

**COLOMBIA SUPPORT NETWORK STATEMENT ON WALL STREET
JOURNAL ARTICLE ON THE PEACE COMMUNITY OF SAN JOSE DE APARTADO
December 15, 2009**

In the “Americas” column in the December 14, 2009 edition of the Wall Street Journal Mary Anastasia O’Grady presented an account of the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado rife with false information and allusions to supposed facts which have no basis in reality. Ms. O’Grady has written critical pieces on the Peace Community in the past, making unsubstantiated allegations about the community and its leaders. CSN established a sister community relationship with Apartado twenty-one years ago, and we have been especially close to the Peace Community of San Jose ever since it was formed on Good Friday in March 1997. We are especially well-placed to know what the community is, what its principles are, and how it embodies those principles in practice.

In her December 14 column Ms. O’Grady presents as if true the allegations made by a former member of the FARC guerrillas named Daniel Sierra Martinez, also known as “Samir”, whom she says she interviewed in Colombia last week. We have known about Samir for some time. He is a former member of the FARC who was given refuge in the Colombian Army base of the Seventeenth Brigade at Carepa, near Apartado. Although according to Colombian law he should have been turned over to the public prosecutor’s (the Fiscal General’s) office for criminal processing, he instead was housed at the military base, where he has been encouraged to issue false, defamatory information about the Peace Community and human rights organizations which have supported the Peace Community. Ms. O’Grady presents Samir’s testimony as if it were true. Thus she suggests that the information he has supplied confirms President Alvaro Uribe’s allegations that “some ‘human rights’ groups are actually fronts for terrorists.” Observing that Samir charged that the Peace Community “was not the least bit neutral”, she cites him as saying the Peace Community “was a FARC safe haven for wounded and sick rebels and for storing medical supplies”. She presents as if true a claim by Samir that suppliers to the FARC met with rebels in San Jose, “where there were also always five or six members of the Peace Brigades International.” The suggestion is that Peace Brigades International (PBI) is facilitating guerrilla-support activity in the Peace Community. This is utterly outrageous and demands from the Wall Street Journal a rectification.

The facts are these: the Peace Community has suffered numerous killings of community members by the FARC, including the massacre of Peace Community leaders, who were taken from their homes and murdered in the town square. More than 30 Peace Community residents have been murdered by FARC guerrillas since 1997. Why? Because the Peace Community has a set of principles which it follows, and among these are that the Community does not permit armed actors within its borders and does not give support to any of them. It does not permit transit of arms or armed personnel through the Community, nor the providing of supplies to armed actors, including the guerrillas. Thus the

FARC have attacked Peace Community members in retaliation for the Community's refusal to provide support and supplies its units, or to allow them to pass through the community. If Mary Anastasia O'Grady has specific evidence to the contrary, let her produce it. If she cannot, which is surely the case, she owes the Peace Community an apology. And she certainly owes an apology to PBI, whose members in San Jose have protected Peace Community members, themselves committed to peace, from attacks against them.

What is behind the enmity of President Uribe, and his journalist apologist, Ms. O'Grady, toward the Peace Community is that the Community members are determined to remain upon their lands, where they seek to live and farm in peace. These lands are coveted by President Uribe's government and by paramilitary forces with ties to members of President Uribe's political supporters for these lands' strategic location and for mineral wealth the lands reportedly contain. The goal of the people for whom Ms. O'Grady speaks is to force the Peace Community out of the region.

Ms. O'Grady criticizes Edward Lancheros, Father Javier Giraldo and Gloria Cuartas (the latter of whom she characterizes as "the notoriously left-wing mayor" of Apartado) for insisting that the military stay out of the area. First we should acknowledge that we know all three of these people well and consider it a privilege to know them. They are not guerrilla supporters. Edward has made very important contributions to the operation of the community and never has been false to the commitment to opposition to arms and armed groups in the community, including the FARC guerrillas. Father Giraldo has dedicated his life to protecting the rights of victims of violence and to preserving and compiling information about human rights abuses. His principled opposition to violence and courageous recording of abuses by all armed actors—guerrillas, paramilitaries, and state security forces—are great contributions to peace and justice in Colombia. Far from criticizing Father Giraldo, Ms. O'Grady should recognize him for what he is, an authentic Colombian hero. Gloria Cuartas was chosen mayor of Apartado back in 1994, when Alvaro Uribe was Governor of Antioquia Department, in which Apartado (including the Peace Community of San Jose) is located. Our CSN web page, which we believe to be the oldest focused on Colombia, back then detailed Mayor Cuartas' pursuit of peace in Apartado. When violence wracked her community, she comforted the families of victims of violence and welcomed persons displaced from their homes by violence in the countryside. Yet when she sought information about paramilitary activity in her municipality from Governor Uribe, asking to know about the activities of groups called "Convivires" formed under Uribe's aegis, he declined to provide details, sending to Mayor Cuartas instead a dismissive, impolite letter from his right-hand man, Pedro Juan Moreno, who was later linked to supplying inputs for cocaine production in Colombia. Since her term as mayor ended, Gloria Cuartas has been a tireless worker for protection of victims of violence and an unfailing advocate for human rights. No one in Colombia has displayed more courage in defending and supporting innocent people threatened by violence, including those of the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado.

Ms. O'Grady's mindless defense of the Colombian military ignores the many abuses the military have committed. Among the worst of them was the massacre carried out by soldiers of the Seventeenth Brigade in collaboration with paramilitary forces against members of the Peace Community in a rural district of the community, where on February 21, 2005, Peace Community leader Luis Eduardo Guerra, his companion and son, and 5 other Peace Community members were murdered. Luis Eduardo, whom we knew well and who had visited CSN in Madison, Wisconsin, and had spoken at the School of the Americas protest, had met with Vice President Francisco Santos just a day or two before being murdered, to discuss concerns of Peace Community residents for their personal safety. CSN sent an investigative delegation to Apartado and learned that the Seventeenth Brigade under the command of General Fandino had participated in the massacre. This conclusion has just been supported by testimony of an Army colonel who participated in the massacre.

Instead of giving a public airing to Samir's lies, Ms. O'Grady, were she a genuine reporter rather than a simple apologist for President Uribe, would and should focus on the problematic role of the military in confrontation with the Peace Community and human rights workers. Her statement about the "pacified" Uraba for which she suggests the Colombian Army was responsible fails to mention that the "pacification" involved the Army collaborating with paramilitary forces to murder hundreds of innocent noncombatants.

Finally, Ms. O'Grady suggests at the beginning of her article that Colombia's experience presents an "instructive" model for the U.S. in Afghanistan on "defending a civilian population in a narco-economy." This statement is the height of folly. President Uribe's actions have ratified military murder of civilians and have produced millions of displaced persons. About 4.5 million people out of a population of 45 million have been forced out of their homes, more than any other country in the world, except perhaps Sudan/Darfur. President Uribe's so-called "democratic security" has been neither democratic nor secure. Only a person totally oblivious to the truth could suggest this as a model. For the Wall Street Journal to present this nonsense uncritically speaks very poorly for the paper itself.

Written by John I. Laun