An ICRC evaluation has given voice to the special and urgent needs of the families of missing persons, with a view to finding ways of alleviating the desperate situation of those who are tortured by uncertainty as they search for their loved ones.

Year after year, thousands of Colombian families suffer the anguish of searching for a missing loved one and coping with the difficulties caused by the loss of a family member, in many cases, the family’s main breadwinner. The torment of not knowing the fate of a missing family member is compounded by the seeming inability of the institutions responsible to understand the needs of these families. Answers are not forthcoming, and the authorities struggle to deal with the many requests, as their workload increases year after year. People continued to disappear in 2013. Almost 7,500 people were officially reported missing in the course of the year, and a total of around 67,000 people remained missing at the end of December (see graph).

In view of this enormous humanitarian challenge that Colombia will have to address in the years ahead, in mid-2013, the ICRC conducted an in-depth evaluation of the needs of families with one or more missing family members (see page 22). The findings confirmed that their most pressing need was “to know what has happened to my loved one and to have him back dead or alive,” as one family member put it during the working sessions with the ICRC. They also need to know that they are not alone and that their material and psychosocial needs will be covered.

**The ICRC’s humanitarian response**

The ICRC’s response to the problem of disappearances extends to all the parties involved, including the alleged perpetrators and the government institutions responsible for missing persons. It also supports the families of missing persons. The aim of its work is to prevent the disappearance of people and human remains by promoting respect for persons protected under humanitarian rules and to support efforts to trace missing persons and strengthen the response of government institutions.

**Documenting cases**

The ICRC’s access to areas affected by conflict and other forms of violence enabled its delegates to document 157 cases of missing persons, 44 of which involved children and 14 women. In the course of its confidential dialogue with weapon bearers, the organization broached the subject of the cases of 128 people, to inquire about their fate, with those allegedly responsible for their disappearance.

**Supporting families in their search**

The ICRC guided 61 families through the process of tracing their missing loved ones or recovering, identifying and collecting their remains. In some cases, it also provided financial support. Twenty-four of these missing persons were found alive, and the remains of another nine were returned to their families. A further 57 families of missing persons participated in a process led by the Colombian Red Cross Society in Buenaventura to determine their needs, provide guidance for them and strengthen mutual support to help alleviate their grief.

**Restoring family links**

ICRC teams, in collaboration with the Colombian Red Cross Society, enabled 83 people who had been separated from their families by the conflict or armed violence to re-establish contact with their loved ones; 48 of them were minors.

**Recovering human remains**

ICRC experts recovered the human remains of 12 people killed in connection with the armed conflict. Most were victims buried in places to which the legal authorities did not have access.

**Supporting government institutions**

A total of 463 people, mainly officials from the institutions that deal with missing persons, took part in seminars and workshops held by the ICRC in several regions on subjects such as the legal framework and procedures applicable in missing person cases, the attentive treatment of family members and good practices for the identification of people and remains. The construction of a morgue and vaults for human remains in Satinga (Nariño) will facilitate efforts to identify bodies buried in the local cemetery.

**DISAPPEARANCE**

IN 2013, 7,464 PEOPLE WERE REPORTED TO HAVE GONE MISSING IN THE COURSE OF THE YEAR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of people who disappeared in the course of the year</th>
<th>Number of people still missing at the end of the year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>7,547</td>
<td>60,137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>7,464</td>
<td>67,195</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: SIRDEC (online information database used to identify missing persons and human remains), National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Science, Colombia, as at 15 January 2014.

**WHAT IHL HAS TO SAY**

**ICRC study on customary international humanitarian law**

- Rule 115. The dead must be disposed of in a respectful manner and their graves respected and properly maintained.
- Rule 116. With a view to the identification of the dead, each party to the conflict must record all available information prior to disposal and mark the location of the graves.
- Rule 117. Each party to the conflict must take all feasible measures to account for persons reported missing as a result of armed conflict and must provide their family members with any information it has on their fate.
2014, a year to hear what families need

Around 230 people – 80 per cent of them relatives of missing persons – talked to ICRC experts in seven areas of the country in the course of 2013. The aim was to make a thorough assessment of the needs of the families of missing persons. The findings will be compiled in a report to be published in the second half of 2014 and used to guide the institutional response to this problem.

The preliminary findings of the ICRC’s assessment indicate that families require both material and psychosocial support. Their first concern is to know what has happened to their loved ones, followed by attentive treatment from the officials dealing with their requests and employment and educational opportunities to help them overcome the precarious situation they face as a result of the loss of a family member.

The ICRC will also launch a public campaign with the involvement of twelve well-known urban artists (see photos), inviting Colombians to reflect on the special and urgent needs of the families of missing persons. People in all walks of life can, in their own way, help to ease the grief of the families of missing persons. Taking the time to think about it is the first step.