

Colombia

Action on



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Our group on the road to Villavicencio

Erik Dodge, photo

University of Nebraska-Kearney Student Delegation

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The idea of organizing a class around Colombian politics and human rights that included a class trip to Colombia has been one that I have had for many years. In fact, Cecilia and I spoke about the idea several times over the last five years only to have scheduling or financial conflicts undermine our plans. The extensive networks that CSN possesses within the country, and the long history of Cecilia leading delegations to Colombia, makes CSN an ideal vehicle for not only the excellent activist and solidarity work that it conducts, but

This newsletter is focused on a delegation that was organized at the request of the Department of Political Science at the University of Nebraska-Kearney with the objective of providing Professor William Avilés' students with an on-site experience in Colombia. CSN is profoundly grateful to Professor Avilés for his invaluable didactic initiative, and is very proud to have facilitated such a successful delegation. CSN looks forward to sending future student delegations to Colombia.

Introduction continued

also in achieving concrete educational objectives for a university classroom. With a group of college students, consisting of varying political positions and ideologies, understandably more focused upon seeking a positive grade in a class rather than changes to U.S. foreign policy, the challenges for CSN would be different. Based on what we accomplished during our week in Colombia and the feedback from my students, the class and CSN more than met their goals.

Our trip to Bogotá, Villavicencio and the National Park of Chicaque from May 23rd- May 31st followed two weeks of classes at the University of Nebraska in Kearney in which my students read and discussed works by Forrest Hylton, Alfredo Molano, Nazih Richani, W. John Green, Russell Crandall and Eduardo Posada. Thus, none of the eleven students on the delegation came to Colombia with a belief that the country represented an ideal democratic regime. They also understood that a variety of state and non-state actors were central to the continuing conflict and the persistence of human rights violations by the Colombian state, para-state and guerrilla insurgency. My students watched documentaries about the decimation of the Unión Patriótica and the consequences of Plan Colombia as well as read arguments illustrating the influence of multinational corporations in promoting the country's "war system." Of course all of this information can often be abstract and students can often feel disconnected from the material that they are studying. To

supplement this information with actually meeting and conversing with flesh and blood individuals presently immersed in Colombia's political dynamics made it impossible for these students to easily dismiss the difficult and sometimes gruesome reality of Colombian politics. As one of my students, Viridiana Almanza, stated in her travel journal "one can only see how exceptional Colombia is by having the personal connection with the Colombian people—they are after all, I discovered, the essence of Colombia's politics and culture."

After a long flight to Bogotá we began to make those personal connections the day after our arrival with our trip to Villavicencio in the department of Meta. It was there where I and my students met with representatives from Colombia National Victims Rights Movement, leaders of trade unions, and human rights attorneys representing victims of the "false positive" scandal. Most importantly we listened to the individual testimonies of women and men who had directly lost husbands, brothers, sons and daughters to the false combat kills of the Colombian army. As many readers know the "false positives" scandal has involved members of the army killing Colombian civilians and dressing them up as guerrilla combatants in order to inflate their combat statistics and obtain special benefits (extra vacation time, bonuses and/or promotions). We listened to one testimony after another, with Cecilia working hard to translate every detail, and my students working hard to absorb the specifics presented by each victim.

Josh Moody, a journalism student in my class, summed up the experience with the following "the victim accounts reverberated through my mind, the trip suddenly felt a little more real, even raw. Villavicencio was a dose of reality." Many in my class left these meetings with the sense that we needed to remember these stories not only for our meetings with U.S. and Colombian governmental officials, but when we returned back to the United States.

Our group was reminded of this reality in our meetings with the human rights officer of the U.S. embassy and representatives of Colombia's Fiscalía. Many of us were disappointed with the response from the embassy, with some recognizing the fact that the embassy official's position required finding ways to justify and support the continuation of U.S. policy and aid. In contrast, some of my students left Colombia's Fiscalía with a sense of hope, a belief that at least some members of Colombia's justice system are genuinely seeking the truth underlying the vast array of human rights violations that the Colombian people have experienced for almost three decades. We supplemented these governmental meetings with reunions with indigenous and women's rights and activists, academics as well as a day-long hike through Chicaque's Natural Park. These experiences allowed my students to be exposed to not only the distinctive ways that different social groups have experienced the conflict, but also to a sense in Chicaque of the natural beauty of Colombia's countryside and the various

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Action On Colombia is the official newsletter of the Colombia Support Network, a national peace and justice network of groups and individuals working to promote respect for human rights in Colombia and a just relationship between the United States and Colombia through grass-roots activism.

CSN supports a nonviolent, negotiated resolution to the conflict in Colombia.

CSN is the only current project of Wisconsin Interfaith Committee on Latin America

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environmental threats to the Amazon.

Clearly we accomplished a great deal in the short time that we were in Bogotá, with my students sometimes feeling over-whelmed by the experience. Yet many of my students have come back from Colombia with not only a desire to return to Latin America in the near future, but also with a desire to directly change U.S. policy on Colombia. At the time of this writing one of my students, Rebeca Acosta, is seeking a way to return to Colombia this year to attend a women's rights conference and several members of my class are awaiting word from our

congressman, Adrian Smith, on a meeting to discuss the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement. Finally, we are planning activities in the fall to speak with peace groups in Nebraska to share our experience in Colombia and the human rights challenges facing many Colombians on a day to day basis. On behalf of my students and myself I want to thank Cecilia Zaraté-Laun for all of her work in making this trip a reality and for the support of Colombia Support Network. Cecilia was simply tireless in her efforts, despite still recovering from a broken arm! My class will always be appreciative. Thank you.

“Colombia Human Rights and Democracy: Day One Villavicencio”

—“We are in a government system that doesn't recognize the truth . . .”

*Viridiana Almanza Zavala,
History/Political Science Major, Senior*

Monday, May 24, 2010

Before arriving in Colombia, my thoughts about our “class field trip” were optimistic, and to a certain extent adventurous. However, nothing could prepare me for the cruel reality of life that I was about to experience, the cultural aspects of Colombia that make it so unique, and the tremendous amount of information that I learned in just one week. From our class readings and discussions, Colombia seemed to be a conflictive country like many others in the world. Nevertheless, one can only see how exceptional Colombia is by having the personal connection with the Colombian people—they are after all, I discovered, the essence of Colombia's politics and culture.

When we arrived in Bogotá, my first impression of the city was that it seemed rather similar to any city in Mexico. The structure of Latin

American cities is inescapable. Having been “on the road” for more than 15 hours, we were naturally tired so we went to bed right away. (Our hotel, *Centro Internacional*, had exceeded my expectations). Next morning we woke up early so we could finally begin our Colombian exploration. Our destination? Villavicencio. On our drive from the hotel to the outskirts of Bogota, I discovered how “energetic” Colombians are. It was about 7am and already people were working, walking, and engaging with one another. In addition, I finally put a picture to the class reading that described the poverty-driven situation in Colombia. Essentially, what impacted me the most were the shantytowns where these people lived, and these were considered people “fortunate” enough not to live on the streets.

Before we arrived in Villavicencio, we got a glimpse of the rich and majestic countryside of Colombia. The clouds, vegetation, and the mountainous



Paulina Mahecha with a photo of her daughter María Cristina Cobo Mahecha. María, a nurse, was tortured, violated and killed by the paramilitaries in April 2004 when she was three months pregnant. Paulina shared the devastating testimony of her daughter's death with our group during our visit to Villavicencio.

Erik Dodge, photo

scenery illustrated how rich Colombia was in resources—something that has been both a blessing and a curse for the people. Once we came closer and closer to our final destination, the change in the climate became apparent. The topography of Colombia influenced the hot/humid weather that was felt in Villavicencio. In Bogotá, on the other hand, the cordilleras surrounding it, and its elevation, prevent it from having the subtropical climate it was bound to have.

When we arrived at Villavicencio, we went to the “Plaza de la Symphonia” where we were going to be meeting with individuals who were victims of the False Positives, displacement, paramilitaries, and the Colombian army, and who had come from all around the region to share their distressing stories. My first sense when we got there was that these people—humble and full of despair—saw us as their last hope. It is heartbreaking

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Colombian Human Rights and Democracy continued

to admit, but I believe some of these people thought that because we were from the U.S. we would bring justice into their lives—not knowing that in the U.S. there is also a political structure system where only so much can be done. Once they introduced themselves as members of *the Sindicato de Trabajadores de Meta*, *Comisión de Derechos Humanos*, *Colectivo Orlando Fals-Borda*, *Viudas de los Falso Positivos-Guaviare*, and *Compañeros Desplazados-Guaviare*, the individuals began to speak about the miserable situation they faced/face in Colombia.

One of the first things I came to realize is that in Colombia life is never a guarantee, it is always a struggle—life is secured only for the selected few that control the power. (Elites vs. Lower classes). Many of the people that gave testimony of their husbands, siblings, daughters/sons, and relative's deaths were inconsolable, fearful, and pessimistic about the future. Most notably, however, was the other part of these victims' character which confirmed the generosity, valor, and dignity they hold. These individuals began by saying how the war-like situation came to be in the Ariari region during the Pastrana administration. They stated that between 1998 and 2002, the Pastrana Administration and the FARC held peace talks which resulted in the demilitarization of certain regions of Colombia. This area, which includes part of Meta, was referred to as “la zona de despeje,” and served as “peace areas” between the guerrillas and the national army. Once this “peace” failed, the government's main objective was

to reclaim the territory.

During this time human rights violations escalated throughout this region because “the government assumed that everybody in this territory aided the guerrillas.” With no distinction between the civilians and the guerrillas, the massacres began. The Colombian women, the men, and the children were not safe. They were persecuted and repressed as the Colombian government saw fit—their lives and futures were held by those in power. In addition, the government began to displace the people of this area in order to give it to the corporations, or elites that so desperately wanted the oil, water, and other natural-resources found in the region. As of 2001, “79 people were displaced and 103 went missing” in particular in parts of the Ariari region. The goal of these associations is to seek “justice and truth,” and to get their lands back. However, their goals have been obstructed by a government system that revolves around impunity, by the paramilitaries that offer them no mercy if they speak out against them, and by threats that promised them more deaths if they seek any justice.

Subsequently, the individuals began retelling their testimonies. All of their stories left my peers and I devastated. The tears, hurt, and cruel reality these people exposed almost seemed surreal. Nevertheless, I think it was necessary for us to hear their stories so we could get a clear picture of what is going on in Colombia, and so we can start to value our freedoms and equalities more. Although all the narrations were touching, the one about Diana Ospina

stood out for me. Diana's husband was mutilated and killed on December 6, 2006 by the Colombian army. She and her husband had only been together for three years, and they had a nine month old baby girl. Her husband was killed because the army claimed he was a helping the FARC, however he was just a common field worker who avoided any association with armed groups. After his death, Diana and her relatives were being followed and threatened. At the time of the incident, Diana was only 18 years old—younger than everybody in our group. With a composure that not many can have, she stated that, “there is no age to bear what life brings you.”

On the way to our hotel, I couldn't stop thinking of the life some people in Colombia were having. When we read books like *The Dispossessed* by Alfredo Molano and *Evil Hour in Colombia* by Forrest Hylton, the inequality, torture, massacres, displacements, and poverty of the people were mentioned; yet, once you are there listening to the people, seeing how hurt they are, you really have a sense that their stories are the truth. This truth needs to be heard by everybody, especially the government of Colombia. This truth is also where the answer to their problems resides. Maybe then can these people begin to live again, and have hope for the future. The visit to Villavicencio was definitely the most influential part of the trip. I realized that it takes real valor to share a story in front of foreign and unknown people, but it takes more heart to tell a truth that is hurtful and devastating. These Colombian individuals have both valor and heart despite being hurt and devastated.

“The Fiscalía, Peace and Justice”

James Keating

Political Science/French/International Studies Major, Junior

Today we visited the Colombian equivalent of the U.S. Attorney General’s Office, which is referred to as the Fiscalía. Like most of our trips during this week-long delegation, the trek into this important Colombian Governmental body started with a lecture, which was kicked off with a brief introduction focused on explaining what the exact purpose of the Fiscalía is and how it serves Colombia. The introduction was not like the many we had already heard over the delegation, this one was different. Some very strong and interesting comments were made by our introductory representative of the Fiscalía. The representative first described the Fiscalía by stating that

it was a civil authority tool, which is needed to maintain order. To put this in proper perspective, the representative told a story of how after the raid of Berlin by Russian troops in WWII, the Soviets raped over 1 million German women, but because no civil authority was present, this atrocity was never spoken of in the international community, and went on unpunished. I found this opening to be a very dramatic and contradicting metaphor for the need of civil authority in a country that leads the western hemisphere in human rights violations. Immediately following the lesson on civil authority, we were then suddenly thrown into a lesson on diplomacy, which, for lack of a better word, was very interesting.

The representative described diplomacy as being able to “call someone a son of a bitch smiling, while the other

person takes the insult smiling,” this was by far the quote of my trip in Colombia. I have never encountered an individual, especially one working for the government, speaking so bluntly about such a topic. This bluntness contributed to a loss in legitimacy, but for me his loss of legitimacy dive-bombed even further when the representative commented on the dire situation of economic inequality facing Colombians as being a result of Colombia having “very little resources,” I found this to be a major contradiction seeing that Colombia is very rich in resources, especially oil, and coal which are multi-billion dollar industries. This contradiction (or better described as a sheer lie), was a major insult to my, and my classmates’ intelligence.

Colombia’s resources have long been sought after by the international community, especially that of the U.S., Canada, and other free market nation’s large private corporations. These corporations benefit from Colombia’s culture of violence by receiving permission to invest at discount prices on export tariffs, and labor (just to name a few among many). The existence of these international investments in a war culture means security measures must be taken; this in turn leads directly and indirectly to the financing of the Colombian war system. These supposed “little resources” that Colombia possesses have lead to millions of military, private security, and land protection aid from the U.S., and because of the armed conflict, the Colombian population is being exploited for land, cheap labor, and lives. Suggesting that the population suffers from a lack of resources is like suggesting that the earth has no water. Colombia’s conflict is fueled by its vast resources, but the only people that benefit from the land are the armed actors, who seek out the resources to finance their violent campaigns.



James overlooking Bogotá from the Chicaque mountain.

Erik Dodge, photo

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“The Fiscalía, Peace and Justice” continued

While fighting is taking place, and the state enlists Paras to do its dirty work, the population is left in the cold and marched violently off plentiful Colombian land. Needless to say, this introduction to the Fiscalía provided a shaky start; however the Fiscalía was surprisingly very open to our questions and concerns, and was by far the most upfront governmental body we visited. The Fiscalía didn't rely on lectures to convince us of the good they are doing (for good reason), but they allowed us to see what goes on behind their closed doors.

This trip to the Fiscalía, despite the rough introduction, was especially helpful in shedding light on the Peace and Justice Law. This law offers reduced prison sentences, financial benefits, and readjustment training for those Paras who have participated in selective killings, displacement, rapes, tortures, and massacres in exchange for demobilization and full confession of their crimes. Prison sentences are limited to a maximum of eight years, even for those who participated in massacres and torture. For example, Alonso de Jesus Baquero, received a reduced jail sentence of seven years after having confessed to more than 800 killings. This law is intended to help the demobilization of Paramilitaries. The Uribe Government, with the help of U.S. figure heads were able to portray the Peace and Justice Law as effective, but in hindsight, the Colombian violations have increased in some areas (such as union murders, and displacement) rather than decreased, and worst yet since the “demobilization” was completed, paramilitary structures and networks have been reorganized, recomposed, and “cleansed,” making the restructured groups and networks more efficient (these facts can be found in Jasmin Hristov's *Legalizing the illegal: paramilitarism in Colombia's Post-*

Paramilitary' era). This law was merely a smokescreen rather than a solution. When the Peace and Justice Law's co-author and the President's second-cousin (Mario Uribe) was arrested in 2008 for aiding Paramilitary groups it was pretty clear that the law lacked substantial substance. It is safe to say that as long as Paramilitaries have political connections as strong as the Presidency, no law will be successful in demobilization. Despite the Peace and Justice Law's many flaws, the Fiscalía is required to carry it out to the best of its abilities, and some good things have come from the law, such as truth and reconciliation for some of the victims' families. Little justice is being provided by the Peace and Justice Law, but it is a step up from the previous policy of zero justice. The Fiscalía was surprisingly open with us and allowed us to actually view a live confession as it was happening.

The confession we witnessed was very detailed, and extensive. Listening to how this particular individual was a part of carrying out crimes on innocent communities, and how they ignored the value of human life made it extremely difficult to hold back anger, and discontent as my classmates and I watched this individual tell a story of how he and some others killed a large group of people with machetes, and then either chopped them into pieces and dumped them in the river or lit them on fire. Sheer coldness took over the room and was completely evident by the individual's complete lack of emotion; the only humane thing that happened during this particular confession was when the individual took a sip of his bottled water. I do not have a better solution to the Peace and Justice Law, and the fact that some of Colombia's darkness is being shed into the light, is a positive step in the right direction, but it is clear that many steps are still

needed. Too many lives have been lost so carelessly in Colombia. The Fiscalía, as long as it remains genuine, is making an impact.

Colombia is the third largest recipient of U.S. aid, this means hundreds of millions of dollars annually. Much of the aid is focused on the conservative militaristic side of policy. Claiming a “war on drugs,” and a “war on terror” requires military support of Colombia, but the fact of the matter is that this aid scarcely accomplishes its primary goals and only aids the Colombian conflict. This is evident by the Colombian state supporting Paramilitaries, narco-trafficking, and the protection of international economic interests. Much of the conflict is a product of land conflict and the presence of abundant resources leads to major power struggles and U.S. free market investment only feeds the struggle. The U.S. strongly needs to reconsider its conservative stance on Colombia and gradually take a more liberal approach. Instead of combating the conflict with helicopters, bullets, and more military bases, investment in autonomous democratic institutions and the Justice system needs to become become a central part of U.S. foreign policy. Overall, the Fiscalía was a great experience. They allowed us to see some confessions, which really helped in the understanding of how the Peace and Justice process works, however they expressed a need for better technology and resources, which is something that needs to be addressed, seeing that the Fiscalía is a more diplomatic solution to violent crimes in Colombia. Maybe instead of focusing so much on military and the hard side of U.S. interests U.S. policy can focus on institutions.



Nan Cheney at a peace rally.

Photo courtesy of the Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice (WNPJ)

Our Memorial to Nan Cheney

By John I. Laun

The Colombia Support Network (CSN) lost a great friend and supporter this past April 30 when Nan Cheney passed away. Nan, a Madison resident, worked tirelessly for peace and committed herself to promoting justice, in this country and abroad. She co-founded and led the Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice (WNPJ) in 1991 to promote the idea of a community of organizations throughout this state combining our efforts to promote policies in this country that would really benefit the voiceless and underprivileged in this society, and also men, women and children everywhere. CSN has been proud to be a member of WNPJ virtually since its earliest days. Nan believed that peace and justice are universal values, so it was natural for her to support organizations focusing on achieving peace and promoting justice, whether in Wisconsin, Colombia, Nicaragua or any other place where war raged and justice was challenged. She gave us a great example of how important it is to work together in search of a better world.

Nan accompanied CSN on a delegation to our sister community of San Jose de Apartadó, and always took an active interest in our CSN programs. She joined us on numerous occasions when we brought Colombian sister community residents to Madison to describe the situation in their hometown and their homeland. She contributed in many ways to our projects and programs, always with a bright smile and a soft voice of support and encouragement. We will greatly miss her. We send our condolences to her husband David, who often accompanied her on her projects for peace, and to her family.

Madison, May 18, 2010

The Colombia Support Network

Action on Colombia

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