



Peace Community children on their way to school

Photo by Anne Schoeneborn

What Will the Proposed Colombian Peace Agreement Mean for the Peace Community San José de Apartadó? April 2016 Delegation to San Josecito and La Unión

by Hope Hague, a CSN Board Member

On a wild taxi ride up the steep mountain streets of Medellín to our lodging at the Villa Claret, we got a brief impression of the frenetic activity—music, bars, street commerce, taxis hustling everywhere—in the cramped neighborhoods that were home, we were told, to many Colombians violently displaced from their land over the many years of violence. All this was in sharp contrast to the serene darkness of the mountaintop retreat and the stunning view of Medellín's lights far below. Flying on the next morning to the district capital of Apartadó, we entered an entirely different world: the fertile jungle landscape of the Urabá region, where a Jeep carried us via bumpy roads to the Peace Community of San Josecito, close to San José de Apartadó, where we were guests of the Peace Community for three days and two nights.

Proposed Peace Agreement continued

On the surface, San Josecito seems a tropical idyll where people, animals, and nature live in harmony, and the inhabitants work cooperatively and productively as campesinos. Since relocating from San José to San Josecito in 2005, the community has built up an impressive infrastructure of community spaces: a central gathering place, an adult training center, a church, a school, a kitchen for visitors and schoolchildren, a field for basketball and soccer, a pool hall, housing for visitors, even electricity and plumbing in an area where the government provides no public services.

But there is a darker side to this picture, as we discovered in our meeting that first afternoon with the members of the Peace Community's Internal Council, who gathered from remote villages to speak with us. As each person spoke, a picture of external threats emerged. We saw photos of graffiti intruders had painted during the previous night on the Community's entrance sign and on the guest house, proclaiming that the "Gaitanista" paramilitaries (a subgroup of the criminal Clan Úsuga) were "precente" (*sic*) and would not be leaving any time soon. Community members told stories of families in remote villages intimidated by arrest and police detention, and of death threats from armed men when farmers refused to sell their land to speculators. All around us were memorials to the many who had died since the founding

of the Peace Community, and we saw a tall military observation tower looming on a mountaintop, looking down on a community that had experienced nothing but persecution and denunciation from the local unit of the Colombian military.

Community leaders expressed deep concern about the Peace Community's future following an impending peace agreement between the government and the FARC. The departure of the guerillas, they said, was sure to upset the balance of power and leave a vacuum for further land grabs by the unnamed people "over the mountain." These speculators, it was said, employed the paramilitaries, were related to powerful political clans, had links to the drug trade, and were investing heavily in the district capital, Apartadó, hoping to cash in on planned post-peace-agreement megaprojects. A more specific worry concerned a Korean mining company's options on coal deposits adjacent to the Peace Community. If these options were exploited, the resulting mining boom could turn the tide against the Peace Community's non-violent, neutral way of life, surrounding them with new armed actors and displacing them from their resource-rich land.

We learned more about the situation on the periphery of the Peace Community the next day, when, under the watchful eyes of our guides, we rode on mule-back up the rocky

mountain path to La Unión, site of the massacre of six Peace Community leaders in 2000, which in turn led to the displacement of the families who farmed there. Juan, our host and guide to the new, reclaimed La Unión, showed us some of what communal effort had accomplished since then: a community library in memory of the murdered leaders filled with beautiful children's books, newly constructed community gathering places, and a small house for the volunteer human rights witness who lives among them. We saw an impressive array of agricultural products: bananas, pineapples, mangos, avocados, cocoa (the main cash crop), and a planting of sugar cane, along with the basic technology for producing molasses and unrefined cane sugar. One unique practice in the Peace Community is the posting of signs to maintain awareness of the principles holding the community together. In the sugar production area, a sign proclaimed the importance of "food sovereignty," reflecting experiences of hardship as military and paramilitary checkpoints blocked access to markets in the district capital, and Community members were robbed and harassed with impunity, making both food purchases and money transactions difficult and dangerous.

After a final day of conversations with Community members, we left for Apartadó and Bogotá, carrying with us their deep concern about the Community's still uncertain future

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 grass-roots activism.

CSN supports a nonviolent, negotiated resolution to the conflict in Colombia.

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in the post-peace process. On the hopeful side, we could see that the Peace Community is not isolated or defenseless. An international network of friends and human rights activists in Colombia and abroad visit the community, advocate for it, accompany it as human rights observers, and support its documentation of human rights abuses. It has an active media presence and solidarity relationships with other campesino and indigenous groups fighting for their just place in post-peace Colombia.

The Community's tremendous sacrifices and principled perseverance against powerful adversaries for the sake of the human dignity that can grow from land, community, and self-determination have created something morally powerful and worthy of all our support. In a time when so many had to flee to the cities and struggle in desperate poverty, the Peace Community achieved, in the words of one founding member, "a future...that is not the future we were taught to expect." In a just world, this exemplary and heroic community, along with the many other campesino and indigenous communities fighting for respect in Colombia, would have a place at the table when development decisions are being made in faraway Bogotá. Let us hope it will be so.

An End to Colombia's Armed Conflict?

Reflections on Our Delegation Meetings in Bogotá

by Anne Schoeneborn,
Health specialist and former CSN intern

After spending three days and two nights immersed in the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó—hearing community members tell of their struggles and seeing with our own eyes the fruits of their shared labor—we flew on to Bogotá, with hopes that our small delegation could somehow help their concerns be heard in Colombia's far-away capital city. With just enough time to change out of our hiking boots and into more formal attire, we embarked on three days of meetings with an impressive roster of politicians, human rights lawyers, representatives of the United Nations and U.S. Embassy, activists and other members of Colombian civil society. With each meeting, we delved into new layers and facets of Colombia's current reality and heard new perspectives on what the peace process unfolding in Havana might mean for Colombia's future.

Being in Bogotá during what feels like a major turning point in Colombian history made it difficult to keep the focus specifically on the

Peace Community. With such broad and ambitious agenda items as agrarian reform and drug trafficking under discussion in Havana, conversations inexorably turned to the future: How will things change when and if the peace agreement is signed? And yet, having the Peace Community as a concrete example to come back to throughout our meetings helped ground our discussions, providing a microcosm to focus on in the moments we began to feel lost in the complex, macro-context that is Colombia. Looking back on our discussions, several key themes emerged:

- Regardless of what name is given to the armed militias that have long terrorized rural Colombia ("paramilitaries," "BACRIM" [bandas criminales], or, most recently, "organized armed groups"), they continue to exist and continue to commit grave human rights abuses. A particularly poignant moment was when William Rozo Álvarez of the Center for Research and Popular Education (CINEP) presented us with two thick copies of *Noche y Niebla* (Night and Fog), the book CINEP publishes twice a year to chronicle all of the human rights abuses being committed in Colombia. "The book keeps getting thicker. When it has been reduced to no pages at all, we'll know we have finally achieved peace," Rozo Álvarez remarked.

- There is widespread concern about what will happen if and when the FARC demobilizes. It is feared that this sudden change could create a power vacuum, particularly in rural areas where both the FARC and paramilitaries

Photo by Anne Schoeneborn



Peace and serenity reflected at the Peace Community's visitors' lodge

End to armed conflict continued

have an active presence. Members of the Peace Community expressed great trepidation about the prospect of paramilitary groups seizing the opportunity presented by such a power vacuum in order to acquire even more land in the resource-rich, strategically located region of Urabá. They told us of many small landholders in the region who have been coerced into selling their land, and reported that known paramilitary leaders have recently acquired land very close to the Peace Community—both trends they feel pose a serious threat to their continued survival.

- Although several people we met with in Bogotá spoke of the significant improvements the Colombian military has made in terms of corruption levels and alliances with paramilitaries, these changes have yet to trickle down to all regions of Colombia. The Peace Community of San José de Apartadó continues to be harassed by the military's Seventeenth Brigade and finds it hard to fathom that a day might come when the military acts as a source of protection rather than fear. Colombia is the most militarized country in the western hemisphere, so significant changes to the military—whether to its overall size and power, or its norms and culture—will be critical to Colombia achieving lasting peace.

- There are many ambitious initiatives being planned as part of the current peace process. Among them is a new, very complex transitional justice system that will handle cases against state actors, FARC guerrillas, and those accused of financing paramilitaries. In addition, a truth commission is to be established that will serve as a platform for victims to give testimony about the human rights violations they suffered during Colombia's armed

conflict—and for perpetrators to formally take responsibility for their roles in these crimes. Given the sheer number of victims and perpetrators, these initiatives represent an enormous undertaking. And—given what these initiatives represent—expectations among victims are understandably high. Todd Howland, Representative of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, told us of the extraordinary level of interest among victims across even the most remote areas of Colombia in giving testimony in front of the truth commission. His primary concern, however, is that the Colombian Government does not have even close to enough resources to set up and maintain all of the new governmental bodies and mechanisms that will be needed to implement all of the planned initiatives effectively.

- Economic interests—particularly those of multinational companies involved in Colombia's industrial agriculture and mining sector—underlie many of the country's human rights challenges. In Bogotá, we met with Francisco Ramirez, a human rights lawyer putting together a legal case to hold the multinational mining company, Drummond accountable for its involvement in a long series of human rights violations. The case represents the first in Colombia where a multinational company is being taken to court for war crimes. "A peace process without multinational companies coming forward to take responsibility for their crimes is a joke," Ramirez asserted. The next day, when Gloria Cuartas, a former mayor of Apartadó, reflected on the future of Urabá, she posed the question: "Can megaprojects co-exist with small, local projects? Are the U.S. and Colombian governments ready to accept this?" She stressed the importance of continued vigilance even

if the peace talks are successful. As mega-projects focused on resource extraction continue to constitute a central aspect of Colombia's national development plan, the battle to keep these companies in check will likely continue for years to come.

- Everyone we spoke with had criticisms of the peace process, but there was unanimous agreement that, without peace, there can be no progress. As Rodrigo Uprimny of the think tank Dejusticia explained, "Some ask, 'How can you achieve peace without social justice?' In this case, however, we cannot achieve social justice without peace." Looking ahead, Iván Cepéda, a Senator actively involved in both the FARC and ELN peace processes, added that what is actually likely to occur "post-conflict" is a major social struggle to ensure that the most challenging elements of the peace agreement (such as agrarian reform) are actually implemented.

On our final day in Bogotá, we headed to the airport, our heads reeling. As I sat in the plane trying to digest all I had seen and heard during the previous week, I had the sensation of trying to piece together an enormously complex jigsaw puzzle. In the weeks since, what I keep coming back to is the tireless optimism and incredible courage of the many human rights defenders we met during our trip. Whether the leaders of the Peace Community, the human rights lawyers who spend years building cases on behalf of the conflict's victims, or the brave politicians who speak out about corruption and injustice, it is the faces of these dedicated men and women—who continue to work in Colombia despite regular death threats—that will stay with me, giving me hope that Colombia will be able to achieve enduring peace at last.

Far Away Relatives visit each other

Written by Cecilia Zarate-Laun and John Laun

In early June, after holding our yearly national meeting in Madison, we decided to connect distant relatives who did not know each other. Our meeting was highly successful and very well attended. Our guest from Colombia was Carmenza Tez, a brilliant and passionate woman leader who defends the Amazon rainforest so dear to her and to her fellow Kamentsa and Inga indigenous nations in southern Colombia. The construction of a road that is planned to cross the whole continent will connect Belem do Pará on the Atlantic Coast of Brazil with Tumaco, a port on the Colombian Pacific Ocean Coast. Needless to say, the road not only will mean the end of the Amazon as we know it today, but it will likely mean the beginning of the end of our planet by destroying its lungs. The road will use rivers and land to reach its final destiny. It will cross the sacred land of the Kamentsa and Inga, where their ancestors are buried and where

their spiritual values and principles originate. It will require the destruction of several thousand Amazon oaks that take hundreds of years to develop. This road also will facilitate the entrance of multinationals seeking to mine for gold, coltan, and other minerals and to drill for oil.

Up in northern Wisconsin, far distant from the lands of the Kamentsa and Inga, the Bad River Ojibwe, the Menominee and Oneida nations face a similar struggle. A multinational corporation wants to build an open pit copper mine in Upper Michigan which will very likely contaminate and virtually destroy the precious Wolf River in Wisconsin, since the use of chemicals and chemical left-overs will damage the waters of this sacred river. The production of wild rice, a basic food of the Bad River and Menominee indigenous communities, will be seriously affected.

Both native groups unbeknown to each other took the same action. A group of the Kamentsa and Inga

in Colombia and a group of the Menominee in Wisconsin walked along each piece of their sacred lands meditating, connecting with Mother Earth and with the spirits, contemplating the beauty and wholeness of their lands and considering the unity of mankind with its planet. After sharing their experiences of their respective walks and discussing the importance of preserving their sacred paths to each indigenous community through the visit of Carmenza, each decided to become involved and active in opposing these two insane projects based on greed without caring for the rest of mankind.

When asked to say a prayer at a beautiful spot overlooking the Wolf River, Carmenza Tez of the Kamentsa and Menominee conservation leader Guy Reiter both said exactly the same words in the language of each, as if they had the same thoughts and feelings. Two peoples who could not even talk to each other, but for whom the meaning and spiritual value of Mother Earth was the same.



CSN delegation members meet with the Peace Community's Internal Council

Photo by Anne Schoeneborn

A Unique and Special Educational System

by Haley Olig, a CSN's intern

The Peace Community of San José de Apartadó is unlike anything I've ever seen. Interning at the Colombia Support Network, I had heard countless stories and descriptions; but seeing it for myself was something entirely different. I had the privilege of participating in the 2016 Delegation, and it was one of the most impactful experiences in my life.

I've always been fascinated by non-traditional education systems - especially in areas of active conflict - so I was excited for the opportunity to study the Peace Community's structure. Although I have studied international educational policy, I had no idea what to expect.

Amidst all of the homes and community buildings sit two concrete structures. Adorned with murals and paintings depicting a peaceful and prosperous world, these two buildings serve as the community's school buildings. Throughout the day children can be heard laughing, singing, counting, and playing. Although it might seem like organized chaos at first glance, it is actually an extremely sophisticated and highly-developed system of education, designed to fulfill the practical needs of the Peace Community's children.

I sat down with Maria Beltrán, one of the Community's three teachers. Before she moved into the Peace Community, she was the equivalent of a high school principal; however, she has been a teacher for all three years she's been in the Community. She says that the biggest difference between a traditional school (the kind of school to which we are accustomed in the United States) and the school in the Peace Community is the educative process. In San José de Apartadó, the process takes place



Farm animals and seed beds in the Peace Community

Photo by Anne Schoeneborn

“in both the child's community, and the environment in which the child lives.... The Peace Community itself is a school,” she stated. Instead of relying solely on paper and chalkboards to teach, Beltrán and her colleagues use the Community's surrounding forests and fields to teach students basic academic skills. On the day we sat down, Beltrán planned to take her students into a heavily wooded area and use the edible plants to teach the day's themes: division, multiplication, and addition.

The goals of the Peace Community's education are simple, Beltrán said. First and foremost is teaching students to express themselves with clarity and confidence in all situations, regardless of who is present. Beltrán told me that they want their pupils to have the same comfort speaking to the mayor as they would have speaking to their neighbor. They learn “everything that one can construct speaking...,” she said. “Not all of this can be communicated through writing.” Second, students are taught to formulate and articulate opinions based on critical observations. “We want

them to be able to enter any situation with the sense that they are equal, and that their opinions have value,” she told me. More than anything, the education system in San José de Apartadó is about arriving at an idea, and then applying that idea to the real world. The third goal of the Community's education system is that students can connect their schooling to their daily lives. This is why the system is based on the democratic, interactive pedagogy of Paolo Freire. In this system the student is an active participant in the educational process, rather than the recipient of a one-way transfer of knowledge. This theory of education is often associated with an increased sense of self-worth and independence in students. By using this pedagogy and teaching community-based teaching tools, the students become self-reliant members of the community as children. Although there are clear and rigorous academic standards, the focus is on the student's ability to function in the unstable and often dangerous setting of the Peace Community.

This system of education is wholly impressive, and completely unique. The most striking part, however, is the conflict-related education that the students receive. The Peace Community of San José de Apartadó is under constant attack; yet somehow the Community members find the strength to maintain their peaceful lifestyle. The students are taught the reasoning behind the Community's choice to use non-violent resistance instead of violence. In addition to this logic, the children are also taught basic behaviors to live by the Community's strict standards. One such behavior is to refuse to provide information to anyone outside of the Peace Community. They are also taught the history of Colombia's conflict, and its often overlooked socioeconomic roots. Most importantly, however, students are taught that the violence is not their fault. Having witnessed such violence at a young age, it's only logical that the children would wonder whether they are to blame. According to Beltrán, that is the hardest part of teaching in the Peace Community. She says that to combat this feeling in the children, teachers constantly remind their students that "...it's because of the economy and the war. It's not personal. It's not your fault, and it's not you they hate."

In addition to the pedagogical differences, Beltrán encountered several logistical and pragmatic differences in her transition from the traditional education system to the Peace Community's education system. She found that the Community's system is much more fluid, and allows her to change the lesson plans as needed. She also noted that the students are grouped by knowledge, rather than age. This allows children from different age groups to form connections, while

ensuring that the environment remains free of stress and competition. This type of atmosphere is particularly important with the students in the Peace Community. Because so many of the Community's children have been forced to flee their homes, many missed a portion or the entirety of their education. By employing peer education and small group teaching techniques, the Community's teachers ensure that each student is able to learn not only the material, but also how to transmit information in a respectful manner. At the time of our interview, Beltrán had roughly fifteen students in her class, ranging from nine to twelve years old. Despite the age differences, Beltrán said that the classroom is always "an environment of challenge, of partnership, and equality."

Although the Peace Community's education system is highly developed, Beltrán pointed out that they lack many basic resources. As the school director in her previous job, Beltrán had access to school doctors, psychologists, and other support staff. In the Peace Community, however, she and her colleagues must find creative solutions to students' behavioral and psychological problems. She cited ADHD as an example. In the Peace Community, she said, "...we don't have Ritalin. We don't have other medications that you might use for behavioral issues." Instead, the teachers work to create a safe environment in which the students feel loved, valued, and relaxed. Beltrán said that they then work with individual students to develop strategies to help students "arrive at an equilibrium" in which they can thrive. Despite these challenges, however, Beltrán repeatedly told me, "I honestly love this job. Truly, I do."

When I asked Beltrán how they

address grief and loss, and whether they use any group coping mechanisms in the classroom, she visibly brightened. "We don't use any," she told me. "For the first time, the violence has not directly touched the children. And that is exactly why we created this community."

The Colombia Support Network

Action on Colombia

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