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Mr. Ira Glass, Director
Mr. Sean Cole, Producer
"This American Life"
WBEZ, Chicago Public Radio
848 East Grand Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60611

Dear Mr. Glass and Mr. Cole:

I have on several occasions in the past listened to your radio program with interest. Your programs generally are interesting and informative. However, your program featuring Jose Miguel Sokoloff was very misleading and astonishingly incomplete. Mr. Sokoloff's presentation concerning his collaboration with the Colombian Army badly needed to be placed in context, something you failed to do almost completely.

There are two basic problems with the way Mr. Sokoloff's presentation was treated. First, no context was given for the purpose for which the FARC guerrillas formally began their fight against the Colombian government back in 1965. Second, the Colombian Army, with a long history of very serious human rights abuses, was given a pass by your program. The Colombian Army, as we have reported at great length over the past 29 years, has committed great crimes with virtual impunity over this whole period.

With respect to the FARC, they began their rebellion against the government seeking to improve the lot of small-scale farmers, called campesinos, who had been deprived of their economic, social and political rights by a government run by a narrow elite. The FARC sought agrarian reform, a more just society for these residents of rural areas. Mr. Sokoloff conveys the impression that the guerrillas are simply criminals---they kidnap, are involved in the drug trade, and extort money from relatives of kidnap victims and merchants---while the Colombian Army, which provided funding and helicopters for his activities, are good guys. This is a very misleading characterization of the situation in Colombia. The guerrillas indeed have engaged in kidnapping and extortion, though they say this was to raise funds to finance their activities. They have taxed coca producers, though they deny marketing the coca or cocaine abroad themselves. And they have committed many other very serious crimes, including murders and massacres.

Chapters

Central New York
(Cortland, Ithaca,
Syracuse)

Kansas City MO, KS

Dane County, WI

The FARC started as an organization seeking to change the power relationships in the countryside through land reform, as campesinos lived in poverty while large landowners denied them basic rights and controlled the local governments. That situation is still quite true for the Colombian countryside today. Colombia has the second worst distribution of wealth in South America, after Paraguay, as measured by the GINI Index. You might well have mentioned that the FARC were invited to lay down their arms and enter the political system by President Belisario Betancur in the mid-1980's. When many FARC guerrillas did lay down their arms and run for public office (it must be said also, however, that the FARC continued to maintain an armed force in the countryside), they were joined by others who had never taken up arms against the government, but wanted to achieve meaningful changes through peaceful electoral campaigns. The two groups together formed a new political movement, the Union Patriótica (UP) or Patriotic Union. The response of the traditional power structure was to support paramilitary forces which collaborated with the Colombian Army in carrying out the murder of some 5,000 members of the UP, including two Presidential candidates, in a genocidal campaign that left a tremendous blemish on Colombian society. As the UP members were murdered, many FARC guerrillas returned to armed rebellion against what they saw as an unjust system. This case of political genocide has no parallel elsewhere in the world. The case of the UP murders has been brought before the Inter-American Court for Human Rights.

You might usefully have discussed the role of the United States Government in the Colombian conflict, which would have been a much needed learning experience for your This American Life audience. Fearful of the influence on Colombia's people that Fidel Castro might have, President John F. Kennedy in 1962 sent a military mission to Colombia headed by General William Yarborough which suggested to the Colombian government that it should use paramilitary forces against civilians who might opt for a change in government. The United States bears substantial responsibility for violent suppression of peaceful efforts at change, through the advice of General Yarborough and our government's support for the Colombian military to the extent of more than 6 billion dollars in military aid under "Plan Colombia" and the "national security" doctrine, which focused on counter-insurgency warfare. These counter-insurgency activities were carried out against many civilians presumed to have anti-status quo leanings, as well as against the guerrillas.

And you might usefully have taken a close look at the Colombia Army, which Mr. Sokoloff presents in such idealistic terms. This is an army which has collaborated with violent, illegal paramilitary forces to kill many innocent civilians and itself been responsible for massacres. Back in 1985 the Army responded to the taking of the Palace of Justice in downtown Bogota by guerrillas of the M-19 Movement with a counter offensive which left the building in ruins, with 11 justices of the highest Colombian courts, including the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, dead and numerous M-19 guerrillas dead. All of the dead justices reportedly were killed by military

bullets. And 11 workers at the cafeteria in the basement of the building were ushered out of the building and subsequently tortured and murdered by order of the Army command at the Palace of Justice and a nearby historic house. The details of what became of the cafeteria workers and where their lifeless bodies were buried have still not been revealed by the Army commanders responsible for their disappearance and murder, 30 years after the event.

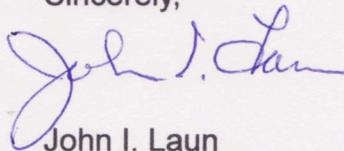
Furthermore, the Colombian Armed Forces have misbehaved in another astonishing series of actions, known as the "false positives" scandal. This activity consisted of Army commanders supervising the kidnapping of young men of families with limited resources---often by offering them a job or other incentive, then taking them to a community some distance away where they would not be known, and then murdering them and falsely presenting them as "guerrillas killed in combat"---"positives" in Army lingo (i.e., "false positives"). The Army officers approved these criminal activities in order to boost the number of guerrillas killed by their unit so they would be given promotions, vacations or money for Christmas or Mother's Day under a plan approved by the Ministry of Defense when current President Juan Manuel Santos was Minister of Defense. The number of youths killed in this manner appears to have exceeded 3,000.

We of the Colombia Support Network have become keenly aware of the Colombian Army's misdeeds. We have worked with grass-roots organizations in rural communities, forming sister community relationships, and with human rights organizations. And we have taken delegations to Colombia for the past 29 years and maintained a web page detailing our activities and sending out urgent action messages in response to threats against civilians. The Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado, the official sister community of Dane County, Wisconsin (which includes the state capital, Madison), is a good example of the repression of campesino communities. The Peace Community does not allow any firearms within the community, and has established a set of principles for good government. Yet the Colombian military of the Seventeenth Army Brigade in Carepa, some 30 kilometers from the Peace Community, has for many years threatened Peace Community leaders. And on February 21, 2005 the Seventeenth Brigade carried out a joint exercise with illegal paramilitaries in which they massacred 8 Peace Community people, including Luis Eduardo Guerra, a co-founder of the Peace Community and member of its leadership council, and 3 young children. We had hosted Luis Eduardo here in Madison two years or so before his murder.

So this is the military Jose Miguel Sokoloff presents so positively in his puff piece on the Army-supported Christmas demobilization of FARC fighters! I present this information, not to defend the guerrillas from the charges of numerous human rights violations (including having murdered some of the leaders of the predecessor of the Peace Community), but to show that the presentation by Mr. Sokoloff is misleading and a serious

failure to put his discussion into the context of Colombian reality. I believe that you have done a disservice to your audience, and particularly to those who have suffered from human rights violations by the Colombian Army.

Sincerely,



John I. Laun
President, Colombia Support Network

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