

Colombia

Action on

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Village named for Luis Eduardo Guerra

Colombia and its Precarious Democracy

By Luis Eduard Celis

Translated by Eunice Gibson, CSN volunteer translator

Colombia is experiencing a presidential debate that clearly reflects its limitations as a fragile democracy, plagued with serious issues that it needs to overcome, so that we can truthfully say that Colombia's political life is governed by a high-quality democracy that can be effective throughout the whole country. The revelations about the presence of drug trafficking money, spying, and schemes to sabotage the ongoing peace process with the FARC, conspiracies in which the Armed Forces "rebel" against the process of dialogs and negotiations are subjects that have captured the political stage in the last few weeks. This demonstrates that there are serious problems to be solved and that those who are using "dirty tricks" are very powerful. It is clear that these problems are not recent, but have been part of Colombian politics for decades, along with the presence of drug trafficking in politics and the use of the

Colombia and its Precarious Democracy continued

Armed Forces to defend the social, economic, and political order. These are tremendous weaknesses to overcome, if we want to say that we live in a democracy.

Colombia has had some democratic institutions and procedures: elections, parties that have alternated in power, a functioning parliament, decentralization of local and regional governments, and a “free” press, but while these are important, at the same time there has been persistent violence as a mechanism of political action, and a fragility of the electoral system that has made election fraud and stolen elections a “shadow” that generates little credibility in the seriousness of the electoral system. Together with that, we have a political system that has been monopolized by Liberal-Conservative bipartisanship that, for one hundred and fifty years, has monopolized governance, and even though during the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century there have been contrasting societal systems, after a civil war among themselves, they decided on a pact of alternating, such as the National Front, that excluded any third party. That explains in part this half century of armed guerrilla rebellion that we are on the way to closing down with the negotiations with the FARC and the pending negotiations with the ELN.

As a separate chapter, it is worth considering what the presence of drug trafficking as a social dynamic has meant, and the important powers that the traffickers have had as key actors in many regions of the country.

That has been a process that affects the economy, and not just the illegal actors, but also providing goods and services for populations that have lacked the basics and that, with the presence of actors in league with the drug traffickers, have been able to see how in their communities they were able to obtain what previously had been unfamiliar and out of reach. That is what drug trafficking has done, bringing about at the same time terrible violence and achieving an enormous presence in Colombian politics. The justice system, part of the press and the communication media, and some political sectors have fought this presence with the support of the international community. This enormous presence has also led to what has been called “Para-politics” which by now has put dozens of members of Congress in prison and done damage

which is not a thing of the past, but much to the contrary, continues to be present and active in Colombian politics.

Colombia is experiencing a presidential debate where not very much is being said about the difficulties in our democracy, where we have to overcome three serious problems: violence against opponents or forces that might achieve power, the fragility of the electoral system, with its propensity for fraud, and the inequality in competition for power. These subjects have been debated for decades in Colombian society and in the last two, after the adoption of the Constitution of 1991, some important steps have been taken, but much remains to be done in institutional reforms, in systems, and for a culture of democracy, in order to be able to state that we live in a democracy.



CSN intern Steven Snyder with State Historical Society archivist Jonathan Nelson at CSN Annual Meeting.

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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Bogotá and its policy towards the victims of the armed conflict

By Ana Teresa Bernal

Translated by David Van Den Brandt,
a CSN Volunteer Translator

In Colombia, the internal armed conflict has left, according to the official numbers, 6,300,000 victims. Bogotá is a city seriously affected by this situation: the number of persons displaced by violence that have arrived in Bogotá is 500,000.

The current government of mayor Gustavo Petro, a very recognized leader of the Colombian left, has designed a public policy of great importance that will answer the situation that the victims face. Day after day, they continue arriving in the capital city of the country.

This policy is part of the three axes of the Development Plan, primarily of the first and third axes, namely:

Axis 1. A city that overcomes segregation and discrimination.

Axis 2. A city that arranges itself around water.

Axis 3. A city that defends what is public. Returns trust to the citizenry via its institutions.

To guarantee this, Petro's government created the High Office for Victim Rights, Peace, and Reconciliation (Alta Consejería para los derechos de las víctimas, la Paz y la Reconciliación), directing the programs towards the victims of the armed conflict in the overcoming of segregation and in defense of what is public.

Located in the first axis is the entire process of assistance, attention, and complete reparation for the victims. To achieve this end, the axis relies on:

6 Attention centers in the localities where the highest concentration of victims exists.



An artisan miner in a Marmato mine.

2 Housing centers for people or families that arrive to the city without any type of social network.

1 Historical Memory center located in a central place and visible for all citizens.

A team of attorneys and professionals that represent the victims' interests so that they can access their rights.

The budget that Bogotá Humana, directed by mayor Gustavo Petro, has allocated for assisting and attending to the victims of the armed conflict in Bogotá is approximately 300 billion pesos per year [~\$156,089,700 USD]. No city in the entire country makes such an important effort to work with the National Government in a complementary way in the task of reparations for victims.

But although the effort of the city is enormous, what is done for the victims clearly continues to be

insufficient. It has really not achieved a process of economic, psychological, nor social stabilization in the case of indigenous and afro-descendant cultural communities. Greater resources are required, and therefore, our mayor has made clear to the National Government on repeated occasions the necessity of a peace bond that would contribute to the reparation process for victims of the armed conflict in Colombia.

A greater political will is required for this, and such a will should express itself now that we're living with an electoral opportunity and that the topic of the victims has been in the public agenda recently.

Ana Teresa Bernal M

Alta Consejera para los derechos
De las víctimas, la Paz y la Reconciliación
Bogotá, D.C.
Colombia-Sur América

Letter to CSN from Member Terry Adcock

Dear CSN :

I see Colombia's dilemma to be parallel to the one we face in the United States. The multinational corporations/cabals owned by the oligarchs have such a stranglehold on the economic/political system that the current political system can bring about nothing but the «status quo.» And the «status quo» brings nothing but death and destruction to those who would change it.

I believe that the CSN approach is the proper one—building Peace

Communities that say “NO” to the current destructive “reality” by offering a NEW reality that struggles for peace over power and domination. This is the long, hard, costly approach that doesn't kowtow to the false alternatives of those protecting the “status quo.” It is a long-term solution to a short-term problem, and it's hard to maintain in the midst of violence and repression by those wanting to maintain their power and influence.

But it is the right approach. And the way we know it is the right

approach is because everyone defending the status quo wants to kill those who try to implement it.

We need to build Peace Communities here in the United States, while at the same time promoting and supporting Peace Communities in Colombia. It is truly the only alternative we have.

I am thankful to consider myself a part of the CSN approach.

Terry Adcock
Austin, TX

A Message from Gloria Cuartas, former Mayor of Apartado

Translated by David Van Den Brandt, a CSN volunteer translator

I'm part of the contaminated Left.

Yes, I have to say it; I'm not the same woman that arrived in the municipality of Apartadó and lived the war and lives the war—Apartadó changed my life. Feeling the pain and uncertainty of a people surrounded by a selective death that determined who could stay in a region and who couldn't contaminated my heart.

My ears became contaminated hearing the cries of women searching for their husbands and kids in the banana plantations, on rivers' shores and then in the rivers. I'm followed by the cries of dogs standing next to the bodies of the men and women who had taken care of them. Nights were never again clear and peaceful because in the cover of darkness, death advanced, imposing power logics upon the bodies of women. No longer could I be at peace because I learned that the military power lives and gets along with the paramilitary army, caretaker of the goods and properties of a select few.

I'm part of the contaminated left,

which has seen boys and girls lose their dreams and a vision of utopia because municipalities privilege investment in so-called “armed security” while investment in health, education, and housing take second place.

I'm part of the contaminated left, which exerts much effort to understand that insurgencies have created territorialities of power, which confront the hegemonic power of the State, and have generated other forms of inhabiting territories.

I'm part of the contaminated left, which understands that the economic model and development plan of the State, upon privatizing the public realm, have broken social organizations in that eagerness to survive.

I'm part of the contaminated left, which believes that the United States has an obligation to respect our internal affairs and to stop utilizing our territory as a battlefield against us and Latin America.

I'm part of the contaminated left, which sees in Santos compliance with an international agenda that forces him to reach agreements in the peace

accords.

I'm part of the contaminated left, which does NOT accept Uribismo as an alternative because we know that its plan for death and its negotiating methodology without ceding are an already proven extermination agenda.

I'm no longer the same, and therefore, I want a peace process that allows my life as a woman to believe and calm my heart again; a process that helps us to strengthen a broad front where we can overcome the exclusive economic model that has deepened the war, imposing its interests.

If peace doesn't come knocking, “let's at least push so that it could be.” I consider that I will alleviate my soul this 15th of June saying to URIBE that I'm not ready to continue living in the middle of the war; that his totalitarian practices for extermination frighten me; that I know very well about his capacity to impose cruelty.

I'm part of the contaminated left that wants to and deserves to live in peace.

Gloria Cuartas

PEACE AND THE NEW CONGRESS

By Antonio Sanguino*
(Summarized by Eunice Gibson,
CSN volunteer translator)

The make-up of the new Congress casts doubt on the future of the peace agreements, basically because of the conflicting interests in the redistribution of productive land, democratization of Colombian politics and respect for human rights.

A coalition of traditional parties will have a majority and the left will be in the minority.

This Congress is a product of a fragile ideological identity, based on private economic interests. It will not give the President a blank check to carry out provisions of the peace agreements. It will insist on specific provisions, and those will be intended to inflict the least cost on these economic interests.

The issue of the land

The democratic redistribution of the land and modernization of land use will be opposed by the large landowner mentality of our traditional political class. Colombian writers have documented that landowners see land reform as a threat to their way of life.

Little has changed. Many members of the new Congress have ties to paramilitary activities and will be opposed to agrarian reform. Landowners are a new force now opposing the peace process as well as land reform. Politicians who have used their positions to acquire land will be opposed to the peace process.

But experts state that agrarian reform requires executive action, and that executive action will be required to undo the illegal actions taken to expropriate land during the Uribe administration. Besides, some executive actions have to be taken under the Victims' Law. Judicial and administrative land restitution will require political will in the new government.

Land restitution needs to break with the corporatist thinking that characterizes the Colombian government. Instead of increasing the holdings of landowner families, land needs to be returned to victims and that will require the government to act boldly.

Democratization of Colombian politics

Everybody knows that our political system still suffers from the bipartisan nationalism that pacified the country in the '50's, but was the germ of exclusion in the '80's.

It is a system where patronage limits access to public resources and reproduces itself.

Investigations of the Segovia, Antioquia massacre, in which members of the Patriotic Union were murdered, show that it was intended to control a political movement. The insurgency and the government have agreed to deal with this basic issue, where political conversation stigmatizes political

opposition, making it an object of disgrace and even murder.

Vilma Franco describes it well in her book about the counterinsurgency in Antioquia in the '80's and '90's. She describes how the Antioquia elite constructed an "us", disciplined, religious, hard working, and conservative, and "them", to be defeated with violence, leading to the phenomenon of the paramilitaries.

What kind of reforms will the new Congress support? Allowing former members of the FARC some kind of political participation is the minimum price that the political and economic elites will have to pay if the armed conflict is to cease. But they are unlikely to allow real democratization because that would undo the historic factionalism that is based on private interests.

Neither do conditions exist for passage of a statute that would provide real protection for the opposition, whose job it is to question the incumbent government. A



A woman prepares a poster for a demonstration.

THE BAD LUCK OF BUENAVENTURA

By Cecilia Zárate-Laun

Congress led by an ex-president, whose strategy is terrorist and a group of “Para-politicians” will have no desire to do that.

Respect for human rights

The current Congress needs to support a peace agreement that favors victims. Congress must see to it that the peace agreement does not provide impunity for crimes against humanity, and that it does provide specific tools for achieving truth, justice, and reparation. The current Congress is more inclined to favor the victimizers over the victims. The “Para-politicians” and others will object to judicial proceedings that root out the truth about those individuals who made paramilitarism possible. And the armed forces will seek an agreement that will provide impunity for them.

Conclusion

The recently elected Congress represents the interests of those who have always governed and want to continue in the same way, and they will use the bureaucracy to do that. They want to spend as little of their own money and advantage as possible. Electoral maps will continue to support corporate principles before peace. The solution to the root causes of the armed conflict, such as redistribution of land, democratization of politics and human rights, to the extent that provisions of the peace agreements require congressional action, will be subjected to landholder and exclusionary interests. The road to real peace requires that the citizens elect representatives who will support these solutions.

*Antonio Sanguino is a member of the Bogotá City Council and spokesman for the Alianza Verde (Green Party).

The city of Buenaventura, Colombia’s main port on the Pacific Coast, was founded on July 15, 1540. Buenaventura, ironically, means ‘good luck’ and ‘total happiness.’

Buenaventura is part of the biogeographic region of Chocó that goes from the border with Panamá to the border with Ecuador.

It is considered one of the most biologically diverse areas on the planet. It is mainly populated by Afro-colombians and Indigenous communities.

Chocó has been a region whose natural resources have been extracted by using violence, force and exclusion of its population. This long history of suffering has characterized this area during different time periods. At the end of last century, and indeed as of today, it is being prepared to implement the neo-liberal policies ruled from Washington whose goal is to practice a social-economic policy based upon market forces.

Buenaventura has a population of nearly 355 thousand inhabitants. Fully 80% of its people live in poverty, 63% are unemployed. Although, they live surrounded by waters of eight rivers, they do not have clean water or garbage collection services. Buenaventura hosts 60% of Colombia’s foreign businesses.

The Colombian government is developing mega projects in Buenaventura in order to increase its economic competitiveness in the Pacific. Among these plans are the construction of a new port in ‘Malaga Bay’* for big ships since the bay possesses deep waters. The enlargement of its cargo structures is being built by Filipino and Singapore companies. Another project is a road that would connect the Pacific with the Orinoquia region (in the border with Venezuela). There

are other scheduled plans, such as the sea terminal for the Dagua river, and a duty-free zone in Cruz Bay.

The government’s goals and the new construction are taking over neighborhoods from the land adjacent to the sea called ‘bajamar’ (low tide). The inhabitants who are mainly fishermen and wood workers say they are being forced to leave: *“We won these lands to the sea... we worked to fill up with clay and saw dust the streets..we put up with everything to have a house by the sea and leave early to fish...Now they want us to leave for our security. But after they displace us, they will build hotels, restaurants, stores, offices right here in our territory... Nobody has asked us if we want to leave....”*

President Santos has declared Buenaventura the capital city of the “Pacific Alliance” and wants to make it a ‘development pole.’ But, I ask at what price? The cost is quite high, the use of violence, the impoverishment of the population, their displacement and their disempowerment.

During the Administration of former President Uribe, there was a demobilization of paramilitary groups who filled the Colombian countryside with terror and atrocities. Among the young, unemployed recruiters, mercenaries formed “Bandas Criminales” (BACRIM) which are groups in charge of making the ‘clean up’ of the city’s territories in Buenaventura.

For example, the “Punta del Este” massacre that was committed on 4/19/05 where a paramilitary invited twelve young men from his neighborhood to play a soccer game offering 200 thousand pesos to the winning team. The match ended up with the young men disappeared, and their bodies found three days later in a nearby marsh. Their eyes pulled from their sockets and shots in their skulls.

continued

People are killed every day in the street, in markets, or taken to the “Casas de pique” which are chopping houses where people are dismembered, their bodies in pieces thrown to the sea.

According to the Forensic Office in the first 3 months of 2014 alone, 96 persons have died from violent causes in Buenaventura. When they asked for help from the military to avoid a killing, they answered that “*They can not do anything about it because their function is to protect wealth.*” Recently a researcher, Gearoid O’Loingsigh, reported that in Buenaventura “*Genocide is more profitable to the powerful and the government because of this simple math equation: they pay 500 thousand pesos to a paramilitary to do his job of killing 10 people monthly, while building a decent house for a family costs 400 million pesos. If there are 10 persons who need a house, the expense is 400 million. For the government it is cheaper to allow the killing of 10 than to relocate one family.*”

The Colombian government has answered to the people of Buenaventura, religious officials of the Diocese and several journalists about these macabre events, in the same traditional way. The military do not defend the people, but they allow the paramilitary to do their dirty work with total freedom. What is important for the government is to facilitate the economic development of the multinational corporations in Buenaventura.

Buenaventura’s mayor wrote a moving letter to President Santos alleging that it was ‘ungrateful, perplexing, and illogical’ that the “Eighth Presidential Meeting of the Pacific Alliance ... was held in the Atlantic coast in the Caribbean city of Cartagena” (<http://www.buenaventura.gov.co/>)

But the real reason is that Buenaventura is not ready yet to be shown off. There is still a lot of blood, more desperated screams from the

chopping houses, and many tears before we wish good luck to the international business world.

CSN Poster featured on AMC Blog

The poster “Winds of March,” that won a platinum award from the Association of Marketing and Communications is featured on its blog.

<http://blog.amcpros.com/2014/06/23/giving-back-through-marketing-and-communications-randy-clark-graphic-design/>

The Colombia Support Network

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A young person with a pet parrot.



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