

July 14, 2015

**Advisory Council:**

**Rev Daniel Berrigan S.J.**  
Activist, Writer, Poet

**Larry Birns**  
The Council on  
Hemispheric Affairs

**Blase Bonpane**  
The Office of the Americas

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Member, U.S. Congress

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Honorable  
Juan Fernando Cristo  
Minister of Interior  
Bogotá, Colombia

Dear Minister Cristo:

As you may know, the Colombia Support Network (CSN) is a national nongovernmental organization based in Madison, Wisconsin, USA. By action of the Dane County Board of Supervisors, Dane County, Wisconsin, is the sister city of the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, Antioquia, Colombia. Since the early 1990's, representatives of CSN regularly travel to visit the Peace Community and are in regular contact via telephone and internet with the residents of the Community. As you are probably also aware, the Peace Community maintains a website that is kept current, and there are also a number of other internet sites that contain current information about the Peace Community and about events that take place in that part of the country.

In reviewing that information, we are deeply concerned about events involving the 17<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the Colombian Army. As you know, the 17<sup>th</sup> Brigade has been notorious for human rights violations, but the situation has become much worse with the appointment of Col. Germán Rójas Díaz. He publicizes defamatory statements that place individual citizens in grave danger; he supports the paramilitaries instead of controlling them, which is his sworn duty; and he allows his subordinates to threaten the citizens, take their property, and interfere with their subsistence farming activities, as well as deliberately involving them in combat, contrary to international law. We urge that Col. Rójas be removed immediately.

On December 10, 2013, the President of Colombia apologized publicly to the Peace Community because his predecessor had accused the Community of being guerrillas and harboring guerrillas. This was false and defamatory and the Constitutional Court ordered the apology.

On Monday, October 27, 2014, on *Caracol-Television International*, Col. Rojas stated that the Peace Community were "guerrillas" and "bandits". Also, without any evidence, he accused international groups (such as our own) of protecting the guerrillas. This is absolutely false and defamatory and in violation of the Community's rights and of the rights of our organization.

As recently as June 16, 2015, Col. Rójas told the media that the Peace Community's legal representative, German Graciano Posso, is a "guerrilla belonging to the 5<sup>th</sup> Front of the FARC". This statement is false and



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defamatory and violates the law. In addition, this statement makes this law-abiding individual into a target of the paramilitaries, who occupy and move freely in much of the territory that Col. Rójas has the duty to protect.

The paramilitaries are an illegal group under Colombian law and have been named by the United States as a terrorist organization. Yet, in Urabá they work closely with the Colombian military and their control is such that they have been allowed to undertake actions that, under Colombian law, would and should be taken by a municipality, namely building roads and developing housing units. For more details, see an article by Juan Diego Restrepo, “Y entonces quien manda en Urabá” in *Semana.com*, August 9, 2014.

Because the Colombian Army grants the paramilitaries the liberty to do as they wish in Urabá, they patrol in uniform, carrying weapons. They actually capture and detain residents, usually letting them go after they make threats and steal their food, animals, farming tools or other belongings. They frequently set up illegal checkpoints, stop public transportation vehicles, and require campesinos to attend meetings. They circulate pamphlets that illegally defame the Peace Community and threaten violence.

Unfortunately, the soldiers commanded by Col. Rójas also commit some of these same violations, sometimes alone and sometimes together with the paramilitaries. On Friday, October 10, 2014, a campesino was seized by soldiers, tied to a tree for ten hours, threatened and accused of being a guerrilla. When he was released, he was threatened with harm if he told anyone what had happened. That is just one example.

His soldiers barge into people’s houses without permission. They interfere with farm work by blocking pathways. They actually camp out in or next to the homes of civilians, putting their lives at risk. On April 15, 2015, they seized a member of the Peace Community and accused him of giving information to the guerrillas. They claimed that international organizations (such as ours) were doing the same thing. Eventually he was released.

As if there remained any doubt as to Col. Rójas’ loyalty to the citizens of Colombia or to his own Commander-in-Chief, on Thursday, May 21, 2015, at a meeting where he and the 17<sup>th</sup> Brigade were being honored by local business people, he said “. . . Rito Alejo Del Río . . . contributed to build the Urabá of today.”

Rito Alejo Del Río is a war criminal who worked closely with the paramilitaries. He was convicted of murder and other crimes and is now confined to prison by Colombian justice. On *Caracol Radio* on June 26, 2015, Colombia’s Minister of Defense, Luis Carlo Villegas, invited citizens to tell him if they believe there are connections between the Colombian military and illegal organizations. How can he continue to tolerate a commander who admires Rito Alejo Del Río?

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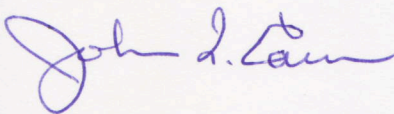
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In recent days the Army has made declarations against Don Jaime García, who lives in the vicinity but is not a member of the Peace Community, but who has been in real solidarity with the Peace Community. The Army has made several false accusations against him to intimidate him. For some time they have been pressuring him to sell to the Army a piece of land he owns across the road from San Josecito, so they can locate there a military base, since they are going to have to move their installations out of the town of San Jose. Don Jaime has not wished to sell his land to the Army, to avoid doing damage to the Peace Community. He is a very well-respected person, and the Army should desist from pressuring him to sell them his property.

Finally, I would like to mention that the Government has not followed the requirements established by several sentences of the Constitutional Court and of the Council of State which prohibit the placement of police stations and military bases in the midst of the civilian population in zones of conflict. Such militarization attracts the guerrillas, and every week there are several instances of crossfire, with great risk to the population and with frequent injuries to civilians. The government has also failed to abide by the requirements of Decision 164 of 2012 by the Constitutional Court, since it has not complied with any of the 4 orders given by the Court. They it has also failed to follow Sentence T-125 of 2007, which ordered it to divulge the names of the members of the public forces who were present in the locations,

Thank you for your kind attention to this letter.

Respectfully,



John I. Laun, President  
Colombia Support Network

CC: Hon. Juan Manuel Santos, President of Colombia  
President Maria Victoria Calle Correa, Colombian Constitutional Court  
President Manuel E. Ventura Robles, Inter-American Court of Human Rights  
President Luis Rafael Vergara Quintero, Consejo de Estado  
Luis Carlos Villegas, Minister of Defense  
Gen. Juan Pablo Rodriguez Barragán, Commander, Colombian Armed Forces  
Gen. Alberto José Mejía Ferrero, Commander, Colombian Army  
Hon. Kevin Whitaker, U.S. Ambassador to Colombia  
Hon. Tammy Baldwin, U.S. Senate  
Hon. Mark Pocan, U.S. House of Representatives  
Representative Todd Howland, Office of the High Commissioner for



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