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Refugees from Colombia Make Plea for United States Asylum

By JACOB H. FRIES

A group of Colombian leaders and local officials called on the United States government yesterday to grant temporary asylum to Colombians who fear returning to their native country, where guerrilla fighters and the army have clashed for decades in a bloody civil war.

Carlos A. Manzano, a Democratic state committeeman from Manhattan, said he hoped to meet with Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and convince him that the conflict in Colombia is tantamount to genocide.

"There is a greater risk of being kidnapped in Colombia than in any other country in the world," Mr. Manzano told three dozen Colombians who had gathered at the Church of St. Francis of Assisi in Midtown.

He said as many as 100,000 Colombians live in the United States "in daily fear of returning."

Mr. Manzano's mother, who still lives in Cali, Colombia, where he grew up, is considering fleeing the country, he said. She has run her own textile and embroidering business there for more than 45 years, he said, but she might now have to leave it behind.

"She feels like a prisoner," said Mr. Manzano, who would not give his mother's name for fear that she might be singled out.

Among the other officials attending yesterday's event were State Senator Eric Schneiderman, William H. Salgado, who is running for the State Assembly from Queens, and a representative for the city comptroller, William C. Thompson, Jr.

In August, Gov. George E. Pataki wrote to President Bush and Attorney General John Ashcroft request-



Michael Nagle/The New York Times

Carlos A. Manzano, a Democratic state committeeman from Manhattan, was among those who met yesterday in an effort to gain temporary asylum for thousands of Colombian immigrants who say they are refugees.

ing temporary protective status for Colombian nationals in the United States.

A spokeswoman for the State Department said yesterday the request was being considered.

Gabriel Duarte, who lives in Islip,

on Long Island, said his cousin, who came to America two months ago, had lived for five years in constant fear of guerrillas.

She is a dentist, he said, and rebels telephoned her, threatening to kidnap her daughter, if she did not pay a

tax for practicing dentistry.

"She isn't happy here yet," Mr. Duarte said. "She is worried about her daughter, who is still in Colombia. And she worries she might be sent back herself."