



Unravelling an unholy alliance

by *Clara López Obregón

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November 9th of 2006 brought a significant surprise to Colombian politics. Two senators and a member of the House of Representatives were charged by the Supreme Court¹ of participating in the formation and activities of paramilitary death squads, and warrants for their arrest were issued. Several other political figures, including a former Governor and an Ambassador outside the jurisdiction of the Court, were named, and investigations into their conduct ordered by the highest judicial authority of the country. How did I feel when I realized that these events were the beginning of a full scale investigation into the widely known, though not acknowledged, connections of establishment figures with outlaw private armies? Surprised like everybody else, but vindicated. After many

Unravelling an unholy alliance continued

years of insistence², something was finally being done to uncover the extent of paramilitary influence in high places, and I had been instrumental in these events by formally denouncing, before the judiciary, the infiltration of Congress by the paramilitary, a year and half earlier, on June 9 of 2005.

At the time, the government was negotiating the submission of the paramilitary federation of regional right wing vigilante groups known as AUC, (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* or United Self Defense Corps of Colombia). One of their leaders, Vicente Castaño, brother to Fidel and Carlos Castaño Gil³, organizers of the principal outfit associated in the AUC, started showing off the outlaw organization's political clout by stating publicly that they had elected 35% of the members of Congress. This was not entirely loose talk as the statement coincided, almost word for word, with what another paramilitary leader, Salvatore Mancuso, had alleged just days before the 2002 congressional elections.⁴ Congress, by assertion of the promoters of some of the worst crimes ever registered, was discussing legislation regarding the conditions of their surrender while they seemed to proclaim that the law would treat them well because they meant to write it!

With a healthy dose of skepticism and overcoming the natural fear of interfering in these matters, I wrote to the judicial authorities demanding an investigation into the paramilitary bosses' reiterated affirmations that they held a quota of Congress. I felt that their assertions amounted to a confession of a major conspiracy to adulterate political representation, basis of democratic

government. How could we, the people, have faith in our democratic institutions, if Congress were prey to unidentified outlaws in its midst?

Until then, all formal criminal investigations had been directed against individual actors and segregated into innumerable independent cases. My grievance was aimed at unraveling the conspiracy as a whole. The objective was to spur an investigation into the unholy alliance of politicians and illegal groups of armed civilians and drug traffickers that has practically replaced public authority in vast areas of the country under the justification of protecting society and the State from widespread guerrilla insurgency.

Faced with a common denominator, the Supreme Court accumulated all the prior individual cases into one full-scale investigation which has given rise to the first official effort aimed at establishing the responsibility of former and acting members of Congress with irregular paramilitary groups. After the first indictments, six additional congressmen have been called in for questioning. Many more await the Court's call. The press informs daily of new developments. Senator Miguel de la Espriella, for instance, made public his attendance at a meeting of more than 40 politicians with the AUC leadership in 2001.⁵ A political commitment, signed by all present, was handed over to the authorities by paramilitary boss Salvatore Mancuso as part of his ongoing confession under the

special legislation⁶ that offers generous benefits to the AUC members that have entered into negotiations with the government.⁷ The AUC leaders have called

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upon politicians, business leaders and army officers to tell the truth about their relationship with the paramilitary groups. One such leader, former Air Force officer Andrés Angarita Giraldo who offered to give names, was murdered on the 28th of December (2006).⁸

The Supreme Court has been surrounded by a great deal of public support, but reprehensible efforts are underway to pressure the Magistrates into silence. A Congressional Committee is looking into charges against some of the Court's members and the press has published allegations that taint others with illicit connections. Indicted Congressmen are renouncing their seats in order to evade the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court. All the same, the Court

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.

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

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remains firm and intent on following through with this investigation.

Convictions are another matter. Evidence is scant and witnesses elusive, due to the perils involved. Much depends on the willingness and effective capacity of government authorities to successfully provide protection to witnesses. Another threat to the full disclosure of the truth paradoxically comes from law enforcement agencies. Many of the principal witnesses are the paramilitary-cum-drug lords that the US is demanding in extradition for the drug trafficking. The track record with plea bargaining cases of drug traffickers⁹ has left most of the human rights atrocities untold and in absolute impunity. Credible immunity from extradition for the principal figures or a conditioning of its concession to full disclosure of crimes against humanity and human rights abuse, will also be needed.

Truth and total disclosure of the holocaust that Colombia has lived over the past twenty years is a necessary ingredient of reconciliation, based on a semblance of justice and reparation of the victims that run in the thousands. The first step has been taken by the Supreme Court. We can only hope that they can and will continue until the whole truth is revealed.

NOTE FROM CSN: Clara's request to the Supreme Court launched the tsunami-like investigation that currently overwhelms Colombian politics. She graciously accepted CSN's invitation to write this article describing her action.

Footnotes

¹ By the Colombian Constitution, Congressmen have the privilege of being judged by the Criminal Section of the Supreme Court.

² I first denounced the burgeoning unholy alliance of paramilitary, politicians, landowners and members of the armed forces as speaker at the funeral of Jaime Pardo Leal, President of the Patriotic Union, on October 13 of 1987 (Full text in Spanish at www.claralopez.net)

³ Fidel Castaño Gil, alias Rambo, was killed in a scuffle with an EPL guerrilla party in 1994. Carlos Castaño was murdered, apparently by Vicente Castaño in April of 2004.

⁴ Margarita Martínez for the Associated Press, Feb 13, 2002 12:22 PM
<http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/colombia/doc/mancuso.html>

⁵ http://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/2006-11-26/ARTICULO-WEB-NOTA_INTERIOR-3340795.html

⁶ Known as the "Justice and Peace Law", this controversial legislation offers reduced sentences of a maximum of 8 years to paramilitary commanders in exchange for full confessions and reparation of victims. To date, some 25.000 formal complaints against the AUC leaders have been presented to the authorities involving over 100.000 victims. In his still unfinished confession, Mancuso has taken responsibility for 87 criminal actions totaling more than 300 fatal victims (6 massacres, 61 individual murders of labor and political leaders, among others). The principal Colombian newspaper heads its Sunday edition of January 21st (2007) with the following headline: "Mancuso no confesó ni el 5%" (Mancuso didn't confess even 5%). According to the article, the Police attributes to Mancuso's group, 7.300 of the 8.113 murders committed in the Norte de Santander province between 1999 and 2004.

⁷ The document, classified as "Top Secret" and now in the hands of the Supreme Court, involves "the refoundation of the Republic", quotes the Constitution and is signed in a strictly hierarchical order, the paramilitary bosses first, followed by 4 senators, 7 Representatives, 2 Governors, 5 Mayors, etc. (EL Tiempo, January 19th, 2007).

⁸ He is the fourth high ranking paramilitary boss to be murdered after the peace talks started in 2004. The other three are Carlos Castaño commander of the AUUC, Miguel Arroyave and Carlos Mario García, alias 'Doble cero'. Two of the AUC lawyers and dozens of demobilized members of the AUC have also been killed.

⁹ See the two part special report on this matter in the St. Petersburg Times, ONLINE, by David Adams, published May 4, 2003.
http://www.sptimes.com/2003/05/04/Worldandnation/Dr_B_and_Group_43.shtml

CSN IN ACTION:

CSN launched three documents to be delivered to their respective Members of Congress by the different chapters, members, friends and associates throughout the country. These documents address US foreign policy towards Colombia from three different angles : one is on Colombian Army human rights abuses; another was prepared especially by Accion Andina Colombia on the fumigations and environmental concerns; and the third is a CSN translation of an open letter from Colombian Senator Jorge Robledo on the Free Trade Agreement to Members of the US Congress. See these documents at www.colombiasupport.net

The CSN chapter in Kansas City had a successful table at the SOAW vigil at Fort Benning. They did national outreach to many people for our organization and collected lots of new names

Natalia Fajardo made appointments to see her Vermont Representatives in Congress in order to submit CSN's document on the Colombian Army. We hope many more follow her example. She and 4 others met with Rep Welch on February 21

The reports from CSN have gone to all the eight representatives and both US Senators in Wisconsin. This was done by CSN members or by sister organizations in the state. A special meeting was planned by CSN member David Kast with 6 more constituents from Rep David Obey's district in Wausau on February 22. John W. Gibson, Eunice Gibson and Cecilia Zarate-Laun were also present

Marylin Lorenz in St Louis distributed the documents to both Missouri Senators and Representatives.

CSN expresses great appreciation to Board Member Eunice Gibson for her dedicated and continued development and update on the document about the behavior of the Colombian Army.

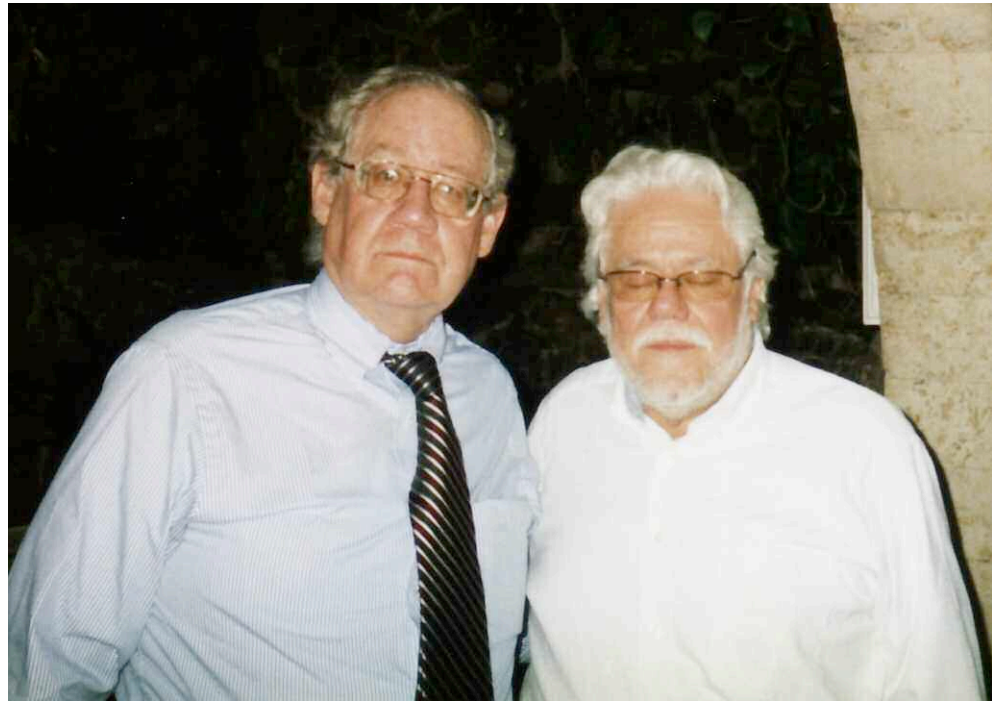
The Underlying Principles of U.S. toward Colombia and the Results of their Implementation

by Jack Laun

The U.S. seeks to exercise authority in Colombia out of a number of concerns. Principal among these are protecting its access to natural resources and promoting sale of U.S. products through the formation of a bilateral, eventually hemispheric Free Trade Area.

Natural resources include petroleum for U.S. companies such as Occidental Petroleum, Exxon and Texaco; coal for Drummond Coal Co. and Exxon; and minerals such as gold and uranium mined by multinational companies with U.S. capital investment. The strategy of the Colombian government, in league with the U.S. government, has been to train forces to protect mineral and oil deposits and oil pipelines. The Colombian military, through the efforts of Generals such as Rito Alejo del Rio and Jaime Millan, has coordinated its activities with private security forces, or paramilitaries, to protect oil and mineral installations. This is consistent with the recommendations made by the Yarborough Commission, a military mission sent to Colombia in 1962 by the Kennedy Government, which recommended the formation of paramilitaries to impose order in areas beset by violence, including where U.S. companies were carrying out exploration and mining activities. Paramilitary forces have murdered union leaders (at a Colombian Coca Cola plant and of Drummond Coal Co. union leaders, which was done according to a witness at the order of a Drummond coal executive). They have also murdered peasant members of cooperatives and other grass-roots organizations in areas of economic

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Jack Laun with presidential candidate Carlos Gaviria-Diaz in Bogotá

interest to multinational companies.

These paramilitary forces in recent years have also forced millions of peasants, indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombians off their lands, especially in areas where oil drilling and mining activities are being carried out. Colombia now has some 3.6 million internally displaced persons, the second most of any country in the world after Darfur. This activity also clears the land for mega-projects associated with the Free Trade Area of the Americas. Among these are a proposed railroad and highway link across northern Colombia from Venezuela's Maracaibo oil fields to the Pacific Ocean, for transport of oil to China, Japan and other East Asian countries. There are also plans for harnessing Colombia's rivers to provide electricity to other countries.

But these plans all require, as does

commerce from north to south, an end to the Colombian guerrilla wars, in the view of U.S. policymakers. So not only does the U.S. train Colombian military officers at the School of the Americas (renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation a few years ago), but it maintains some 800 military personnel in Colombia to train the Colombian military on its home turf. The Bush administration has sought and obtained Congressional approval for spending U.S. tax dollars on fighting the guerrillas. In the last five years the U.S. has spent over 3 billion dollars in aid to Colombia, approximately 80% in military expenditures.

Another part of the U.S. policy toward Colombia has focused upon the so-called "War on Drugs." This has involved primarily crop spraying, or fumigation, of the coca crop (and more recently poppy

CSN Sister Communitas Cajibío-Central New York Chapter

Adopted from an article by Colleen Kattau

CSN's CENTRAL NEW YORK CHAPTER
CONNECTS WITH CAJIBIO

In 1976 visionary and social activist Hank Strunk used a personal inheritance to buy 432 acres of land in Truxton, New York for the development of a communal committee to ecological land stewardship. Since then 12 households have followed that vision at Common Place Land Cooperative (CPLC). Now CPLC has announced the first use of its Land Liberation Fund, a \$10,000 donation to assist the Small Farmers Movement of Cajibío in Colombia (Movimiento Campesino de Cajibío, MCC). The Fund seeks to facilitate the liberation of land away from market forces and privatized ownership and towards collective ecological stewardship.

In 1990 the MCC was formed, uniting nine rural communities in a commitment to develop alternatives and strategies against multinational corporate incursion and accompanying state and paramilitary violence. After a visit by several Central

New York activists to Cajibío where they met with Marylen Serna Salinas, one of the leaders of the MCC, a sister community relationship between Syracuse, Cortland and Ithaca, New York was formed.

As a sister community relationship through the Colombia Support Network developed, the Central New York sister community recognized that the theoretical basis for the goals of the MCC were very similar to those of CPLC. Both communities embrace the right to inhabit and utilize land and the responsibility to share and safeguard it for future generations.

In stark contrast to the US and transnational models of economic development, Cajibío's small farmers have always looked to the land itself, both culturally and spiritually. MCC members pursue recovery of their territory not just to reverse the legacy of forced displacement from their lands, but also to protect the land ecologically and use land for its original purposes of food production for their community following

ecological principles.

In spring of 2005 while the Central New York CSN chapter explored the possibility of providing funds to Cajibío for land purchase, the MCC had been meeting with young people of the organization who wanted to participate in the land recovery effort. They needed land for a small youth center for cultural and educational activities and to grow organic crops for local consumption. They would also teach the younger children about organic farming crops for local consumption. The MCC's plan seemed a good project for CPLC land acquisition fund support.

The MCC and CPLC have much to learn from each other. It is our hope that young people from both communities will have the chance to visit each other soon, and that Central New York can contribute to the MCC's success while learning from it how to temper our own disproportionate individualism.

**Colleen Kattau is a singer/songwriter and Assistant Professor of Spanish at SUNY Cortland. She is a member of both CPLC and the Central New York CSN Chapter. She visited Cajibío in 2004.*

Considerations for Shifting US Aid to Colombia

by Cecilia Zarate-Laun

In recent months judicial investigations have demonstrated that there is a powerful criminal alliance in Colombia among politicians, drug-lords, paramilitaries and the Colombian army. More and more information surfaces daily linking the relationship among these actors, with the worrisome added fact that most of them are members of the coalition of President Alvaro Uribe. We believe it is not in the best interest of the US government to ally itself with a government essentially controlled by a mafia and to a government that has several members of its Legislative branch in prison. More detentions of legislators, state governors, and former Members of Parliament have been announced

According to the Colombian Constitution, only the Supreme Court has the power to investigate and judge members of the Legislative branch. Former political office-holders are investigated and prosecuted by the Fiscalía General (Attorney General's office). In spite of multiple death threats, these two Judicial Branch entities have recently done a superb job using their powers to deliver justice. However, given the fact that

more and more corruption charges and very serious crimes keep showing up, these offices deserve all the support of the United States in providing them with the financial and technical resources they need to continue doing what they are doing. Strengthening Colombian democracy would benefit the Hemisphere as a whole and would send a clear and strong message to our neighbors that the United States stands tall when defending uncompromising principles. It is in the best interest of the United States to support the Colombian Supreme Court and the Attorney General's office, whose courageous work is serving democracy and freedom.

One of the most courageous persons in Colombia is Senator Gustavo Petro from the opposition party the Polo Democrático Alternativo. Petro's debates in the Colombian Congress have demonstrated the links and relationships among many politicians, military, paramilitaries and drug traffickers, acting as shady governments in vast regions of Colombia, controlling the economy of these regions, with power of life and death over their inhabitants and displacing millions of peasants in order to take their land and to continue their illegal activities. The Inter-American Commission

of Human Rights has granted Senator Petro precautionary measures to protect him. Senator Petro was very seriously threatened on February 6, 2007 and therefore it would be important that the international community monitors the safety of Senator Petro.

In relation to drug-trafficking, current policies and the cocaine price at street level demonstrate that the strategies have failed and are doomed to keep failing. New and more creative approaches must be developed, such as tracking drug money in the financial markets to find money launderers and, exercising control over trade in chemical substances indispensable to produce cocaine, which are not produced in Colombia. Substances such as ether and potassium permanganate have to be imported and it would be more productive to track them than to damage Colombia's unique bio-diversity by spraying the coca crop with glyphosate. Drug treatment in this country would be a more effective tool than persecuting humble peasants who produce coca because their original lands were taken by the drug-trafficking paramilitaries and the politicians beholden to them mentioned above.

A Letter from the Peasant Community of Cajibío to its Sister Community the CSN Chapter in Central New York

How Cajibío will use the land purchased with the CPLC funds

By *Movimiento Campesino de Cajibío*

“What land we will leave to our children, what children we will leave to our land”

The young peasants of Cajibío are experiencing very difficult times because they cannot foresee a good future. Land is scarce, their resources are scarce and the multinational corporations are accumulating more and more land.

The tradition of families from a long time back has been that the fathers pass on as an inheritance to each one of their sons a part of the farm where they began to plant crops and prepare the land, where they will live when they get married and have a family. But today fathers can no longer do this, because the farms now are very small and are not sufficient for all their children.

The alternatives are few because their resources are insufficient to buy a parcel or they do not have good support necessary to obtain credit from a bank. They are also affected by the presence of the multinational corporations which extend more and more their crops, displacing peasants or impeding their access to land, and as a result more and more young men see their dreams frustrated.

The peasants have no alternative to guarantee a future for their children, and the children are emigrating to the cities in search of a future for which they are not prepared. For a peasant the land signifies the possibility of realizing his dreams, of

continuing his father’s activity in raising a family and the possibility of contributing to the country from what he knows how to do and he likes to do.

Transforming the thinking of a young man, getting him to think as a peasant, ought to be accompanied by giving him the possibility of having a piece of land where he can build his dreams. They recognize the responsibility which they have with their people, but they are not able to locate themselves where they can make their contribution.

From this perspective a relationship has been established with the brothers and sisters of the Central New York region, to help out so that peasant youths in Cajibío may have a little land. We are working with 120 youths collected in seven groups. Initially with the funds sent to us we are buying a piece of land for each group and with funds raised by the group of youths, the organization of a planting in a communal form is being carried out. The products obtained from this planting will be distributed among the members of the group or when the crops are sold, the profits will be distributed.

With this activity the organization seeks to keep the youths from emigrating to the cities where an uncertain future awaits them. This activity seeks to have the youths keep their peasant identity, providing continuity to the project of their parents staying on their farms, strengthening the organizational process.

MOVIMIENTO CAMPESINO DE CAJIBIO

CSN national meeting

University of Wisconsin-Madison

May 4–6, 2007

The Colombia Support Network

Action on Colombia

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I am interested in volunteering:

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PARTICIPATING IN CSN WORKING GROUPS

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