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Not war, not peace: NGOs turn to Latin America plagued by violence

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BOGOTA (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Aid agencies are gearing up to deliver humanitarian relief in Latin American cities that are beset by high levels of armed violence, including Colombia's second city of Medellin, academic researchers said.

In the past, most humanitarian efforts have focused on rural areas and people affected by war and natural disasters.

But a recent **report** by Bogota-based think tank Conflict Analysis Resource Centre (**CERAC**) and the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro notes that with increasing numbers of people living in cities - more than 50 percent of the world's 7 billion people live in urban

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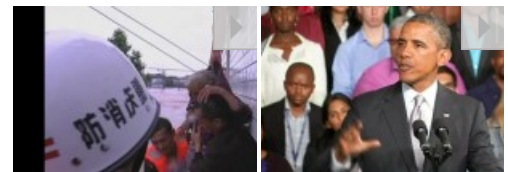
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areas - aid agencies are increasingly focusing their attention and resources on the needs of the urban poor.

"We're seeing more non-governmental organisations (NGOs) looking at urban areas and cities for humanitarian intervention in Latin America. People living in cities are far more likely to be victims of lethal violence than those living in war zones," Claudia Navas, a co-author of the report and researcher at CERAC, told Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"In Colombia, NGOs are intervening in cities like Medellin where armed actors and criminal groups operate. The future of international humanitarian action will be decided in these new types of situations that are neither war nor peace."

The report looked at Medellin, a city plagued by daily drug-related violence and drug turf wars.

The ways in which aid agencies are helping communities to prevent and deal with drug-related violence and crime in Medellin is a bellwether, Navas said, for humanitarian relief in other cities in Latin America and the Caribbean, including Rio de Janeiro, Port-au-Prince and Guatemala City.

"Understanding the dynamics of insecurity in Medellin and the ways in which violence can be prevented and reduced, and providing protection to civilians, will have implications that resonate far beyond the region," Navas said.

INVISIBLE VIOLENCE

Back in 1991, Medellin was the murder capital of the world with an annual homicide rate of 380 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. At the time, the city was ground zero for the world's largest cocaine cartel run by native son and drug lord Pablo Escobar.

While Medellin's annual murder rate has plummeted to 53 per 100,000 inhabitants today - largely due to the demise of the cocaine cartels - much of the violence in the city's slums is invisible, the report said.

"Medellin is not experiencing outright warfare but the extent of violence is immense," Navas said.

"There are invisible and under-reported forms of non-lethal violence taking place in Medellin, like forced displacement, sexual violence and rape. Armed actors impose social control, including curfews, leaving communities confined. There's also economic control over communities, such as extortion, and even the brands and types of products sold in shops in slum areas are controlled by armed groups."

Last year 9,941 people were forced to leave their homes in Medellin - 1,507 people more than in 2011 - according to Rodrigo Ardila, the city's top human rights official in his latest [report](#), while nearly 1,880 people have been reported missing over the last three years in the city.

AID IN GANG-PLAGUED SLUMS

It is such high levels of violence that prompted the International Committee of the Red Cross ([ICRC](#)) in Colombia to start working in Medellin's gang-ridden slum neighbourhoods in 2011.

With more than 300 different gangs controlling drug trafficking and extortion rackets in Medellin, the report noted that violence in the city is dynamic and volatile, making it difficult for international aid agencies to define how to work on the ground, rules for negotiating with criminal gangs and ensure their aid workers are safe.

"In Medellin, one of the most difficult things is to engage in dialogue with local armed groups given their lack of unity and lack of political motives," said Navas.

"Having a dialogue with criminal gangs is controversial, and it has received resistance from state authorities in Medellin who see this as a police matter."

In the past, relief agencies have tended to take on the role of government, providing water, basic healthcare and education in countries where state institutions are weak and are non-existent, says Navas.

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"In Medellin, though, the idea is that NGOs act more as a complement to state services because this is a city with strong institutional capacity," she said.

She added relief agencies operating in violent cities are working more closely with community leaders to help local residents better cope and respond to armed violence and crime.

"Community leaders are increasingly being seen as important partners to prevent future violence and the recruitment of children in gangs."

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