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USCR Denounces Panama's Forced Return of Colombian Refugees

Washington, DC, April 25, 2003 In a letter to the government of Panama, the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) denounced the Panamanian government's forced return of 109 Colombian refugees. On April 21, Panamanian National Guard and immigration officials arrived in Punusa, the town in which the refugees were living and forcibly removed them from the town. Families were separated in the process and the refugees compelled to leave all their belongings behind. The refugees—a large majority of them children—were then taken to a place near the border, where they made their way to the Colombian town of Zapzurro. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is now assisting them.

USCR Executive Director Lavinia Limón said, "The refoulement of these individuals was in direct violation of the UN Refugee Convention, to which Panama is a party. Furthermore, it also violated an agreement between your government and UNHCR—reached after earlier instances of Panama forcibly returning Colombian refugees—in which your government committed to informing UNHCR of any proposed repatriations of Colombian refugees."

The refugees are mostly Afro-Colombians, a particularly disenfranchised group that is over-represented among Colombia's 2.5 million internally displaced persons. It is not clear whether they had enjoyed the protection of Temporary Humanitarian Status (THS) in Panama or if they were among the many Colombians asylum seekers in Panama who lack THS. Many Colombians who flee to Panama in search of protection fail to obtain it because officials from the National Office for the Attention of Refugees (ONPAR), who are charged with interviewing Colombian asylum seekers to determine if they are eligible for THS or if they wish to pursue asylum claims, rarely visit the border areas to carry out their responsibilities.

USCR added, "We condemn this gross violation of the rights of refugees. We urge your government to take steps to ensure that the Panamanian authorities do not forcibly return other Colombian asylum seekers and that ONPAR officials visit all Colombian asylum seekers in the border areas to fairly assess their need for international protection."

The U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) is a public information and advocacy program of Immigration and Refugee Services of America (IRSA), a nongovernmental, non-profit organization. Since 1958, USCR has defended the rights of refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons worldwide.

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