

Environmental recovery key to post-conflict development in Colombia – UN agency

24 March 2017 – Concluding a mission to Colombia, a multi-disciplinary team of United Nations environment experts have highlighted that the country has a unique opportunity to promote sustainable and resilient livelihoods in which the nature serves as the foundation for long-lasting peace.

In a news release today, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) said that different rebel groups and criminal gangs, which controlled large parts of the country for decades, illegally extracted and exploited natural resources leading to major environmental damage, including illegal cropping, deforestation and the unregulated use of hazardous chemicals.

The UN team's visit and aerial inspection of the Quito and Atrato rivers uncovered the scale of environmental challenges brought by large scale and mechanized illegal operations.

"The environmental destruction in the Quito river basin is significant in terms of scope and magnitude, due to a combination of illegal mining and deforestation," read the release.

Also, the release of Mercury (one of the most hazardous chemicals used in mining) into the environment has added significant challenges given the potential that the heavy, toxic, metal can reach the community through air, water and food chain.

The UN team was invited by the Colombian President, Juan Manuel Santos, to identify priority actions towards mitigating the health and livelihood risks from the environmental damage in priority areas for post-conflict development.

"Environment is at the heart of post-conflict development in Colombia," said Leo Heileman, the Director of the UNEP Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, noting that the UN agency "will unwaveringly stand by Colombia during the post-conflict phase."

Initial support proposed by UNEP includes technical recommendations and training for the effective implementation of environmental peace-building projects; strategic environmental assessment of key post-conflict interventions; advice on measures to improve social, economic and environmental conditions for the extractive sector and to remediate damage caused by illegal operations; and strengthening of the institutional and technical capacities.

On its part, the Colombian Government emphasized the importance of strengthening the environmental dividends of peace and fostering green growth

as pillars for sustainable development, noted the UNEP news release.