



CSN delegation members and Peace Community representatives in a meeting area in San Josecito.

The Colombian Army: Friend or Enemy of Peace?

By Eunice Gibson, Secretary, CSN Board of Directors

The history of the Colombian Army for murder and war crimes is so awful that its scandals have their own Wikipedia page.

[https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anexo:Esc%C3%A1ndalos del Ej%C3%A9rcito Nacional de Colombia](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anexo:Esc%C3%A1ndalos_del_Ej%C3%A9rcito_Nacional_de_Colombia)

Doubtless the most shocking of all the Colombian Army's misfeasance and malfeasance is the "false positives." US military aiding the government in the civil war were aware that this Army felt free to kill civilians. That increased when advisers with Vietnam experience stressed the importance of body counts, and pressure for "combat kills" grew with General Mario Montoya's command of the Fourth Brigade in Medellín.

See <https://cambiocolombia.com/conflicto-armado-en-colombia/por-130-falsos-positivos-fue-imputado-el-general-mario-montoya>

“Total Peace”? cont.

Upping the ante, a Defense Ministry Directive dated November 17, 2005, offered rewards to a member of the Colombian Army who killed a guerrilla. High-ranking Army officers competed in their demands for “combat kills” and offered parties, time off, and promotions for the units and the soldiers with the most “kills”. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace has determined that more than 6,400 innocent, defenseless civilians were killed, dressed in camouflage, and presented as “guerrillas killed in combat”, with the killers rewarded as promised in the Directive.

See <https://www.elespectador.com/judicial/falsos-positivos-las-claves-de-la-imputacion-contra-el-general-r-mario-montoya-2/>

That’s not to mention the continuing corruption, selling weapons to the guerrillas, skimming contracts, and being on the drug lords’ payrolls.¹ Before his appointment as Colombia’s Minister of Defense, Iván Velásquez had worked as the top United Nations official at the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, and in Colombia he had successfully prosecuted politicians involved with paramilitaries (“parapolitica”). (For more information about the new Minister’s background, see “Iván Velásquez, a Target of the DAS, is the new Minister of Defense,” CSN web site, posted July 30, 2022.

¹ <https://www.semana.com/noticias/corrupcion-en-el-ejercito-colombiano/>

In our recent delegation to Colombia, we asked several experienced political observers whether the Army can be a friend to “total peace”. All of them told us that they had a lot of confidence in Minister Velásquez. If anybody could reform and retrain this Army, he would be the one, they agreed.

But the closer the speaker was to the current situation in the countryside, the more concern they expressed about the contribution of the Colombian Army to “total peace.”

Although Minister Iván Velásquez, and the High Commissioner for Peace, Danilo Rueda, visited the Peace

Community of San José de Apartadó early in the new administration, the Peace Community told us they see no real change. They continue every day to observe the Colombian Army cooperating with illegal armed groups, paramilitaries, just as it has done in their area for decades. Those decades have included murders and even massacres. The Peace Community reported that right now the paramilitaries have greater control over the countryside than ever, issuing regulations, demanding unpaid labor, and taking control over “community” organizations. And they see the Army taking no action.



Colorful Wall in the Peace Community.

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

Colombia Support Network
P.O. Box 1505
Madison, WI 53701-1505

email csn@igc.org
www.colombiasupport.net

(608) 709-9817

Carlos Velandia, a former guerrilla who educated himself while serving time in prison, told us that every President of Colombia has been afraid of the Army. He wonders if Colombia's Army, even with new leadership, can even understand a concept of peace that includes everyone. He says that in Colombia, such a degree of inclusiveness is unheard of.

Lucía González is a former member of Colombia's Truth Commission, an entity created by the Peace Agreement signed in 2016. She saw how the United States, based on Vietnam experience, viewed Colombia's civil war as a war on communism, and encouraged the Army to seek out the internal enemy, and to see that enemy in any social protest. She said that the Army has always been called to protect wealth and power in Colombia, and not to protect communities, with the result that 80% of all the people killed in the war were civilians.

She also pointed out that Colombian governments have "abandoned" the countryside. They can't go there, she remarked, because they haven't built any roads to be able to get there. And they don't care, is her conclusion.

Senator Clara López, a longtime friend of CSN, has been traveling around the country in spite of the dangerous violence, which seems to be increasing. She identified a new challenge for the Colombian Army. When the majority of the FARC guerrillas signed the Peace Agreement in 2016 and vacated the territories they had been controlling, the administration in power at that time did not move in to take their place, but rather allowed FARC Dissidents, ELN guerrillas who were not part of the Peace Agreement, and drug dealers to take over the space. Their interests are now not so much political as economic, which is very

different from their political interests during the war. Now their concerns are the protection of their drug routes, plus illegal mining, extortion, and land theft. Besides fighting each other, they have learned to threaten and coopt local authorities and members of community boards.

Senator López has observed that in this current situation of widespread cooptation and threats, the Colombian Army, even with the will to protect communities and break up drug gangs, can't always tell which groups are dangerous killers and which are legitimate social organizations. She stressed that the administration needs to have a better strategy for protecting the communities.

Ana Teresa Bernal, who has met frequently with CSN delegations and is now a member of the City Council in Bogotá, is optimistic that Velásquez, with his extensive investigation and prosecution successes, will make it possible for the Colombian Army and Police (both are part of the Defense Ministry) to cut away the historic bonds between the Army and the paramilitaries. She says Minister Velásquez is not political, and not a confrontational person, but that he has already discharged fifty high-ranking officers. While the political opposition and the retired Army officers have criticized him fiercely, she noted that younger officers have received raises and promotions, and she thinks that the active duty military will support him.

Juan Pablo Guerrero, Deputy Director of CINEP (Center for Investigation and Popular Education), observed that the Army and the paramilitaries still work closely together, just as the Peace Community described to us. He has also found, as Senator Clara López told us, that the armed groups now have "civilian"

representatives that wield social, territorial, and commercial control in the countryside where the government does not go. He, too, notes that their interests are more economic than political, and those include drug dealing, human trafficking, and even migration.

He said that the armed groups do a lot of killing, and that people are too terrified to give testimony. And, as Senator Clara López also told us, CINEP investigators now find it difficult to identify the killers in 80% of the cases, as they used to do regularly.

Luis Eduardo "Lucho" Celis has worked for human rights in Colombia's countryside and has met with many CSN delegations in the past. But now, Lucho is a government official, in the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace. When we mentioned our visit to the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, he commented, "There is no functioning government in San José."

Asked about working for peace with the help of the Army, he is optimistic. He responded that there are definitely

The Colombia Support Network

Action on Colombia

Editor

Jack Laun

Contributors

Eunice Gibson

Daivd Kast

John Laun

Mark Anderson

Design

Randy Clark

<http://colombiasupport.net/donate/>

Wicola/CSN is a 501(c)3
tax-exempt organization.
Your tax-deductible donation
helps support our advocacy,
education and
people-to-people initiatives

“Total Peace”? cont.

criminals in the Army, but most members are not criminals. He finds the same is true for the prosecutors, commenting that it has been that way for generations.

Nancy Fiallo is an experienced human rights attorney who has represented numerous victims of government actions. She is best known for her representation of the Mothers of Soacha.

See <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/solidarity-mothers-soacha>, and <https://exploringyourmind.com/mothers-soacha-example-courage/>

When we asked Attorney Fiallo if the Army would make a contribution to “total peace”, she told us that there is essentially no legal system in the countryside. She pointed out that this has made the Army very powerful, and it can use that power to help or hinder “total peace”.

Rodrigo Uprimny is a well-known law professor and researcher, and he writes weekly columns for the Dejusticia web site and for EL ESPECTADOR. We asked for his comments on the things we had been told about the possibility of the Army’s being able to promote “total peace”. He answered that the new Minister of Defense does not condone any collusion between the Army and the paramilitaries. If there is evidence of that, Dr. Uprimny believes the Minister would intervene.

Dr. Uprimny stressed that the illegal armed groups are no longer the agents of the government as they were during the armed conflict.

See <https://www.las2orillas.co/quien-creo-las-convivir-2a-parte/>

He believes that the Army, historically fixed on weeding out internal political enemies, thus needs to realize that the



Four delegation members with interview guest in Colombia.

armed gangs are just criminals, like other criminals, and when the Army fights the gangs, it is not fighting for the existing political system in the way they believed they were doing when they worked closely with the paramilitaries. What will it take for that to change?

Dr. Uprimny explained that the Colombian Army always adopts a written doctrine, which is used in training. In 2016, when Army leaders saw the coming of peace with the FARC guerrillas, one of the generals prepared a new doctrine. It pointed out clearly that the Army would have to recognize that the demobilized guerrillas, no longer enemies, would have the same right to the Army’s protection as any other citizen of Colombia. (See <https://pacifista.tv/notas/cinco-cambios-doctrina-militar/>

However, Dr. Uprimny pointed out, that general was discharged and forced to retire, while the doctrine

was repudiated by the Duque administration.² As we heard in our previous meetings, he noted that it is “ingrained in the military brain that they are fighting ‘internal enemies’.” He also commented that, with new leadership and new training, it’s hard to know how strong that feeling is at the present time. But he also observed that right now there is not credible, strong security in the countryside, so the country people, at this point in 2 In fact, a member of the Army murdered a demobilized guerrilla, and his superiors tried to cover it up, although the killer was eventually prosecuted. See <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/extrajudicial-killing-dims-hopes-colombia-de-demobilized-farc/> As of August 2023, 355 demobilized FARC guerrillas had been killed. See <https://www.dw.com/es/onu-355-exguerrilleros-farc-asesinados-tras-firma-de-paz-en-colombia/a-64316052>

time, are definitely not experiencing “total peace”.

Finally, we met with Ana María Rodríguez, the new (8 months) Director of the Colombian Commission of Jurists. She pointed out that when the paramilitaries were demobilized in 2005, the members went in different directions, mostly to the various armed gangs. In particular, she said, the Clan del Golfo, sometimes known as the AGC (Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces) has grown very fast and is very powerful.³ There are also FARC Dissidents and the National Liberation Army (ELN), the organization with which the government is negotiating right now. They are all very violent, and she says that many times the communities under their control don't even know which group it is that is confining them, threatening them, and ordering them around.

Attorney Rodríguez believes that the failure to implement the 2016 Peace Agreement is partly to blame, stating, as did Senator Clara López, that the territory controlled by the FARC should have been taken over by the government immediately. When that didn't happen, the gangs moved in. She also noted that, besides the other criminal activities, sex trafficking has increased significantly, often at the cost of impoverished Venezuelan immigrants.

She stresses the necessity for the government to get out into the countryside and govern, which it has never done.

So, is the Colombian Army a friend to “total peace”? None of the people

³ This is the gang that mostly controls the neighborhood of the Peace Community, and the gang that they still refer to as “paramilitaries”. The term “paramilitary” instead of “gang” implies the support of the government, as that is how the paramilitaries were created .

we interviewed, except for the Peace Community, denied that the new Defense Minister is doing everything he can to make the Army into that friend. Both Arley Tuberkia and Germán Graciano of the Peace Community recognized that the new administration wants the Army to change, and the two officials that immediately came to visit them listened to their complaints. But there has been only minimal change, and the Clan del Golfo gang is in complete control in their neighborhood, perhaps more than ever, and they see no sign of the Army doing anything to change that.

The Army has been very active in other regions, if not in the area of the Peace Community, and the Minister of Defense tweets every day about arrests made, drugs and weapons seized. But is the Army protecting the communities or just the ranches and the plantations?

The Defense Minister has been quoted as saying that the Army can't turn the page on the horrible activities of the false positives unless “the book of truth” is read to its end.⁴ Will that happen? What is being taught in the military academies? In the courses taken by officers seeking promotion? To the new recruits? In the tactical exercises? Has a general officer been assigned to write a new doctrine for the Army?

So, we can only hope that the Army will be a friend to “total peace”, and not an enemy. As Al Jazeera reported in 2022 when Iván Velásquez was sworn in as Minister of Defense, “Colombia's Next Defence Minister faces a “hell of a fight.”⁵

⁴ <https://www.lasillavacia.com/lasilla-vacia/opinion/articulos-columna/montoya/>

⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/4/colombias-next-defence-minister-faces-a-hell-of-a-fight>

Editorial: Recovery, healing and wellness for rural Colombia

By Mark Anderson, Executive Director of the Barbara Schneider Foundation of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and a member of the Colombia Support Network Board of Directors

Recovery, healing and wellness for rural Colombia is an important part of the work initiated by the recently elected Gustavo Petro administration that is leading Colombia in a new, innovative direction full of possibilities for the entire nation.

Colombia Support Network is encouraged by the commitment of the Petro administration to honor the historic Colombian peace agreement by focusing on rural development.

This focus at this particular juncture in history is essential. But this moment brings with it a lot of unfinished business, the legacy of the tortured past of colonialism, exploitation, extraction, repression and lawless profiteering.

Rural communities have borne much of the burden of this tragic past and are in need of attention to the many aspects of rural life as they emerge from the past and present horrors into the future that Colombian people envision for them.

Just as rural Colombian residents, farmers, ranchers, indigenous communities, those working in businesses and government in rural areas need holistic health in order to survive and even thrive, the rural environment itself needs holistic healing too. Holistic health is needed for each individual person. It is also necessary for each family, community and for nature itself.

For the individual, holistic health involves all aspects of the person. Health in body, heart, mind and spirit. Or said another way, we must nurture each person's physical health, emotional health, mental health and spiritual health.

To achieve and maintain each person's holistic health we need to take care of our bodies with good food, water and housing. For our emotional health we need healthy relationships, connections to culture and a strong sense of who we are in relationship to community. Mental health is more than lack of mental illness, it involves healing from trauma as well as learning throughout life, and spiritual health wraps around all these aspects and is an enormous resource when we face the challenges life brings us.

For the rural community, physical health includes infrastructure that supports the local economy and not just the economy of the large landholders, the multinational corporations and the extractive industries. Transportation systems must facilitate access to farm inputs and agricultural processing plants. Communication systems must provide internet access to all. Access to clean water, healthy foods in local communities, available health care and clean energy sources must be guaranteed for all rural communities as well.

A healthy rural community cannot exist without strong, accountable public safety. There needs to be active local government including local police that are accountable to the local population. De-militarization of law enforcement is an important challenge when there are many armed groups who prey on rural community members. But there has been a pattern of violence against local communities by uniformed military units. This must end. Strong local government with support from regional and national government will fill the vacuum in the rural areas that the armed groups take advantage of.

Just as each person needs good emotional health, rural communities

do as well. They need strong cultural activities that build community and make each community vibrant with its own personality. Strong schools and higher education are important in rural areas. Increased literacy and professional skills support greater participation in local civil society, businesses and governmental agencies. A positive upward spiral can result for communities and their residents.

Indigenous communities must be respected and supported as well. The majority of biodiversity on our planet lives on Indigenous lands. Partnering with these communities to manage and maintain biodiversity helps protect this natural resource that is essential for human health. The rainforest in particular must be seen as a powerful asset for rural communities and not as wasted land to be cut down for marginal cattle ranching enterprises. Extraction of minerals and oil for export are part of the broken past and can no longer be relied upon as the major product of rural communities. Extractive industries distort local government by focusing on the needs of a very few rather than the greatest strength of the rural communities, its people. This old broken economic model, by weakening local government and civil society in turn opens communities up to armed predators and exploiters of people and nature.

Agriculture, when managed responsibly, protects the land and the ecology while providing employment for rural communities, fresh foods for local use and for export to urban communities. A healthy rural Colombia for small farmers, Indigenous, and other community members is required for peaceful productive lives for rural individuals and communities.

Colombia Support Network Delegation's Visit to San Jose de Apartado on July 27, 2023

By David Kast, with suggestions from Jack Laun and Eunice Gibson

Colombia Support Network (CSN) began its most recent delegation to Colombia on Monday, July 24, 2023, meeting at the Hotel Ibis in Medellin. The delegation ended on August 4. Our leader, Jack Laun, co-founder along with his wife, Cecilia Zarate-Laun, and program director of CSN arrived on July 25. Members of this delegation included: Jack Laun, Emma Strenski (CSN President and Board member), Eunice Gibson (CSN secretary and Board member), David Kast (CSN Board member), Beatriz Vejarano (CSN Board member and translator), Patrick Gibson (Eunice's son), and Jesse Ishikawa (Eunice's cousin).

The appointments we made were largely orchestrated by Beatriz. Two members of the delegation, Jack Laun and David Kast, had to leave early on August 1. The rest of the delegation remained until August 4. Beatriz was present at all the Bogotá meetings and some other shared events.

Our first major stop was at the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado at their farm San Josecito, located about one kilometer before the town of San Jose on the road between Apartado and San Jose. This was on Thursday, July 27. We had flown to the city of Apartado from Medellin the prior day.

Some brief background on the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado is in order.

The small settlement of San Jose

de Apartado was founded by Don Bartolome Catano in 1970. In many way this was both a good and bad choice for starting a small farming settlement. Good because of the rich soil for farming; bad because it also lies on a route for drug transport and also migration from Colombia to Panama and north.

In any case, the settlement was started and more people moved to the area joining Don Bartolome. This group formed the Balsamar Cooperative in 1985, a collective of farmers who worked to grow and sell cacao, bananas, pineapples, avocados and other crops collectively.

Shortly after this time violence

increased dramatically. There had already been violence between the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), other rebel groups, paramilitaries (who mainly worked with the military), and the military itself. This violence surrounded the community. Drug trafficking was also increasing and inexorably all the armed actors were drawn into the drug trafficking. But matters escalated when a large segment of the FARC signed a deal with the government, laying down their arms to reincorporate into civil society. With the Communist Party and other progressive members of society dissatisfied with the traditional parties, they started a new

continued on the following page



CSN Secretary Eunice Gibson and CSN President Emma Strenski on the CSN delegation in Colombia.

Visit to San José de Apartado cont.

political party, the Union Patriótica (UP, Patriotic Union) in 1985. This party started winning offices around the country and the traditional parties responded by enlisting paramilitaries and criminal elements to eliminate them. In fact, thousands of former FARC members and political and social leaders from the UP Party were killed from the mid-80s through the 1990s.

Much of this happened in Antioquia (Antioquia is the Department in which Apartado and San Jose de Apartado are located), and on August 17, 1996, Don Bartolome himself was shot and killed in the City Council Chambers of Apartado. More leaders were killed in September 1996 and February 1997.

At this time, in early 1997, members of the community supported by Monsignor Isaias Duarte Cancino, Bishop of Apartado, Gloria Cuartas, Mayor of Apartado and Colombian NGOs such as Justicia y Paz and CINEP (a Jesuit think-tank), organized to officially declare themselves a Peace Community. On March 23, 1997, Palm Sunday, a formal declaration was signed officially creating the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado, which comprised San Jose and 16 smaller satellite communities.

At that time, residents there took an unprecedented stand against the violence between the revolutionaries, paramilitaries and the Colombian Army surrounding them as well as drug traffickers, by declaring themselves a harbor of non-violence and refusing to align themselves with any of the armed actors. This is not to say that some members of what became the Peace Community did not have opinions on the national situation and, indeed, some members of the San Jose community left the community to participate to one degree or another with some of the armed actors.

But the Peace Community was born, adopting some rigorous conditions for themselves: 1) They would not allow any weapons, alcohol or drugs in their community, 2) They would remain fully non-aligned, neutral, with respect to any of the violent actors, 3) They would not supply any of the armed actors with foodstuffs or any other supplies of any kind, 4) They would not allow armed actors, i.e., the FARC, paramilitaries, or the police or military, nor drug traffickers, in their homes or community. Their gates were closed to the armed actors. The Peace Community of San Jose created a full working program, a constitution including an executive council, voting protocols, and various standing committees to deal with the everyday running of the community.

The road connecting Apartado to San Jose is a rough, rutted dirt road that the people of San Jose as well as the Peace Community have been requesting be upgraded to blacktop or a smoothed dirt road for years to no avail. The road had not changed from the first time I had visited the Peace Community at San Josecito in 2013.

The road leading to the Peace Community is not heavily populated, but the population has increased over the years. There are a few public buildings including a school, a few small grocery and small goods stores and places to eat and a number of residences and farms. This territory, barely above sea level, is hot and humid. During this visit the mosquitos were not too bad. There is a danger here of both malaria and yellow fever. Some of the delegation brought malaria prevention tablets and a few had had yellow fever vaccinations from some years earlier.

But San Jose was a small (unincorporated) town that also included non-members of the Peace Community. And the Peace

Community had enemies. All the armed actors wanted the Peace Community to take sides. When the Peace Community refused to do so, they were attacked by all sides. They suffered attacks and killings from all the primary armed actors, namely the insurgent revolutionaries (FARC), paramilitaries and the Army, including one well known massacre perpetrated on them by paramilitaries and the Army on February 21, 2005, in which eight people were killed including Luis Eduardo Guerra, one of the leaders of the Peace Community, and several children. In all, since the founding of the Peace Community in 1997, more than 300 of its members have been killed, about 2/3 by the paramilitaries and Army working together, and about 1/3 by the revolutionaries, primarily the FARC Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. (See <https://pbicolombia.org/accompanied-organisations/peace-community/>. The Peace Community became a Peace Brigades International accompaniment community.)

Subsequent to this massacre, the government placed a police station in San Jose. The Peace Community objected to this, claiming that these were some of the very armed actors who had attacked and killed their members. The government turned a blind eye despite international outcry at the massacre and a call for removal of the police station near the center of the town. Military presence also became greater in San Jose (Note: in Colombia the Police are technically part of the Army). The placement of the Police Station close to a public school and public buildings put the public in danger from fighting between the Police, Army, paramilitaries and FARC. So the Peace Community made the decision to move out of San Jose and build a new settlement on land about

one kilometer away on the road from San Jose to Apartado on land which the Peace Community owned called La Holandesa. This land had been purchased with the help of human rights support out of Holland. The new settlement was called San Josecito and remains the primary home of the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado to this day.

The entire area in which the Peace Community lives is rich in mineral deposits (oil, coal), stone, forests, water, banana plantations, cacao and other crops and many multinational interests would like access to this land and have been willing to engage paramilitaries and the military to terrorize people off the land to make it more accessible to exploitation. Not only Peace Community members but other residents in the area have been killed or driven off their land, even in recent months.

In the Peace Community are two memorials to the people from the community who have been killed during the Colombian armed conflict. These include adults and a number of children. I noticed on this trip that the memorials have gotten a bit overgrown as compared to my last visit. But the community is very busy with growing crops for the community and cacao for chocolate that they process and send to Europe.

The Peace Community is well known in Europe and has received a great deal of human rights help from Peace Brigades International, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Witness for Peace and other European and United States peace groups who have sent workers to live with the Community and offer accompaniment to help reduce the violence to which they are subjected. We personally have heard stories from international peace accompanists

of being held up at gun point by paramilitaries, along the road between Apartado and San Jose while with Community members, all of whose money, withdrawn from the Peace Community's bank account in Apartado for expenses, was stolen.

Around the community one sees ducks and chickens, roosters crowing at all times of day, pigs, dogs, cats and horses roaming freely. The Community has its own school for its children and a community dining area and meeting areas, although community members also have their own residences where they eat and live their personal lives.

On this trip we arrived unannounced at about 10 am on Thursday, July 27, and were met by Arley Tuberquia, one of the community leaders. We spoke with him for some time and then were joined by German Graciano Posso and Maria Brigida Gonzalez. Maria Brigida is one of the founders of the Peace Community and German Graciano is their official legal representative and spokesman. Although we spoke most with Arley and German, Brigida is an elder and knows the long history of the Peace Community best. She is also an artist who works with weaving, jewelry and painting, telling the story of the community through her artwork. She lost her 15-year-old daughter to violence by the military in 2005. Virtually every member of the Peace Community has lost family members to assassinations or other attacks from the armed actors in the area: FARC, paramilitaries, Army and Police.

I was present for the entire meeting with Arley, German and Brigida. Notes were taken by Jesse Ishikawa and I am relying on those notes as well as my own memory and knowledge of some of the history for this report. Jack Laun provided most of the translation from Spanish to English with help from

Eunice Gibson.

The stories we were told were similar to the stories we had been told on prior visits. What is so disturbing is that even after the signing of the Peace Agreement between the FARC and Colombian Government in 2016, the threats and violence and intimidation continue from paramilitaries and the military. Most of the current harassment is from the paramilitaries, but the military turns a blind eye to the harassment and threats to kill leaders of the community coming from the paramilitaries. While paramilitaries threaten neighbors of the Peace Community as well, driving some off their land or requiring their help in work projects assigned to them by the paramilitaries, the Peace Community refuses to answer these demands. Even some of their neighbors have become frustrated with the Peace Community for refusing to cooperate with the paramilitaries or the government because of the past history of violence directed toward them by the paramilitaries and military. This has created more difficulties for them. But the children continue to play soccer with neighboring children and soccer games between rival teams have been set up.

When representatives of the Peace Community met in July with people from the federal land restitution office it was a difficult discussion because the representatives of the land restitution office were accompanied by paramilitaries that the community recognized and who had harassed them. The Peace Community refused to meet with the paramilitaries present, so the paramilitaries remained outside the meeting, walking up and down the road.

Rumors of plans to assassinate members of the Peace Community Council are meant to intimidate. Threats

Visit to San José de Apartado cont.

were made specifically against German Graciano. When German Graciano was confronted by three armed assailants several years ago on Peace Community land, the community came immediately to surround him and the assailants, and the assailants were disarmed. The police came and took them away, but they were later released, and no charges were filed. Now Community members do not walk to work or travel alone, but always in pairs or a group to dissuade this type of harassment.

What is the problem that causes this intense dislike of the relatively small Peace Community? The paramilitaries also intimidate other residents in the area, exacting tribute in the form of “protection” money and enlisting local residents for work on construction of an illegal road that is not of benefit to the local residents and runs over some of their land. Meanwhile the Peace Community refuses to participate

or pay “protection” money, so they are accused of being anti-public and opposed to government including, of course, the paramilitaries. Thus, many local residents are led to believe that the Peace Community is in part responsible for their own difficulties with the paramilitaries and their friends in the military.

Everyone is aware that the new president of Colombia, Gustavo Petro, is a former revolutionary, a former member of the now defunct M-19 rebel group. He spent time in prison for this activity and subsequently rejoined civil society and became a legislator working for peace. He is the only progressive president in Colombia’s history. But he has yet to be able to control the military or the paramilitaries, as evidenced by the military’s unwillingness to confront or put a stop to paramilitary activity.

The Peace Community would like to be able to talk to the government

and, in fact, Minister of Defense Ivan Velasquez and Peace Commissioner Danilo Rueda did come to the Peace Community and talked to Community members, but the harassment and threats have not stopped.

Hence the Peace Community has set four conditions for meeting with the government:

- 1) The government must openly apologize for the death of Luis Eduardo Guerra, a Peace Community leader killed in the February 21, 2005 joint military and paramilitary action, confirmed by subsequent investigation, only days after meeting with Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos. His killing was part of the eight-person massacre that also included three children and one young adult.
- 2) The government must move the police station and military out of San Jose.
- 3) The government must establish a commission for evaluating why there have been so many attacks against the Peace Community. (*The human rights impacts of violence are overwhelming. In a judicial hearing in July 2018, Father Javier Giraldo spoke of the most serious human rights violations to date: 325 peasants killed; 500 threats and extermination announcements; 100 incidents of torture; 200 people deprived of their liberty in arbitrary and illegal operations; and more than 50 forced displacements. In addition, the Peace Community registered hundreds of sexual abuses, cattle rustling, looting attacks and armed robberies. These crimes have been perpetrated by all the armed actors who have been present in the area for decades: guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the Colombian*



CSN delegation members meeting with Luis Eduardo (Lucho) Celis in Bogotá.

Armed Forces. <https://pbicolombia.org/accompanied-organizations/peace-community/>) There finally was partial accountability for the massacre of February 21, 2005 mentioned above.

- 4) The government must openly recognize and accept the Peace Community.

Many people are convinced the government will never accept these conditions, particularly the second, and suggest that the Peace Community should agree to meet with the government without these prior conditions. However, the Peace Community has a recorded and publicly confirmed history of attacks on them by the military and police working side-by-side with the paramilitaries. Furthermore, the military and police are located close to public buildings and schools, and these public venues have thus been threatened by the possibility of rebel and government altercations near them, or of violence due to confrontations with paramilitaries. In fact, this position of having military and police near schools and other public buildings is contrary to federal law. Although the Peace Community's demands may not be met, they are not unjust or exaggerated. They are simply just demands that the government honor its own laws and commitments.

The Peace Community's position is clear and simple in this regard; we might say it is simply calling a spade

a spade. The Peace Community lives a community life in peace, allowing no weapons and no one on the property with weapons, including military or police. The military and police up to the present have colluded with paramilitaries to harass, intimidate and threaten the Peace Community. As mentioned above, this has continued despite the Peace Community meeting with Defense Minister Velasquez and Peace Commissioner Rueda.

Although land ownership papers may not exist in full formality for the Peace Community (as for many communities and individuals in Colombia), the Peace Community obtains legal ownership through *adverse possession*, otherwise known as squatter's rights, due to having lived continuously on the land for more than five years. The land was given to them and no other claims have been made in the 25 years of their residence there.

Toward the end of our meeting with the Peace Community leadership, Brigida led us all on a walking tour of the Community, pointing out living quarters, the memorial spaces for fallen Community members, some of the animals, the elementary school, some craft projects, murals done by herself and others within the Community, and the Community communal dining area.

When this tour was completed, our taxi had returned and we drove to Apartado for the night. The next day we flew to Bogota.

The United States Government and Colombia, September 26, 2023

by David Kast

The Colombia Support Network mission has been to inform the U.S. public and government representatives of the ongoing crisis that is Colombia. This crisis involves the U.S. government intimately. Colombia has been a close military ally of the United States since the late 1940s when Colombia sent its first students to what later became known as the School of the Americas at Ft. Benning, Georgia¹.

1 In fact, as early as 1928, the U.S. demanded that Colombia stop a strike in Colombia against United Fruit (a U.S. company with a local monopoly on fruit) or face American troops being sent into Colombia. This led to a massacre of up to 2,000 strikers by the Colombian military (exact death total unknown). Later, in the late 1940s Colombia sent officers of the military to the Centro de Entrenamiento Latino Americano, Division Terrestre, later renamed Escuela Latino Americana Terrestre, located in the Panama Canal Zone and founded by the U.S. in 1946. Eventually, by 1984, after several moves in Panama and a change in name to the United States Army School of the Americas, the school took up residence at Ft. Benning, GA, where it became best known as the School of the Americas at Ft. Benning, GA. After 2000, with its reputation tarnished by the release of documents that among other things showed the school teaching methods of torture and other extreme counter insurgency techniques, the School of Americas was closed and reopened as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation WHINSEC) located at Ft. Benning, recently renamed Ft. Moore, near

Colombia is also the only country in Latin America to send troops to the Korean conflict (4,300-5,100 soldiers and 300 sailors), 1951-1954, alongside American troops. Since then Colombia has led counterinsurgency training in various countries in Central America and even at the School of the Americas (since renamed Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, WHINSEC). Although Colombia has no external enemies the U.S. has maintained large military contributions to Colombia, primarily to fight the 60-year-old insurgency against the government that began due to the oligarchic and plutocratic nature of the society which also has one of the greatest income disparities in the Western Hemisphere. The poor, particularly campesinos, indigenous and Afro-Colombians, are at the bottom of the social-economic ladder.

Colombia is also extremely rich in natural resources: gold, silver, platinum, gems, oil, coal, water, lumber, flowers, bananas and cacao, and it is the only country in South America with coastlines on both the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans (the Atlantic via the Caribbean). Thus, it is a target for multinational corporations and as a strategic military location for all of Latin America. Thus, another function of the Colombian military (and the paramilitaries) has been to help guarantee access to Colombia's natural resources for multinationals from the U.S., Canada, Europe and Asia, as well as to provide land for local

Columbus, Georgia. (see www.cfr.org/timeline/us-colombia-relations, and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Hemisphere_Institute_for_Security_Cooperation)

cattle ranchers and large-scale farmers, through the terrorizing of campesinos, indigenous and Afro-Colombians who live on these lands. Thus, the poor are driven off their lands (often lived on for generations but also often without ownership papers) so the government can sell/lease the lands to large farmers or multinationals. They migrate to the cities or try to leave the country and are often left destitute. (Cecilia Zarate-Laun writes of this in many of the articles in the forthcoming book of her writings and talks.)

Further, the government taxes on multinationals are very low so most of the wealth from the exploitation of the lands leaves the country and does very little for the poor local people whose lands are taken and who are forced to work for the multinationals or flee to the cities. Of course, the government itself often receives kick-backs of one sort or another as do military leaders, paramilitaries and large property owners, thus perpetuating the oligarchic, plutocratic structure of the society under the guise of democracy. It is noteworthy that many progressive political leaders have been assassinated from the 1940s to the present, but particularly in the late 1980s when over 5,000 members of the Patriotic Union political party were killed. The Patriotic Union Party had been started by former FARC members who legally rejoined civil society and members of the Communist Party in 1985. It was also joined by progressives who were dissatisfied with the two traditional political parties.

Once the drug influx to the U.S. became epidemic during and after the Vietnam War, the military was called on also to attempt eradication and interdiction of drugs including

coca, its production and processing. But as it happened, the military, paramilitaries and the insurgents soon got caught up in the drug trafficking themselves, making deals with drug lords and dealers, offering or demanding “protection” money, thus taking a cut of the profits. It became and has remained a very complicated dance between multiple violent actors. Furthermore, some of the multinationals also got involved in paying off paramilitaries for getting rid of (assassinating) labor leaders, human rights workers and social leaders. Some have even been implicated in involvement in the drug trafficking itself.

Why has the United States continued to fund the Colombian military when it is aware of its many offenses against the poor, its involvement in drug trafficking and its failed war on drugs? The war on drugs, ineffectual as it has been, has been an excellent distraction from the primary purpose for support to the

military: to ensure that transnational business continues unfettered, and to suppress and or destabilize as much as possible any socialist or economically progressive government. As a footnote, Monsanto, an American company (recently acquired by the German company Bayer) and the maker of Roundup Ultra which uses glyphosate, has been strongly supported by the United States government. Glyphosate is a dangerous herbicide implicated in numerous health problems and the destruction not only of coca plants, but also of normal crops of the peasants. The United States continues to apply pressure on the Petro government to continue the use of glyphosate (Roundup Ultra) even though the Colombian government has suspended its use and all interdiction techniques to date have been unable to significantly reduce coca production, processing and shipment to the United States and Europe. Finally, the Colombian military

acts as a mercenary army for the United States, following it to the Middle East on “peace-keeping” missions (essentially supporting Israel), but primarily in supporting counterinsurgency training in Latin America. So, the United States has a tremendous vested interest in maintaining its strong military relationship with Colombia, despite Colombia’s use of its own military to suppress and subjugate its own people.

When Cecilia asked Seymour Hersh in Washington to do a piece on Colombia, he demurred due to other commitments and ended by saying to her, “Poor Colombia, your country is doomed.” It is no wonder that Cecilia used to refer to Colombia as the 51st state!

Although the United States openly appears to support the Gustavo Petro administration, if one reads the interview of the acting American Ambassador to Colombia, Francisco Palmieri, officially the Chargé d’Affaires for Colombia, by Vicky Davila of Revista Semana here: <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/estados-unidos-le-habla-a-gustavo-petro-el-embajador-francisco-palmieri-sienta-su-posicion-frente-a-la-legalizacion-de-la-cocaina-la-extradicion-las-visas-y-nicolas-maduro/202244/>), one will find that while praising Petro, Palmieri soft-spokenly disagreed with ceasing the spraying of coca crops with glyphosate, he disagreed with legalization of coca for selling to European pharmaceutical companies, he disagreed with Petro’s desire to limit multinational extraction, was ambiguous on allowing tourist visas to the U.S. to Colombians and on Petro’s desire to change extradition agreements with the U.S.

The United States is very much for peace.....so long as it does not significantly interfere with the bottom line: corporate profit and repression of progressive governments that seek



CSN delegation members meeting with Attorney Rodrigo Uprimny in Bogota

US Government & Colombia cont.

significant economic restructuring in favor of the poor. The United States has openly sought to destabilize or even remove many progressive or left-leaning governments, but is very cautious with Colombia because of its huge, vested interest there. It is better to keep the ostensibly democratic government there intact and wait Petro out. If his progressive goals can be subtly stymied or undermined, then in the next presidential election, in which Petro cannot run (there are one term limits in Colombia), a more “reasonable”, more “middle-of-the-road” candidate may be elected.

Perhaps what is needed most, for Americans who are concerned about Colombia, is for them to let their government know that they disapprove of any military aid to Colombia so long as that military is used as a mercenary army to disrupt and destabilize other countries’ progressive or left-leaning governments or to support paramilitaries and the suppression of the poor and minorities including indigenous and Afro-Colombians. For years Colombia has received the most U.S. military aid in Latin America, followed by Mexico, both way above the rest. Only recently has the total received by the combined Northern Triangle (Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras) surpassed Colombia and Mexico individually.

The United States must be advised by its citizenry to turn away from destabilizing or helping overthrow any governments whose economic policies it disapproves of (here think of Guatemala in 1955, Nicaragua after the Sandinista revolution, the overthrow of President Allende in Chile on September 11, 1973, the 60+ year embargo on Cuba,

Venezuela since Chavez, Bolivia since Evo Morales, the Honduras coup, etc.). Recall that it is not about democracy: the U.S. installed the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua in the mid-30s after a 20-year occupation of Nicaragua by the U.S. Marines in support of United Fruit (now Chiquita Brands); the U.S. supported/installed the first president of Cuba (who had dual Cuban-American citizenship) after we “liberated” Cuba from Spain; supported Fulgencio Batista during his checkered tenure as dictator of Cuba; and supported United Fruit in Colombia in 1928 (the ensuing massacre was the basis for a massacre described by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*).

The United States has a huge, vested interest in maintaining “Free Trade” agreements that bring inexpensive goods to the United States and allow duty-free exporting of cheap American subsidized crops to Latin American (and other) countries, destabilizing those countries’ home-grown farm crops and sending campesinos, who can no longer afford to grow crops to sell, to cities to work in factories or live in slums. We will never know what experiments might work in Latin America other than our own economic model if we do not allow and support other countries’ efforts to try new ways. Unfortunately, power convinces us of our exceptionalism and the world’s need of our governance and guidance.

Cecilia Zarate-Laun believed that peace could only come through the rejection of state violence or supporting any armed actors in Colombia. She argued with insurgents from FARC against the use of violence at a meeting in Central America in the 90s even though she agreed with their goals

of ending multinational exploitation and of redistributing land to the poor, particularly the dispossessed. Cecilia continually pointed out in many of her talks and written articles how U.S. support and enforcement of Colombian internal military policy led to the dispossession of peasant lands, forced migration to the cities, loss of cultural integrity and transference of traditional myths, legends and community to the Disneyfication of Colombia where, as she put it, you needed a credit card and a commodified job independent of traditional culture to be considered fully human. The children now, she would say, instead of hearing traditional stories from the elders of their communities, grow up on Mickey Mouse while the elders are driven to sell their myths and legends on the open market or donate them to museums.

Just as for the Peace Community of San Jose, for us to adhere to nonviolent justice and refuse armed violence, for us to demand that the United States stop arms sales and become a non-violent advocate for peace, leaves us open to attacks of being naïve, even complicit with evil, of cowardice and lack of patriotism. It is curious how desiring peace and refusing national violence can so often make others so angry and hostile!

Instead of finding it necessary to support and justify violence “in this situation,” we need to recognize that all violence, particularly war in the age of modern weaponry, evidences the breakdown of justice, and that justice never derives from violence, greed, unfettered corporate capitalism or totalitarianism, but only through their opposites:

Congratulations to Colombia's Courageous Female Reporters

*By Jack Laun,
Co-Founder and Program Director*

This morning I discovered among the messages I received by email a citation to an interview conducted by Patricia Lara Echeverri, the Founder and Director of the newsmagazine Cambio, with Jineth Bedoya, a very courageous reporter who was kidnapped and raped at the order of persons in high places who wished to silence her voice and end her reporting on the violence directed at reporters, particularly women reporters, among whom Patricia Lara and Jineth Bedoya are among the very best. These two reporters have not shied away from reporting on incidents involving violence, and in many cases murder, taking place with the knowledge and approval of government officials.

As I watched the interview with Jineth Bedoya conducted by Patricia Lara and available on Cambio's website, I was particularly impressed by the

determination of both to report on violence directed at women journalists in the hope of ending this terrible mistreatment. And I was reminded of the terrible fate of a student in a course on Urban Policies I taught as a visiting professor in the Political Science Department of the Universidad de los Andes in 1974.

One of the students in my class was Gloria Lara de Echeverry, who came from a prominent family and was a relative of Patricia Lara. Shortly after her graduation from the Universidad de Los Andes, Gloria was kidnapped and held, I believe for ransom, by an armed group. As she was being held captive, a rescue party discovered the location of the group that had kidnapped Gloria. But as the potential rescuers of Gloria neared the place where she was being held, her captors murdered her presumably to keep her from telling the rescue party who her captors were.

This incredible tragedy, involving a person I knew, has remained etched into my memory. As the Co-Founder of the Colombia Support Network with my Colombian wife, Cecilia Lucia Zarate-Laun, I have worried about the terrible violence so many Colombians, especially women, have suffered for so long. I am encouraged by the efforts of the government of President Gustavo Petro to bring an end to the violence that has afflicted his country-my late wife's country-for so long. My wife left a series of articles on the human rights issues in Colombia which is soon to be published in book form.

I fervently hope that the courageous reporting by Jineth Bedoya and Patricia Lara, and several other Colombian journalists who are not afraid to tell the truth about violence in Colombia, and who is behind it, will continue and help provide a foundation for lasting peace in the country.



Wisconsin Interfaith Committee on Latin America, Inc.

Colombia Support Network

P.O. Box 1505

Madison, WI 53701-1505

You do make the difference!

Become involved in ending horrible human rights abuses in Colombia.

I would like to become a member of the Colombia Support Network

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP \$25 REGULAR/\$15 LOW INCOME

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY/STATE/ZIP _____

PHONE/FAX _____

EMAIL _____

Please make checks payable in \$US to WICOLA/Colombia Support Network. Donations are tax deductible.

I am interested in volunteering by:

STARTING A CSN CHAPTER IN MY LOCALE

GOING ON A DELEGATION TO COLOMBIA

TRANSLATING/INTERPRETING

HELPING IN THE OFFICE

SETTING UP A TALK AT MY SCHOOL, GROUP, OR CHURCH

PARTICIPATING IN CSN STUDY GROUPS

I am sending a donation of \$25 \$50 \$100 other

Check PayPal

NAME _____

ACCOUNT _____

EXPIRATION DATE _____

SIGNATURE X _____