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COLOMBIA

FIRST PERSON

An Old Man Finds Hope

An old man displaced by an illegal armed group begins to reclaim his life



Photo: IOM/Juliana Quintero

Manuel is grateful for the meals he gets at a USAID-funded assistance center.

“All your life changes in a second. I went from having a safe life to wondering everyday: how can I survive today?” said Manuel, a Colombian displaced by the ongoing violence in his country.

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Manuel has to concentrate when he tries to remember his age. “I stopped counting the years long ago,” he says with a rueful smile. The last birthday he remembers was when he turned 60, and that was “a while back.” Manuel has lost his family and his friends. Now, he is trying to start his life again.

Manuel arrived in San Vicente del Caguán, in Colombia’s Caquetá region, after being forced off his farm at gunpoint by guerillas. His farm was in the Tolima region, a long way from San Vicente del Caguán, even by bus.

He had lived there, happily married, for many years. After his wife passed away, he intended to stay in the home he had lived in for so long. “Then one day,” he related, “some young, armed men came to my farm and they forced me to leave.”

Manuel fled and began working as a day laborer, earning barely enough to get by. “All of your life changes in a second. I went from having a safe life to wondering everyday: how can I survive today? When this happens and you are already an old man, it is too hard,” he added.

Each day, he felt himself getting older. “The harder I worked, the weaker I got. Finally, the moment came that I could no longer stand to work. I was too tired, and I had hardly any food to eat,” he recalled.

Manuel made his way to the USAID-funded Community Center in San Vicente del Caguán. There, he discovered that there were others like him. The 400 people served there shared his experience of displacement. The center gave Manuel a small plot of land where he could grow vegetables on his own.

While he is waiting to harvest his small garden, Manuel goes to the center once a day to eat. The rest of the day, he works hard to make sure his garden is a success. He is grateful to the center, which has given him hope for the future — hope that he can survive this difficult period, and one day return home to tend to his own land once more.