peru, with a growing number heading to Chile in particular.

Human trafficking is also an issue of significant concern for Colombian authorities. Although Colombia is predominantly a country of origin for human trafficking, it is also one of transit and destination for traffickers and victims. Sexual exploitation and forced labor account for the majority of victims sent to the Caribbean, the United States, Europe, Asia, and elsewhere in South America.

**Labor Migration**

Flexible labor policies introduced during the 1990s progressively facilitated labor migration to Colombia and helped usher in a flow of foreign investment, multinational companies, and highly skilled professionals. The introduction of a new visa regime in 2004 eased controls on investors and professionals. Work permits
for foreign workers are now regulated by Decree No. 834 of 2013, which eliminated previous restrictions and improved conditions for foreign workers.

Labor migration has increased as the oil, mining, transport, and manufacturing industries have grown, attracting significant foreign investment in recent years. After tourism and temporary stays, labor migration accounted for the third largest flow of foreigners arriving in Colombia in 2015. Venezuela was the top origin for labor migrants to Colombia in 2013, accounting for 20 percent of the total. It was followed by the United States (14.7 percent) and Mexico and Argentina (7.2 percent each).

Colombia has also seen considerable growth in Chinese labor migration over the last decade, owing to the promotion of commercial and cultural ties between the two countries. An estimated 25,000 Chinese resided in Colombia in 2014, up from 10,000 in 2008. This highly skilled labor force works primarily in the oil, telecommunications, timber, and auto industries.

**Brain Drain**

Brain drain is a major issue for Colombia. Nearly one-third (29 percent) of Colombian immigrants living in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in 2011 were college-educated professionals. Spain, the United States, France, Germany, Australia, Brazil, and Argentina have been the leading destinations for highly qualified Colombians. Those with postgraduate or doctoral degrees in engineering and science are particularly likely to emigrate. Although the government has developed initiatives to encourage the return of Colombian professionals, the lack of a comprehensive plan guaranteeing employment, competitive salaries, and further investment in science and research discourages the return of many.

**A Sustainable Peace?**

After Colombian voters narrowly rejected a historic peace deal between the government and the FARC in October 2016, Congress approved a revised version in December 2016. Multiple unsuccessful negotiations over three decades and four years of talks in Cuba finally resulted in a comprehensive agreement to end the war. The deal encompasses a wide range of issues, including agrarian development policy, political participation and inclusion of marginalized groups, victim reparation, and end to the violence. Under UN supervision, 7,000 FARC rebels have demobilized to transition zones and pledged to give up their arms.

Although the peace agreement represents unparalleled progress toward a conflict-free Colombia, thousands remain at risk of displacement due to ongoing conflict between remaining guerrillas, right-wing paramilitary groups, and criminal bands as they fight for the formerly FARC-controlled illicit drug trade, illegal mining sites, and rural zones. Rural, indigenous, and Afro-Colombian communities are particularly vulnerable. If provided the opportunity for safe return or relocation, IDPs could be the key to sustainable peace and reconciliation.

Still struggling to emerge from decades of war, Colombia faces new challenges that will test its policies, migration and otherwise. Amid the recent influx of extracontinental migrants and Colombian returnees from Venezuela, Colombia faces a growing demand for services for asylum seekers, refugees, and returned migrants. And most crucially, the post-conflict era will continue to be defined by the need for full integration of IDPs into Colombia’s future, by ensuring the sustainable development of the urban areas that have become home to so many and that those who return or relocate to rural areas are not at risk of
becoming victims again. Developing strategies targeted at facilitating local integration, protecting populations at risk such as indigenous groups and Afro-Colombians, and promoting the active participation of IDPs, refugees, and the diaspora abroad in the implementation of the peace deal will be crucial in Colombia’s search for lasting peace.

Sources


As Colombia Emerges from Decades of War, Migration Challenges Mount


As Colombia Emerges from Decades of War, Migration Challenges Mount


As Colombia Emerges from Decades of War, Migration Challenges Mount


Source URL: http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/colombia-emerges-decades-war-migration-challenges-mount