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### USCRI Urges Action to Protect Colombian Refugees in Panama

Washington, D.C., September 16, 2003 Panamanian authorities are again threatening to involuntarily repatriate Colombian refugees who fear return to their homeland. The refugees fled fighting between guerrillas, paramilitaries, and Colombian government forces in their home area in Colombia in recent years. Panama has granted few Colombian asylum seekers full refugee status but has granted some 900 Colombians Temporary Humanitarian Status.

In late July, Panamanian and Colombian government officials met with a number of refugees in Jaque, Panama, to urge them to return home. The officials reportedly assured the refugees that their areas of origin are now secure and it is safe for them to return. Unconvinced by these assurances, most of the refugees refused to sign the voluntary repatriation forms that the Panamanian authorities presented to them.

In late August, Panamanian officials visited many of the refugees in their homes and pressured them into signing the voluntary repatriation forms. USCR has seen statements by more than two dozen refugees asserting such pressure. All of the refugees stated clearly that they are afraid to return home because they do not think they would be safe there, and that they only signed the forms because the Panamanian authorities pressured them to do so. Some of the refugees said that the Panamanian authorities told them that if they signed the forms and participated in the planned return, they could take all of their belongings with them, but if they did not, the Panamanian immigration authorities would deport them without their belongings.

In April 2003, Panama forcibly repatriated more than 100 Colombian refugees, including some with Temporary Humanitarian Status. USCR condemned the action as a gross violation of the rights of refugees and urged Panama to take steps to ensure that the Panamanian authorities do not forcibly return other Colombian refugees. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) expressed concern regarding the returns, and the Organization of American States' (OAS) InterAmerican Human Rights Commission called for the safeguarding of Colombian refugees in Panama from future forced returns.

In a letter to the Panamanian government, USCR called on Panama to honor its commitment under the UN Refugee Convention, to which it is a party, not to return refugees to their homeland against their will. Rather, if it is indeed the case that their area of origin is safe, Panama should, in conjunction with the government of Colombia and UNHCR, arrange for representatives of the refugees to visit their home areas to assess security conditions for themselves. That will enable them to make an informed decision on whether the time is right for them to voluntarily repatriate.

USCR urges UNHCR and the OAS to act quickly to ensure that Panama does not return the refugee against their will. UNHCR should insist that Panama and Colombia, which is also a party to the UN Refugee Convention, involve UNHCR in all aspects of any repatriation of Colombian refugees. The OAS should also take steps to enforce its call for the safeguarding of Colombian refugees in Panama. USCR also calls on the U.S. government, which has close and friendly relations with Panama, to urge the Panamanian authorities to respect the rights of refugees and not return them involuntarily to a place where their lives could be in danger.

*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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