

Colombia Action on



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David Kast and friend in Peace Community of San Jose.

CSN's April 2013 delegation to the Peace Community in San José de Apartadó

By Eunice Gibson

This delegation started out with a bad misfortune. We had barely landed in Medellín when Cecilia Zarate-Laun became ill. We are grateful to the Medellín Airport baggage handlers who steered us to the First Aid Station, and to the First Aid staff, who urged her to go to the hospital at once. From there, after emergency treatment, she had to return home to Madison. The rest of us, Eunice Gibson, Steven Bray and Gail Ambrosius of Madison, and David Kast of Wausau, Wisconsin, went on to Apartadó, but it was not the same. We missed Cecilia, and the Peace Community missed her too.

Cecilia had arranged for Atty. Angela Gomez of the United Nations Development Project to accompany us on our visit to the Peace Community. Her legal knowledge was very helpful and it was a good opportunity for her to get to know the Peace

CSN's April 2013 delegation to the Peace Community in San José de

Community. The members of the Community let us know that very little has changed in the ways that paramilitaries and Colombian Army patrols are threatening them and violating their rights. Two of their neighbors were killed by soldiers just a few weeks before we arrived. Homes have been entered and crops destroyed.

Members of the Peace Community have repeatedly contacted the highest levels of the Colombian government to let them know that paramilitaries are still active and dangerous in the area. No response. In our meetings in Bogotá, we found that some government officials (Army and Defense Ministry) denied the existence of any paramilitaries, while others (President's and Vice President's human rights staff and the Attorney General's staff) admitted that paramilitaries are still active. (*Semana.com* for May 1, 2013 quotes a labor leader, Edwin Palma, as telling *BBC Mundo* that "paramilitary structures are still intact. Only the names are changed", he says).

The Army and the Police have refused to comply with the Constitutional Court's order to stop covering their name tags and to furnish the names, ranks, and serial numbers of soldiers and police who were present at events when citizens were harmed or threatened. When we visited the town of San José de Apartadó, Gail noticed that the ubiquitous police officers either wore no name tags or covered them with straps.

An ex-guerrilla who goes by the name of Samir is allowed to live at

the Army's 17th Brigade headquarters nearby at Carepa. He broadcasts radio programs where he claims that the Peace Community is a haven for the guerrillas. He tells outlandish lies about how the Community helps the guerrillas. The Army has conferred the title of "Peace Worker" on him and facilitates his activities. Of course his stories encourage paramilitaries and others to target the Peace Community.

There was some good news. We toured part of the cacao plantings and the chocolate factory and we tasted the newest chocolate product. It was delicious. Also, a member of the Community reported that the cattle business, aided in the beginning by Freeze For Food proceeds, is doing very well.

We talked with the municipality's agriculture officer, with a representative of the police, and with the equal rights officer at the Colombian Army 17th Brigade headquarters. All of the officials seem to consider the Peace Community an annoyance that interferes with their efforts. The municipality makes minimal effort to improve the road that leads from Apartadó to San José. The police official complained about Fr. Javier Giraldo's assistance to the Community. And the Army's equal rights officer, with a straight face, admitted that the ex-guerrilla Samir lives at the Brigade headquarters and yet insisted that the Army would like to have a better relationship with the Peace Community.

Our visits in Bogotá varied from hopeful to hopeless. Government

officials were either powerless to help the Community or uninterested in doing so. Two human rights officials in the Ministry of Defense stated that there are no longer any paramilitaries. They told us they did not know that the ex-guerrilla Samir lived at the Colombian Army's 17th Brigade headquarters, although they had visited the headquarters recently. Army officials had given them tapes of Samir's broadcasts and they heard no accusations against the Peace Community. (That evening, using the hotel computer, we did a brief Google search and we found plenty of evidence that Samir has made shocking accusations against the Community.)

Human rights officials from the President's and Vice President's offices were aware of the Community's web site and thus had information about what is going on there. They said their job was to refer complaints to the agencies that were the subject of the complaints. They have been unable to locate any of the paramilitary bases reported by the Peace Community.

We were very fortunate to meet with Colombia's highest military officer, General Alejandro Navas. His position is comparable to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the United States. He was courteous and generous with his time, in spite of being interrupted by calls from the President. But his attitude was disappointing. He admitted that mistakes had been made, although he did not identify them specifically. (Massacres, disemboweled

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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 grassroots activism.

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

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Colombia Support Network
P.O. Box 1505
Madison, WI 53701-1505

email csn@igc.org
www.colombiasupport.net

phone 608.257.8753
fax 608.255.6621

Apartadó continued

babies, false positives, etc.) But he believed that that was all in the past, that now there is a new Colombia and a new Army, although he seemed doubtful about the peace negotiations. He also believed that paramilitaries no longer exist. (On Sunday, August 11, Colombian media reported that the President had replaced General Navas.)

In November 2005, the Colombian Ministry of Defense issued a secret directive offering rewards for soldiers who killed a guerrilla. This was motivated by the military's perceived need to show "results" in the war against the guerrillas. As might have been expected, many ordinary citizens going about their business were murdered and dressed up as guerrillas. The Army even hired recruiters to lure poor young men into the countryside with promises of nonexistent jobs. Authorities have found evidence of more than 3,000 Colombians whose deaths were "false positives".

In Soacha, a poor suburb of Bogotá, recruiters lured more than 20 young men to their deaths and the scandal of the "false positives" was finally uncovered. The "Mothers of Soacha", whose sons were murdered in the

scandal, have traveled to Germany, France, Spain, and the United States to tell the story. They have received many death threats, but they keep on. We were fortunate to meet with four of them. They unrolled a huge sign with pictures of all of the victims, their children. They told us how they found out about what had been done to their sons. It was very moving, heartbreaking, and it made us want to keep on doing what we can to tell what has happened in Colombia.

All was not hopeless. Some of our visits left us hopeful that justice and the rule of law will some day arrive in Colombia. We met with Fr. Javier Giraldo, S.J., and gave him a copy of the Dane County Board of Supervisors resolution criticizing the cruelty of soldiers and paramilitaries against the Peace Community. He has since presented the resolution to President Santos. We also met with Luis Celis of the Nuevo Arco Iris (New Rainbow) organization, a Colombian NGO that has been working for peace and justice.

Luis was hopeful that the peace negotiations would be successful, because, he said, the rich and powerful in Colombia now realize that the war is interfering with business and with

economic progress.

Luis identified some major factors that have to be dealt with in order to achieve an enduring peace. There is too much inequality and exclusion in rural areas. Five percent of all owners control 1/3 of all agricultural land. Five hundred thousand people who live in rural areas own no land at all and another three or four hundred thousand own just a tiny plot. The negotiators will also have to find a way for such unequal and excluded populations to participate in democratic politics without violence and without fraud. Finally, the rights of victims have to be recognized by both sides. He said that the United States could be very helpful in supporting the peace negotiations and that groups like CSN are important in encouraging that.

Finally, our most disappointing interview was with the Embassy of the United States. We met with Adam Lenert, the Human Rights Officer and his superior, Joseph Giblin the Deputy Political Officer. Giblin was about to leave Colombia for a new assignment and his successor, who had arrived in Colombia just the day before, also attended our meeting. A friendly and knowledgeable Colombian lawyer, Juan Carlos Guerrero, was also present. He has been keeping track of the prosecutions related to the February 2005 massacre of eight people in the Peace Community and he knew that we would be interested in the latest information.

The Human Rights Officer has always been helpful and responsive to CSN, but his superior dominated the meeting and clearly believed that we were uninformed innocents, trying to interfere in his domain.



An artisan miner in a Marmato mine.

Colombia Support Network Delegation Report San Jose de Apartado, April 20–28, 2013

By David Kast

This year's first delegation was made up of Cecilia Zarate, Eunice Gibson, David Kast, Gail Ambrosius and Steven Bray. Cecilia became ill on the flight down and was not able to continue on with the delegation. Eunice took over the leadership role.

First a brief summary of our trip. We flew into Medellin on Saturday, April 20th, and then on to Apartado on Sunday, where we were met by a United Nations Development Project (PNUD) representative for the Uraba region, Angela Patricia Gomez. She accompanied us for two days of visits to the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado, relocated to San Josecito, close to San Jose, to avoid police and military presence. On Tuesday, following that primary visit, we visited a banana plantation and the mayor's office in the Apartado City Hall, as well as a United Nations office in Apartado.

On Wednesday, the 24th, we visited the Police Headquarters in Apartado and the 17th Brigade of the Colombian Army in nearby Carepa. From there we flew on to Medellin and then to Bogotá.

On Thursday, in Bogota we first visited CINEP, a Jesuit-run human rights organization that collates data on military and paramilitary violence against civilians. Then we went to the Defense Ministry, where we met with the Army's Director of Human Rights, following which we were met by representatives from both the Vice-President's and President's Human Rights offices. Finally we met with Luis Celis of Arco Iris, a small liberal think-tank.

On Friday, April 26, we met with Gen. Navas, the Chairman of the Military Chiefs of Staff; Gen. Nieto, head of intelligence; and Gen. Jorge Salgado, an acquaintance of Eunice's, who introduced us to Gen. Navas.

After meeting with Gen. Navas, we went to the Fiscalía's (Attorney General's) office. At lunch we met with the Madres de Soacha, mothers whose sons were recruited by the military, then killed, dressed as guerrillas and counted as false positives. Our final formal delegation meeting was at the end of the day at the American Embassy with the Human Rights Officer, the Deputy Political Officer, and a Colombian attorney who worked with the embassy.

On Saturday we did some sight-seeing and shopping, and on Sunday we returned home.

For us personally the most meaningful meetings were with the Peace Community and the Madres de Soacha, CINEP and Arco Iris. In the community we shared meals, played with the children and watched their schooling, visited their cacao and pineapple plantations and heard stories from the leaders and members of the community of their struggles and endurance in the face of ongoing harassment and violence. Hearing the stories of the Madres de Soacha was also heart-rending. We saw pictures of the family members, mainly sons, they had lost to the military through trickery and lies, offered jobs then killed for false positive counts. At CINEP we were able to meet with Fr. Javier Giraldo, S.J., one of the staunchest supporters of the peace community. And Luis Celis of Arco Iris was inspiring in his optimism for peace and reconciliation.

Meeting with the various government representatives was fairly uniform. The lower-rung officials, mainly in the human rights areas, were generally the friendliest, as was the representative of the Fiscalía. But one can tell their hands are tied; they cannot stray from



Father and daughter in the Peace Community of San Jose.

Message from Yamil Amar Catano

September 2, 2013

Dear Cecilia,

I send a cordial greeting to you, your husband and all of those with you. I hope that your health is better now thanks to the medical treatment which you are receiving. Since I know that you are interested in learning about the latest developments related to the situation in this municipality, I will go on to provide you with some comments concerning the situation here in Marmato.

In reaction to the promulgation of Decree 2235 of 2012, which criminalizes mining without a title to the land being mined, generalized protests have arisen against this provision. These protests have begun because the decree seeks to open the path to transnational corporations, for the following reasons. The requirements established by the government to acquire a mining title are costly and require a great deal of time and effort, making it difficult for an artisan miner to fulfill them. And if it be supposed that an artisan miner might obtain a title, it would be almost impossible to keep it because of the reports which the government requires constantly, and because of the taxation measures which the government would also impose. To summarize, the very requirements which are established for a multinational are the same with which a small-scale miner must comply in very unfavorable conditions.

Taking advantage of the situation of disagreement with Decree 2235, an attempt is also made to classify mining into small, medium and large, and through this type of ideas establish that the conditions be different for each of them.

Due to the protests, here in Marmato as in almost all of the country, violent incidents were generated by the presence of Esmad (the anti-disturbance police squad), the police unit which was created so that in an irrational manner the government could terminate the legitimate and justified demonstrations of the communities. Here in Marmato, after the Esmad police had destroyed 15 motorcycles of miners, as well as the hut where the food and the kitchen were located, and after they hurled teargas and other elements, a decisive battle took place. In that battle the demonstrators used stones in their defense, taking advantage of their knowledge of the land, and thanks to that they practically forced the Esmad police to retreat, taking with them approximately 20 of their number injured. However, 8 miners were also injured.

The government, due to the fact that the midget has grown with the protests, now says that it is disposed to enter into a dialogue about the solution of the problems, which the government had previously said was impossible.

With respect to Gran Colombia Gold, the situation has not changed much, and we are waiting for any new occurrence.

Sincerely, Yamil Amar Catano

the official position of the government except in quiet undertones. The Police in Apartado and 17th Brigade were evasive, admitting some problems but claiming that all had been put right and that the community shouldn't complain anymore, but rather cooperate. When it came to Gen. Navas, the Director of Human Rights, and the representatives of the President's Human Rights Office, we were stone-walled. They suggested that the Peace Community needed to cooperate more and they complained too much. And as far as Gen. Navas was concerned, all corruption and problems in the military had been resolved, they were clean now, the rebels had to be crushed, and the bacrim (bandas criminales) controlled. Meanwhile, his view was, the Peace Community, who were suspect for their intransigence, had to trust the government. But the most disappointing meeting was at the U.S. Embassy. It was clear that the people we met with there were not concerned with human rights or the community, only with political dealings with the government. The Human Rights Officer was weak and the Deputy Political Officer was disdainful of Colombian human rights problems and dismissive of the Colombian or U.S. governments' roles in them.

Despite the shortcomings in the meetings with government and military representatives, we are encouraged by our meetings with the peace community, the Madres, CINEP, Luis Celis, those friends who helped us, and the others we met who quietly showed their support for and shared in our goals and ideals and who continue to struggle for peace with justice in Colombia.



Marmato miners' sign saying, "We are not illegal, we are traditional miners."

The Agrarian Strike and the Indigenous MINGA Caused Difficulty for the Colombian Government



Marmato miners' demonstration against Government policies.

by *Carmenza Tez of the Kamentsa Indigenous Community of Sibundoy, Putumayo.*

Translated by Jack Laun, a CSN Volunteer Translator.

On August 19, 2013 Colombian campesinos (peasants) paralyzed traffic with peaceful marches in different departamentos (provinces), demanding the right to a profound agrarian reform. This action sprung from the fact that the rural areas of Colombia have been seriously forgotten by the Colombian state, sharpening the social crisis and increasing poverty in the country.

Initially the government refused to recognize the national agrarian strike. Meanwhile, the capital city of Bogota

was in crisis because the agrarian strike had blocked the supply of foodstuffs from the countryside to the city. In reaction against President Santos's failure to recognize the strike, different cities joined the national strike, with people going to the streets banging on pots and pans, which shook the national government with greater force.

In this situation the government decided to sit down to have a dialogue with the agrarian dignitaries of Boyaca province and Narino province, who are represented in large part by businessmen of the agricultural sector. Meanwhile, the base campesino sector continued the strike in several

provinces with roads blocked, which forced the government to recognize the MIA, "agrarian dialogue table" (mesa de interlocucion agraria), which represents the campesino base in a large part of southwestern Colombia. These campesinos maintained the strike until September 23, for more than a month. The MIA has national spokespersons, who beginning on September 26 began a dialogue with the government on a national collection of petitions which are organized around 7 points.

Meetings of the MIA have been held in several cities, but until now, according to the report of national spokespersons, there has been no advance toward any agreement. One of the primary demands is that the fumigations (spraying) of glyphosate (Monsanto's Roundup Extra, glyphosate with an added surfactant-editor's note) be suspended. The spraying is killing growing food crops and is harming the health of persons, animals and the environment in general. A proposal seeks to replace coca-growing through a plan denominated PLADIA ("Plan of integral development for the Amazon Andean region"). This plan proposes stopping for all time the fumigations and the expansion of coca-growing. As Ecuador is indemnified for the spraying of glyphosate which wafts across its border with Colombia, with greater reason the damage caused to the Colombian population, which receives the aerial fumigation of glyphosate directly and indirectly, should be recognized.

In spite of this situation, the government has accentuated more forcefully the fumigations with glyphosate and deferred the time for a

discussion of this point at the dialogue tables, failing to comply with some accords established with the agrarian dignitaries. In addition, persecution of the leaders of these processes is being generated. Among these actions, they have detained in an arbitrary manner one of the leaders of the MIA in the city of Puerto Asis in Putumayo province. His name is Wilmer Madronero and he has been imprisoned in the city of Mocoa since October 23 of this year. His immediate release is demanded, as well as the release of the other persons who were detained during the agrarian strike throughout the whole country.

In the Upper Putumayo the place known as the Sibundoy Valley joined the agrarian strike with the march of hoe and seed, which was carried out on August 30 of this year, with ample participation. Immediately following the march the agrarian situation of this zone was analyzed and described in a document, so that the regional and national MIA would include our petitions concerning the national demands, which are the same in all of the country.

This process continues on its course, while national meetings with the MIA are being held. In the regions, as is the case for the Putumayo, the exercise of holding meetings in the different municipalities is being carried out, to spread the process and collect greater inputs which strengthen the national set of demands and local responsibility facing the agrarian crisis which the country is experiencing.

In the same way beginning on October 12, of this year the indigenous population in the center of the

country began a strike in response to the failure of the government to comply with the provisions of the several agreements which it has entered into with the indigenous sector. In a parallel development, the indigenous Nasa population in the Putumayo carried out a “minga” (an organized popular protest), with a good representation of Inga communities in the lower Cauca province and the “corregimiento” (district) of Secumbios, which lasted until October 22. The minga participants hoped that the government would comply for the first time with the agreements established in the Cauca. If it did not, they would accentuate with greater strength the peaceful mobilizations to continue in resistance, demanding collective rights and that the social crisis which the country is experiencing be alleviated in the indigenous and campesino sector.

With respect to the basic life of the indigenous and campesino populations of Colombia, I invite North American citizens to try to get the government of Obama to stop the fumigations with glyphosate in Colombia, since these fumigations are every day ending the very life of human beings, food crops in the fields, animals, and the environmental equilibrium of the different ecosystems which they fumigate. They should urge their government to try a path of substitution of coca crop planting, a solid program built by the base communities which are directly and indirectly affected by the present anti-drug policy, which has been imposed by the United States Government upon Colombia.

The Colombia Support Network

Action on Colombia

Editor

Cecilia Zárate-Laun

Contributors

Yamil Amar

Eunice Gibson

David Kast

Jack Laun

Carmenza Tez Juagibioy

Design

Randy Clark

Our wonderful volunteers

Stephen Gaschinard

<http://colombiasupport.net/donate/>

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Wisconsin Interfaith Committee on Latin America, Inc.

Colombia Support Network

P.O. Box 1505

Madison, WI 53701-1505

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