



Members of CSH Central NY chapter in jeep on Cajibío delegation (left to right, Rae Kramer, Ann Tiffany, Laura Macdonald and Jessica Maxwell)

Colombia Support Network Meets Smurfit

by Laura Macdonald

If you didn't know any better, bouncing down a rutted Cajibío road in an oft-repaired jeep, you might think you saw a lush Colombian forest in the distance. The hills are green with trees, a stark contrast to the open ranch lands and croplands that also form the patchwork of land in our sister community. The sad truth is that the green hill in the distance is only a crude illusion of a forest. Rather than being part of a dynamic ecosystem, the trees are exotic species which suck from the water table and damage the soil. These tree plantations are among the many holdings of multinational paper giant Smurfit Kappa Group, doing business in Colombia as Carton de Colombia, and here they are not called forests at all, but *el desierto verde*, the green desert.

Smurfit has been disregarding a previous agreement to stop acquiring land in the Cajibío community, and land available for the local campesinos to purchase has become increasingly expensive and scarce. The Movimiento Campesino de Cajibío (MCC), our sister

CSN Meets Smurfit continued

organization in Cajibío, has made organizing around this issue one of its top priorities. Last March, the organization hosted a "Forum for the Defense of Land and Water" in which the community voiced their opposition to continued land purchases in the municipality on the part of Smurfit, and its determination to struggle nonviolently for change. The same night, a group of people entered a Smurfit plantation and destroyed thousands of trees. It seems likely that these people were angry campesinos, although our hosts, the MCC, did not know who was responsible.

The one thing we do know is that the MCC is absolutely opposed to property damage on Smurfit's land. Shortly after the incursion and the Forum, a leader of the community and a good friend of ours began to receive threats against his life. He was forced to flee to Bogotá in order to protect himself and his family, and he remained there for over a month. Eventually, he was able to have a meeting with local representatives of Smurfit, which resulted in a document wherein the company recognized the role of the MCC in the community. Our friend returned home, believing that the situation had calmed, at least for the time being.

Smurfit's impact on the community was apparent throughout our Colombia Support Network (CSN) Central New York State sister community delegation. From the youth group's presentation on water to the ever-present plantations, to the various conversations we had with

community members, it was clear that this was a problem on people's minds. One night, as we left an outlying *caserío* later than planned, dusk began to settle as we passed through an area dominated by mature pine plantations. The tall rigid rows of trees made eerie walls pressing up against the rutted road. In the jeep we talked with one of the community leaders about the situation with Smurfit. She told us of the threats, the incursions. "Things are more peaceful now," she said, "but we know it is only temporary. They keep buying land and the pressure is mounting. I think things

Land is the most important thing for a campesino, and to suggest they give it up is like suggesting they cease to exist. What the people need is land, for themselves and for their children. They need clean water for drinking and for growing crops.

are going to get very intense, maybe very soon."

That same night, there was another incursion onto Smurfit-owned land which destroyed an additional 4,800 trees. According to unnamed sources within the corporation, high-level Smurfit officials had made it known that the time had come to deal with the unrest in Cauca. Even worse, there were rumors of Smurfit plantation guards being fired and replaced by paramilitaries and of our friend's name being mentioned in the context of the incursions.

Our delegation decided that it was important to show our support for the

MCC and to demonstrate with them their members' innocence of charges of damaging Carton de Colombia trees by setting up through CSN a meeting in Bogotá which our organization had sought with Smurfit's "Social Projects Coordinator" for the Cajibío region, Hector Calderon. It was the first time CSN had organized and conducted a meeting with representatives of a multinational corporation involved in activities harmful to Colombian peasants. Smurfit recognized the importance of the meeting, sending Smurfit's lead lawyer in Colombia, Edgar Muñoz, to accompany Mr. Calderon. The MCC and CSN invited other organizations to send representatives to the meeting, and the lawyer working on behalf of victims of the La Rejoja and Pedregoza massacres, Omar Hernandez of MINGA, was present, as were representatives of Witness for Peace and the Cauca human rights non-governmental organization CIMA. MCC chose two representatives: our friend and the vice-president of the MCC's Board of Directors. In the meeting, our friend stated very clearly that the MCC was not responsible for the incursions. Mr. Calderon assured him, not altogether reassuringly, that "there is no document which accuses [him]" and Mr. Muñoz added that he was not on the list of people whom the company suspects are responsible.

The rest of the meeting consisted of a discussion of the broader relationship between Smurfit and Cajibío. Smurfit's representatives claimed that, despite all evidence to the contrary, the plantations really aren't causing environmental damage according to their experts, and

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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CSN Meets Smurfit continued

that the MCC should accept the wage-economy. The vice-president of the MCC, as the only campesino present at the meeting, spoke powerfully of the history of the struggle for land in Cajibío. The land they have obtained, they have obtained through struggle, and this has always been the case. Land is the most important thing for a campesino, and to suggest they give it up is like suggesting they cease to exist. What the people need is land, for themselves and for their children. They need clean water for drinking and for growing crops. Keeping people on their lands has been the touchstone goal of the MCC. A gulf much larger than the table lay between us. On the one side, a way of looking at the world as resources to be exploited and people as either hindrances or potential workers. On the other side, people who have known struggle all their lives, who see land and community as the keys to a better world.

What was the purpose of such a meeting, if its participants left with such divergent perspectives? First and foremost, the meeting demonstrated to Smurfit that the Movimiento, and our

friend in particular, are not alone. It is our hope that this will provide some measure of safety to our sister community members as they continue to struggle peacefully against the ever-spreading green deserts of Smurfit Carton. Secondly, the meeting provided an opportunity for members of the community to access high-level Smurfit officials who would normally refuse to meet with them, but who did agree to meet with us. This is an example of the increasing solidarity that is developing between our communities. I continue to be grateful for all that our sister community has given us, all that we learn from watching their incredible organizing skills, the warm welcome and friendship that we receive. I am glad to have had at least a small chance to give something back. What we told Smurfit at the meeting is true: We will not be going away. We will be watching, and we will do whatever we can to stay in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Cajibío.

Laura Macdonald, a member of the Central CSN New York Chapter, has worked in the human rights field in Guatemala and in activities seeking to close the school of the Americas, WHINSEC.

CSN NEWS

We received good news from Mogotes, our CSN Minnesota chapter's sister community. In the October elections a great supporter of the Constitutional Assembly was elected Mayor and Leonardo Padilla was re-elected to the City Council with the largest vote of any candidate. Leonardo is one of the leaders of the Constitutional Assembly.

The Kansas City chapter is preparing its first delegation to its sister community in the Putumayo. The delegation will spend time with the Embera-Chamies in the town of El Tigre.

We continue to support the investigation of the military counter-attack of the Palace of Justice 22 years ago. CSN has sent a letter to President Michelle Bachelet of Chile asking that her government request the recall of General Carlos Alberto Frasca – Naranjo, one of the military officers present during the military counter-attack, who is presently serving as military attaché in the Colombian embassy in Santiago.

Our CSN – Kansas City Chapter once again made its annual trip to Columbus Georgia for the SOAW events, where they operated a CSN table. Their participation in the SOA Watch annual demonstration continues a long tradition of CSN support for the closing of the School of the Americas (WHINSEC).

CSN's newsletter designer and Senior Associate Randy Clark presented a show of his Colombia posters and other works in the Washington Pavilion, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Randy's sensitive and provocative posters on Colombia's violence and search for peace received great interest from those attending.

Ana Carrigan's enlightened investigative work on the Palace of Justice affair, published several years ago, is the subject of revived interest, since Colombia's Attorney General has re-opened an investigation into the murder of civilians in the Palace of Justice. CSN has numerous copies available for purchase for those interested. The price is \$20.00.

CSN MOURNS THE PASSING OF JOHN HICKMAN



The Colombia Support Network recently lost one of our greatest friends, our former Treasurer and a long-time member of our national Board of Directors, John Hickman. John, a non-smoker, died of lung cancer in Madison in October. He is pictured above preparing bratwurst and hamburgers for a cookout at one of our National Meetings a few years ago. John provided CSN with invaluable advice and we will miss his knowledgeable contributions to our plans and programs and his unwavering support for them, as well as his wonderful sense of humor. A former university professor and missionary with a doctorate in anthropology and an abiding interest in Latin America, John helped us to sort through the many issues of life and death which our work on Colombia presented.

Central New York Cajibio Sister City visit to Colombia August 2007 **Minga in Action**

by Colleen Kattau

On our way to visit a remote *vereda* (or small village) along one of the rutted back roads of Cajibío, Colombia, the rear wheel suspension of one of the two jeeps we were traveling in broke. Both jeeps stopped. Everyone got out. Tools and hands appeared out of nowhere, and in no time the jeep was temporarily fixed with a log, rope and lots of muscle (Rae Kramer supplied the gorp which also came in handy), and we arrived safely to our destination. What our sister city delegation experienced in this little exercise of ingenuity and skill is a perfect example of what the campesinos of Cajibío call *la minga*, an ancient indigenous concept central to contemporary campesino cultural practice. *Minga* means communal work equally shared, and is the basis upon which the Plan of Life of the Movimiento Campesino de Cajibío (MCC) is realized. The *minga* takes many forms and permeates campesino daily life. In the few short days we had in Cajibío our delegation had the chance to witness the *minga* in action as we saw youth groups, women's groups, and artists realizing their Plan of Life through homegrown cultural events and educational workshops.

As we reached our destination that day to participate in a young people's environmental forum we heard music

breaking the profound silence of the countryside. The music was coming from a youth-run radio station that transmits programming to the surrounding rural community several hours a day. Youth-led radio is an important project of the MCC providing young people the tools to create their own shows, which in turn are designed to educate the larger community. This youth summit brought together several groups from different *veredas* to discuss environmental concerns. The entire summit was broadcast live and conducted as a radio show with interviews, panel discussions, and musical performances. Young people examined local problems of deforestation, massive corporate planting of non-native species, the problematic reliance on synthetic chemicals for farming, contamination of local water supplies, scarcity of water resources, and climatic changes, and linked them to larger socioeconomic issues. Surrounded by the little children of the MCC, Arlen, a young community leader and musician, got us singing the catchy chorus of a song he wrote for the occasion that summed up the simple goal

of the summit: "May all children drink happily, my country's clean water." It was clear from this meeting that young people in Cajibío are well-aware of their responsibility not only to deal with environmental problems, but also to create consciousness among all community members. At the gathering we also met three of the fifteen students who have received university scholarships from the MCC to study areas such as agronomy, medicine, and environmental science. These students have agreed to return to their communities after their studies to provide free services in exchange for this educational opportunity.

The *minga* was also present the next day at a women's gathering in the *vereda* of El Tigre where between forty and fifty women from surrounding neighborhoods came to compare notes on their experiences with subsistence gardening



Cooking a sancocho in the communal pot at El Tigre, Cajibío. Bon appetit!

and to receive training in basic botany. Women traveled many kilometers to attend; some on horseback, others on foot. We were the only ones who came in jeeps. Lunchtime we ate *sancocho* (chicken stew) freshly made in the outdoor *'olla común'* a gigantic steaming metal bowl of stew over an open fire that women tend with a huge wooden spoon. All the ingredients from the meal came from organic local gardens. After lunch, we toured several rich soil plots full of broccoli, cabbage, mint, yucca, potatoes, pineapple and other fruits, and vegetables and herbs native to the region. As most of us on the delegation were home gardeners as well, we were happy to chime in with advice and to learn local techniques for successful harvests. The women's summit at El Tigre is another example of how the MCC helps to provide seeds, planting advice, and advanced training to assist campesinos in their struggle to stay on the land in self-sustaining and environmentally sustainable ways.

Our delegation also visited Don Cesar's highly successful organic dairy farm which is an exquisite example of permaculture at its very best. Don Cesar, who quit his government job in order to start the farm six years ago, raises thirty happy cows on just four acres of farmland, plus has developed a vermiculture (worm) side industry that

efficiently composts the manure into marketable black gold. MCC members in remote areas come here to receive training in organic dairy practices. Don Cesar's farm is gaining fame not just in the small region of Cajibío but at the state level as well.

Our last evening was spent with Jafeth Gómez Ledesma (It was Jafeth who did the 2006 Cultural Workers Calendar cover). Jafeth describes himself as a "cultural ecological worker engaged in cultural resistance", who has returned to the countryside. He is part of an ecologically based community of artists, poets, writers and musicians. We saw the *minga* in action here once again at the paradisiacal cultural center called Semillas de Maiz (Corn Seeds), which was built collectively by this artist community with local materials and which replicates traditional indigenous structures. That night we celebrated the inauguration of Jafeth's new mural that will provide the backdrop for the bamboo outdoor stage. The inspiring mural called simply "the planting" sums up the values and dreams of the MCC that we witnessed on our brief visit there—that together we can realize peace and beauty, and that the land and our collective work will provide.

Colleen Kattau—A member of the CSN Central New York chapter and professor of Spanish at State University of New York-Cortland and a well known composer and musician.

was created with an emphasis in Ethno-education in the Putumayo, in one of the regions most affected by violence, such as Puerto Asís.

With much difficulty and sacrifice, it is now possible that a number of students, primarily peasants, indigenous and Afro-Colombians, are able to be a part of this great university family for the poor. We are absolutely convinced that education is the best way of empowering our communities to resist and survive and also to build a country and a nation from the grassroots level. It is for this reason that we, in the name of the Diocese and the numerous peasants who aspire to enter the university, ask for your support in providing scholarships to leaders who desire to study in this region of the Putumayo.

Currently, we have more than 250 students, who come from all over the Putumayo, from the most remote regions, and who have to pay for tuition, room and board. Tuition costs 200,000 pesos per semester (About \$100) and between other lodging expenses and textbooks, spend another 200,000 pesos. This means they spend an average of 400,000 pesos per semester (About \$200 dollars). I am asking for your generosity in sponsoring a peasant, indigenous or Afro-Colombian student in the form of a scholarship. I know that this would be of tremendous help for these students who wish to excel. In my name, in the name of those who suffer most and of my Bishop, we appreciate all your efforts in support of this great objective of achieving economic support for scholarships for these aspiring students.

Respectfully,

Father Campo Elias de la Cruz

Mocoe-Sibundoy Diocese,
Putumayo, Colombia

CSN'S NOTE : If you are interested in contributing to the scholarship program, please contact the CSN office.

HELP SUPPORT A STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM IN THE PUTUMAYO

*Translated by Amy Rose Pekol,
a CSN Board Member and volunteer translator*

Almost seven years ago, we, the Catholic Diocese of Putumayo, came up with the idea of opening a space in higher education for peasants and indigenous people of the Putumayo since the state of Colombia does not provide such a space.

The peasants are the ones who have suffered most from the war, fumigations and social exclusion. Their conditions of poverty and misery do not allow them to consider the possibility of attaining a higher education. In agreement with the Bolivarian Pontifical University of Medellín, the Institute of Anthropology

A message from the Cajibío Youth Group

Los Angeles, Cajibío
Cauca
Colombia

August 6, 2007

Sister Communities
of the United States:

Fraternal Greetings:

We wish to mark this day by sending you a greeting of brotherhood and sisterhood, of strength, gratitude, solidarity and, above all, of a lot of tenacity and resistance, because in reality there are many reasons for which we struggle day by day without taking a step back. We like to dream that one day we will have a people free from the

devastating corruption of inequality, war and of poor children. The abuses against the Colombian people which the oligarchic government has been committing are too many! We do not understand why while there are children, women, old people, and young people in absolute poverty, our government allocates almost all of its money to the false “democratic security” which it so much defends.

We ask ourselves if this money were to be directed to development of rural areas, would not many people be able to have a better quality of life? But we believe and we are now convinced that these sister communities are those which carry out the true resistance and that as we increasingly fortify ourselves we will be able to have free peoples where we dream of saying “Long Live Liberty.”

It is incredible to think that a country such as yours, so developed, has problems of inequality, oligarchy, nonconformity, etc. We also realize every day that so long as there is not happiness, money is not everything. We have fond memories of the meeting in Villa Colombia, one of those agreeable remembrances of the unassuming nature of Colleen Kattau, Jack Laun, Ann Tiffany, Rae Kramer, Jessica Maxwell and Laura Macdonald. Oh, and one other thing, was that we were left with the wish that Colleen would sing some more, because she is a marvelous artist.

How much more we would like to write to you, but there is so much to say that we would never end. Finally we send you a great big hug from this country so beautiful called COLOMBIA



Young people arriving at the youth meeting in Cajibío

from our youth group and we say to you “distance does not matter when we struggle for the same cause.”

Sincerely,

GRUPO JUVENIL

“JOVENES EMPRENDEDORES DEL FUTURO-JEMFU”

Youth Group: Youths Showing Initiative for the Future

Los Angeles-Cajibío

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