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HUMAN RIGHTS COMPASS

USAID HUMAN RIGHTS PROGRAM Bogotá, Colombia Vol. 2, Ed. 2 September - October 2013

Student makes argument before panel of judges. Photo Credit: Ruby Guzmán, HRP III

Human Rights Law Students Defend Freedom of Expression at Eleventh Annual Moot Court Competition

The Eleventh Annual Moot Court Competition, co-sponsored by HRP III and the Ombudsman's Office, kicked off at the Universidad de Ibagué in Tolima from September 23-27, 2013. This five-day exciting event engaged 46 human rights law students from 23 universities across Colombia who came to compete by making compelling arguments before a panel of judges based on a hypothetical human rights case presented before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. This year's human rights case centered on a topic very relevant to Colombia's human rights situation- the violation of the freedoms of expression and press.

The significance of the competition was poignantly put into perspective when Ombudsman's Office Constitutional Delegate, Luis Manuel Castro Novoa, shared with students fond memories of his own participation at this competition as a law student. His powerful message underscored not only the legacy this competition embodies, but the adept skills and experience it offers for career preparation in human rights.

As a critical academic and legal training for rising human rights lawyers, HRP III was intent on motivating students, tutors, and law faculties across Colombia to take their roles very seriously. HRP III offered training sessions throughout five departments geared towards tutors and legal professors with registered teams to provide them with the necessary tools, skills, and guidance to be shared with the students.

By the time the competition kicked off, students anxiously awaited their turns to present their cases before a rigorous panel of judges. After five grueling days of competition the winners were announced- Ms. Margarita Buchelly and Ms. Kelly Johana Angulo Marín from Universidad San Buenaventura. Ms. Buchelly was also awarded Best Oral Argument.

As in the previous year, HRP III supports their studies by sponsoring a special scholarship opportunity. Both women will travel to American University in Washington, DC in the upcoming year to participate at their Inter-American Human Rights Moot Court Competition. Both women were thrilled to have reached the end so successfully. "It was the most amazing experience we've had, all that time invested in preparing was well worth it…the feeling of standing in front of people and being heard, the nerves… all of it was great!", remarked Margarita Buchelly. •

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Colombian NGOs Convene with USAID at Annual Consultations

CSOs convene at Annual Consultations
Photo Credit: Photo Credit: USAID HRP III

As USAID's HRP III looks ahead to its second full year in operation in Colombia, it made sure to not overlook one of its fundamental and most awaited annual opportunities, the Civil Society Organization (CSO) Consultations held in Bogotá. A cornerstone element to HRP III's programming and success is the relationships, information, and experiences shared by its partners and key human rights NGOs. This invaluable exercise provides first-hand knowledge and assists HRP III to gain a strong pulse and perspective of developments with regard to human rights and beyond. While HRP III may work closely and regularly with many of these stakeholders throughout the year, the Annual Consultation provides an ideal venue for all partners to come together to touch base and discuss the latest trends, concerns, and opportunities in this fast-changing and fluid field of work.

With this in mind, 47 CSOs (28 national and 19 regional), USAID representatives, State Department representatives, and HRP III, convened in Bogotá on September 3, 2013. HRP III staff was on hand to guide discussions on four critical issues including: 1) Peacebuilding in the regions and human rights; 2) Participation and protection of NGO leaders and victims of conflict regarding the implementation of the Victims' Law. 3) Gender-based Violence; and 4) Human rights and private sector in the regions.

Reflecting on these important issues impacting human rights programming, USAID Mission Director, Peter Natiello shared in his opening remarks, "One of the fundamental pillars of HRP III is the flexibility to respond to changes in the human rights situation. I am proud to say that during this past year one significant achievement we have accomplished has been the partnerships we have established with civil society, both on the national and regional levels." With this, participants engaged in an open and constructive dialogue to clarify concerns, challenges, and opportunities to build on.

HRP III intently listened and noted observations throughout the day's session and reiterated their sincere appreciation for the organizations' feedback and perspectives. In taking a comprehensive approach to this integral exercise for HRP III programming, USAID will also host a US-based NGO Consultation in late October.

Donald Chisholm, Director of the Human Rights and Democracy Office, officially closed the day's session assuring that the ideas, recommendations, and concerns raised would be used as inputs regarding future planning and work with the Colombian government. He expressed that feedback gathered throughout the day would serve to strengthen a more unified and coordinated effort in the protection of human rights throughout the regions. This unique opportunity renewed commitments among participating stakeholders ensuring that lines of communication and information flow remain open, useful, and relevant towards effective programming.•

Afro-Colombian women rally at National Congress
Photo Credit: Photo Credit: IIAP

Historic First Autonomous National Afro-Colombian Congress Takes Place in Quibdó

Afro-Colombian communities made history on August 23-28 when they held the first-ever autonomous National Afro-Colombian Congress with over 1,000 community leaders and national officials participating in Quibdó, Chocó. Leading up to this important event, HRP III had worked with Afro-Colombian leaders and organizations to facilitate and organize logistics and technical planning to ensure a successful outcome.

Among the high-level State officials in attendance were President Manuel Santos to open the Congress and Vice President Angelino Garzón to provide closing remarks. President Santos set the tone for the Congress addressing participants stating, "From this Congress, the highest-level mechanisms and structures should emerge which will represent our Afro-Colombian communities. In other words, you have been the owners of this process and you should continue to do so throughout."

The signing of Law 70, one of Colombia's most progressive laws regarding ethnic communities, 20 years ago also in Quibdó was another significant milestone recognized at this event. This vanguard legislation boldly underscored and enshrined Afro-Colombian rights to land, culture, and development. However, the bleak reality that Afro-Colombians live today and the direction it has taken in the past two decades since the passing of Law 70 is a far cry from the newfound hope that the law promised. In addition to the fact that 80% of Afro-Colombians live in conditions of extreme poverty, the regions hardest hit by internal displacement continue to come from areas populated by Afro-Colombians and indigenous communities. Compounding the situation, Afro-Colombian progress on critical issues has been deeply strained by internal division and its inability to often reach consensus.

Front-lining proposals discussed and finalized at the Congress included *consulta previa* (prior consultation), rural development law, the regulation of Law 70, the mining code, as well as the reorganization of the *corporaciones andinas regionales*. Of note regarding *consulta previa*, a protocol was agreed upon outlining its definition, principles and a concrete timeline to be carried out at both the local and national levels which will be discussed with the government for its finalization.

Additionally, a new autonomous committee was created in order to ensure follow through on the agreements made at the Congress as well as developments on the *consulta previa* process. The 109-member committee comprises territorial and *consejos comunitarios* representatives including women, elders, LGBT community members, and youth. This new committee has already begun to convene to establish its organizational structure, mission, and goals to advance commitments made at the Congress. HRP III will also continue to monitor the outcomes and commitments made at this historic event. With the Afro-Colombian Congress successfully completed, spirits and commitments were renewed by both the State and this community with a clearer vision and roadmap to create effective change in improving the quality of life of one of Colombia's most marginalized populations.•

Edgardo Florez , Victims' Roundtable Coordinator, at opening of legal clinic
Photo Credit: USAID HRP III

Legal clinic at El Carmen de Bolívar
Photo Credit: USAID HRP III

Helping Victims in Montes de Maria

Montes de Maria, tucked in the northwest corner of Colombia, is a region of the country that has been ravaged by the effects of violence, forced displacement, dispossession and abandonment of land. Over the past 15 years, its isolated location unfortunately has served as strategic corridor for paramilitaries (now post-demobilized groups), drug traffickers and guerrilla forces. The confluence of these illegal armed forces combined with weak institutional presence and corruption have been the source of numerous human rights violations. For these reasons, HRP III has specifically targeted this region to implement strategies in the areas of psychosocial assistance, legal assistance and self-protection networks.

The statistics reflecting the loss of land for the inhabitants of this region brings into sharp focus the magnitude of the voracious appetite by illegal armed actors for land. For example, of the 90,000 hectares in the municipality of El Carmen de Bolívar, 72% of the land has been registered as abandoned/dispossessed. In addition, El Carmen de Bolívar ranks eighth as the municipality with the most lands abandoned/dispossessed in the country. Associated with these illegal land grabs have been a series of egregious human rights violations committed against its civilians. From 1994-2001, this region became notoriously recognized for 20 massacres that took place in the municipalities of Carmen de Bolívar and San Jacinto. A psychosocial assessment conducted by Diakonia in April 2011 indicated that 76% of the population from the targeted areas in El Carmen de Bolívar has been affected by violence at one point or another.

A civil society leader from Carmen de Bolívar remarked, "Civil society is organized [here] and has created community participation measures, however they become targets once they demand their rights. Public officials have been known to threaten those that file *tutelas* [legal recourse claims]". Through identifying and working with land restitution leaders and other victims' leaders, HRP III has begun to form and/or strengthen self-protection networks. The strategy seeks to bring leaders who are at high risk together, carry out a municipal risk assessment and design a self-protection plan that engages institutions responsible for victims' assistance.

In its initial implementation, networks have already been tested when one leader in Dibulla and another leader's relative in Carmen de Bolivar were killed. Immediately this triggered a communications strategy among them and relevant institutions such as the Ombudsman's Office, the Victims' Unit and the National Protection Unit at the regional and national levels to evaluate the situation and respond. This mechanism has, in essence, allowed these leaders who were previously isolated to meet and provide each other support in a context of mistrust and high insecurity which had prevented them from meeting regularly before.

In providing much needed legal orientation and psychosocial assistance, HRP III teamed up with Universidad de Cartagena's legal clinic to set up a satellite clinic in Carmen de Bolívar. In this way, 400 conflict victims will be legally counseled and 100 victims will receive psychosocial services within the most affected communities. The legal clinic contributes to the safeguarding of victims' rights and recovery from the traumas generated by the ongoing conflict. With HRP III support, the difficult challenges faced by the residents of the Montes de Maria region have begun to pave new self-sustaining paths to protection and recovery. •