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Criminal investigations: An instrument employed to persecute human rights organisations in Colombia?

In Germany, the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó was presented with an award for ten years of non-violent resistance

The Popular Women's Organisation celebrates its 35th anniversary

Summary





The OFP celebrates 35 years of existence. What does it mean for the organisation?



The voluntary confessions by the AUC leaders shed little light on the demands for truth, justice and reparation



From the Sierra to the city: A trip along the Caribbean coast

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Human Rights

"Steadfast in protest" *

n the forward to the 2006 Annual Report of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, Kofi Annan emphasises the role performed by human rights defenders in "protecting victims and denouncing abuses." The report warns that "when they are not assassinated, defenders risk their physical and psychological integrity or their freedom.' He also stresses that, although "States should be the first to protect defenders, they are only too often those sponsoring their repression."

According to the report, in Colombia "Those who persisted in promoting and protecting human rights continued to be the victims of multiple acts of reprisals: assassinations, [...] enforced disappearances, [...] torture, [...] attacks and death threats, [...] acts of harassment and surveillance, [...] or smear campaigns". [...] "The authorities increasingly instrumentalised judicial systems in order to criminalise the activities of defenders, who were subjected to searches, arrests or detentions generally based on fabricated evidence". "With rare



Due to fighting for their rights, campesino communities like Jiguamiandó (Chocó) have suffered from many acts of

exceptions, impunity largely prevailed when it came to prosecuting perpetrators of violations against human rights defenders. Finally, protection measures granted by certain governments were in fact often superficial and mostly used as a mere alibi to avoid tackling the real causes behind these attacks or the crucial issue of impunity".

This report gathers together numerous cases, which is why PBI wants to call attention to the cases concerning accompanied communities and organisations cited in the document, such as those concerning the acts of repression against the communties in the region of Urabá in the Antioquia and Chocó departments (in particular the Peace Community of San José de Apartado and the communities of Jiguamiandó and Curbaradó); the five threats received by the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective; the threats, torture, and murders suffered by the members of the Popular Women's Organisation; and the acts of harrassment and arbitrary detention against members of Committee for Solidarity with Political Prisoners.

Trade Unionism in Colombia

n line with the above-mentioned report by, Amnesty International warns of the present situation of impunity for crimes against trade unionists, since "Impunity in these cases remains at over 90 per cent". This impunity encourages "the perpetrators of human rights violations to be [...] more than willing to repeat their actions." Furthermore, Amnesty International "has received information of the possible use of arbitrary legal proceedings relating to charges of subversion against trade unionists and other human rights defenders."1

In addition, "[t]he spate of death threats in 2006 against trade unionists by paramilitaries is a dramatic illustration that the Colombian government's much publicized 'demobilization' process is not resulting in an improvement in the human rights situation for trade unionists. The process is also failing to dismantle paramilitary structures which continue to operate in collusion with security forces,



sometimes under new names."

It is important to stress that "trade unionists are human rights defenders. Human rights defenders are crucial actors in the struggle for political, social and economic rights. [...] States have international obligations to protect human rights defenders.'

Family members remember their loved ones, the three trade unionists murdered in Caño Seco, Arauca, in 2004. © Jorge Mata/Surimages

- "Steadfast in protest" is the title to the 2006 Annual Report of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) International Federation for Human Rights
- 1 Excerpts taken from the report: Killings, Arbitrary Detentions, and Death Threats: The Reality of Trade Unionism in Colombia, Amnesty International, July, 2007. Al Index: AMR 23/001/2007.

Organisations / Human Rights Defenders

Lawyers and communities continue to be vulnerable groups

ver the last few months in several regions of the country, a climate of harassment and threats against accompanied human rights defenders and communities has continued to persist. Furthermore, this situation has worsened with the assassination of people involved in peace initiatives.

In Urabá, the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, whose leaders, members of the Internal Council are accompanied by PBI, faced new acts of aggression with the aim of to isolating, stigmatising, and harming the Peace Community's nonviolent proposal of staying out of the armed conflict. On May 14th, at seven o'clock in the morning, PBI learned that Francisco Puerta, peasant farmer leader and former coordinator of the Miramar Humanitarian Zone (a Peace Community project), was murdered in the municipality of Apartadó. According to reports, two armed civilians approached and then shot him. According to the same reports, on the same day a group of six armed civilians were seen in a place known as El Mangolo, where normally but not on this occasion-there is a police checkpoint.1

Days previously, people close to the Peace Community said that paramilitaries were threatening to commit a massacre in the Community. On May 9th, three women were detained near El Mangolo by three presumed paramilitaries, who introduced themselves as 'Black Eagles' and claimed to have a list of names of people to kill from the Peace Community. After demanding information about several leaders and accompaniers of the Peace Community, once it was confirmed the women were not members of the Community, they were allowed to go^{.3}

On July 13th, despite all of the denouncements concerning the harassment and murder of Francisco Puerta, the situation worsened when Dairo de Jesús Torres, coordinator of the Alto Bonito Humanitarian Zone, was murdered on the road connecting San José de Apartadó to the municipality of Apartadó. According to the Community, the public transport vehicle on which Dairo Torres was travelling, was intercepted by two armed presumed paramilitaries just five minutes from the entrance to Apartadó and two minutes from the police checkpoint in El Mangolo. These men forced Torres out of the vehicle and made the driver continue on his way. The body of Dairo Torres was found along the road by the passengers that came on the next public transport vehicle that passed the same part of the road. This

murder occurred on a road patrolled by the national police, where regular checkpoints control the movement of vehicles and people.

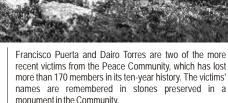
n 2002, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights granted the Peace Community provisional measures of protection. Nonetheless, given the apparent non-compliance of the State, the Inter-American Court had to

reiterate these measures in 2005. On both occasions, the Court required the Colombian State to "guarantee the necessary security conditions on the access routes between San José de Apartadó and Apartadó." 4 The Court also made explicit reference to Tierra Amarilla,⁵ the same place where the presumed paramilitaries threatened the Community on July 12, a day before the murder of Dairo Torres.

On May 25th, in the city of Medellín, the Judicial Liberty Corporation (CJL) received a letter at the reception of its office building, in which death threats were made against the lawyers if they did not give up some of their criminal defence cases. The letter stated the lawyers could be "declared our military target" and warned them: "[...] do not dirty your CVs and consciences, and above all do not make us get our consciences and our hands dirty with your blood."

This threat was made only three days after the publication of the report "Ejecuciones Extrajudiciales: Caso Oriente Antioqueño" (Extrajudicial Executions: The Case of the Eastern Antioquia region) in collaboration with the Colombia-Europe-United States Coordination network and the Human Rights Collective Seeds of Liberty (Codehsel). For several years now, CJL has been conducting research in the Eastern Antioquia region on cases concerning peasant farmers murdered and later presented by the army as members of the guerrilla killed in combat.

In her latest report on the human rights situation in Colombia, the United Nations Human Rights High Commissioner stated that "[b]ecause of their number and widespread occurrence,



murders with characteristics of extrajudicial executions do not appear to be isolated incidents but acts that are tending to become increasingly common." At the same time as receiving the death threat, CJL also denounced the criminal investigation and lack of due process in the case against CJL lawyer Elkin Ramírez Jaramillo and included this in the list of legal and illegal harassments suffered by CJL members. In a more general context, international bodies have spoken out against the fact that in Colombia "[...] authorities appear to be misusing the law by opening investigations on spurious or unsubstantiated charges against human rights defenders in order to stigmatize and harass human rights defenders and prevent them from carrying out their work."8s

hese acts of harassment and murder negatively affect the work of human rights defenders and peace initiatives like the San José Peace Community. Up to now, relevant government agencies have yet to offer a clarification of the investigations of these threats and murders. PBI joins with the Colombia Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in reiterating, "with respect to the rule of law and democratic society, the importance held by the peaceful exercise of the right to defend and promote human rights, the right to work for peace, and the right to work for the victims."9

- Los Paramilitares Asesinan a Francisco. Peace Community press release, 14 May 2007. Black Eagles Águilas Negras is the name of a presumed reformed paramilitary group.
- Los Paramilitares Asesinan a Francisco, Peace Community press release, 14 May 2007.

 Provisional measures of protection requested by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights with respect to the Republic of Colombia and the case of the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó. Resolution issued by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights on 18 June 2002.
- Paramilitares Áquilas Negras Amenazan la Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó. Peace Community press release, 13 July 2007
- Public denunciation issued by the Corporation for Judicial Liberty, Medellín, 28 May 2007.
- $Report of the United \, Nations \, High \, Commissioner \, for \, Human \, Rights \, on \, the \, Situation \, of \, Human \, Rights \, in \, Colombia, \, 5 \, March \, 2007.$ Colombia Fear and Intimidation: The dangers of human rights work. Amnesty International, 7 September 2006, Al Index: AMR
- Condenan los Hostigamientos a Organizaciones No Gubernamentales Defensoras de los Derechos Humanos, Organizaciones Sindicales y Sociales. Office in Colombia of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 6 February 2007

Organisations / Human Rights Defenders

Criminal investigation: An instrument employed to persecute human rights organisations in Colombia?

n the Spanish language, the term used for carrying out criminal investigations is judicializar, which the Real Academia Española defines as "addressing an issue by legal means, which could be addressed differently, generally by political means." Nonetheless, this expression has a very distinct meaning for human rights defenders in Colombia.

"The criminal investigations against grass roots and union leaders as well as human rights defenders have turned into a weapon to persecute those who raise a critical voice. Some criminal investigations fulfil the requirements of the law and are carried out transparently. Others are carried out with the aim of imprisoning those who think differently, in which people are accused of crimes they have not committed, where set-ups take place, and false testimony and arbitrary judicial processes are employed," explains Reynaldo Villalba, a lawyer from the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective (CCAJAR).

Príncipe Gabriel González, from the Committee for Solidarity with Political Prisoners (FCSPP), is an example of this reality. In 2005, the former coordinator of the Santander chapter of FCSPP in Bucaramanga received threats due to his speaking out against human rights. These acts of intimidation forced him to leave for Bogotá. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Vicepresidency, together with the Ministry of Interior and Justice agreed to reinforce his security plan. Nonetheless, in January 2006, Gabriel González was detained, accused of rebellion. The Attorney General's Office ordered his arrest based on intelligence reports from the Technical Investigation Agency (CTI)¹ and testimony provided by former members of the

Gabriel González was detained for 15 months in the 'La Modelo' and 'La Picota', medium and high security prisons, until March 30th of this year, when the Eighth District Court in Bucaramanga acquitted him of the crime of rebellion.² Although he is free again, his lengthy detention has had severe consequences for the work and life of this human rights defender.

"The detention distanced me from the processes and there was no progress in all the work carried out by the FCSPP chapter in Bucaramanga. The objective of the criminal investigation -just like the threats and displacement- is to thwart and harm the organising processes. Personally, it meant separation from my family and the end of my relationship with my spouse. Additionally, it has caused economic problems, since one ends up with no money in prison. It also caused emotional problems, due to the overcrowding and being locked up all the time," explained Gabriel González.

According to Bayron Góngora, lawyer for the for Judicial Liberty Corporation (CJL), the penetration of judicial agencies in military affairs represents one of the most serious problems in the criminal investigations carried out in Colombia. "The national government has implemented a series of policies which turn prosecutors into police. Many of their legal officials have their offices inside the military bases and end up working as officials operating for this military base. We have known prosecutors that go on the operation with the army brigade, wear a bulletproof vest and are issued with a weapon, and they participate in the operation as if they were members of the army. What can one expect from a legal official under these circumstances?" asks Góngora.

urthermore, as the case of Gabriel González and the denunciations issued by several human rights organisations in Colombia show, the Attorney General's Office uses unreliable sources to gather information and publicly accuse human rights workers of having links with insurgent groups.

"The prosecutors use witnesses making vague accusations; they'll say: 'such and such a person belonged to the guerrilla', but they don't say when they saw the person doing something specific. The Attorney General's Office should make them specify the information. Yet it doesn't; it simply uses proceeds with the investigation on the basis of the vague information of said person belonging to the guerrilla," explains Góngora, who, in August 2006, was himself subjected to being set up. In his case, CJL reported that the Valle de Aburrá Metropolitan Police had encouraged prisoners from different prisons to provide false testimony against Góngora as a member of the guerrilla.3

Góngora explains that the cases of criminal investigations carried out against CJL all have a common denominator: the accusations are unclear. Góngora explains that this occurs because there are economic and legal benefits for the witnesses. "Several methods are employed to convince a person to provide testimony. One, by using persons under criminal investigation and offering them legal benefits in exchange for their testimony. 'You accuse so-and-so and we'll give you a sentence reduction or we'll get you out of jail. Other persons are offered economic benefits; this mechanism is quite perverse since people will accuse anyone for money, especially when there is no control and they're allowed to make such widesweeping accusations."



Príncipe Gabriel González, who was criminally investigated and imprisoned for more than a year.

International organizations, such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in its last report, warned of the dangers of using unreliable witnesses. According to the report, "[i]n some cases, these arrests were based on irresponsible statements by demobilized fighters [...] or on non-objective reports by military intelligence or judicial police units. In other cases, the arrests were made without legal warrants. The Office also received information regarding illegal or arbitrary arrests of human rights defenders and social leaders charged, without sufficient evidence, with the crime of rebellion."4

As has been proven in many different cases, these spurious testimonies have provided the basis for legal proceedings and the imprisonment of human rights defenders and persons with no link to illegal actions. And, even though it has been shown that the charges brought against these people are based on nonexistent evidence and false testimonies, these harassment mechanisms -facilitated by legal institutions- are an instrument meant to slow down their work, displace them from their native regions, silence their speaking out against human rights violations, and stigmatize their work in Colombia.

These organisations do not question the legitimate right of the Colombian State to investigate and determine responsibilities resulting from these investigations -provided that the legal proceedings are undertaken with full respect for the established standards in accordance with the rule of law.

"We have never said we cannot be investigated by the Attorney General's Office. In fact, in the many meetings we have had with them, we have said: 'If you believe you have evidence to criminally investigate, okay, do it. But do it respecting the procedures established in the Criminal Code and the Constitution. Respect our rights and also allow us to defend ourselves, " explains Góngora.

- Investigative unit from the Attorney General's Office.
- Defensor de derechos humanos, Principe Gabriel Gonzáles absuelto y dejado en libertad. CCAJAR, April 19, 2007. Persecución a abogado de la Corporación Jurídica Libertad. CJL,
- Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Communities in Resistance



In Germany, the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó received an award for ten years of non-violent resistance



PBI has provided international accompaniment for the Peace Community since 1998.

In September 2007, representatives of the San José de Apartadó Peace Community will arrive at the German city of Aachen to be recognised for their fight against violence. The Aachener Friedenspreis Peace Award recognises leaders from around the world working for peace. Jesús Emilio Tuberquia and Wilson David, members of the Peace Community's Internal Council, spoke with PBI about the importance of this international recognition in the year they are commemorating their ten years of existence.

Ten years ago more than 300 peasant farmers decided to come together and found the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó. What brought you to make this decision?

Wilson: We had fairly compelling reasons, once we began to be violently attacked by illegal armed groups and the army. We were being forced to abandon our land because of orders we received to leave, under the threat of murder and massacres. Thus, in our search for peaceful resistance, we chose this proposal to create the Peace Community, however, up to now, more than 170 members of the community have been murdered.

Jesús Emilio: Human rights violations have been committed throughout this

region's history with the civilian population caught in the crossfire by reprisals carried out by the State, guerrilla, and paramilitaries. So we began to think about a proposal of how we could be respected, basing ourselves on international treaties establishing respect for the civilian population in the midst of the conflict. On these grounds, we declared

ourselves neutral and decided to not collaborate either directly or indirectly- with any armed actor.

Since its creation, the Community has lost more than 170 members and has documented more than 500 human rights violations. Could you give us any examples of these violations?

Wilson: Since 1996, when we were first attacked by the Colombian State and paramilitaries, several NGOs began to report on the abuses, but the State attempted to silence these voices. Meanwhile, after the army announced it would forcibly displace families, the paramilitaries began to steal what had been left behind and burn the houses down. In other words, they destroyed everything to thwart the guerrilla arriving. Another example is when the army and the police murdered a peasant farmer, dressed him in army fatigues with an assault rifle, and took a photo that ended up in the hands of the Attorney General's Office. He is not represented as a peasant farmer in the photo, rather a guerrilla member killed in combat. This type of set-up has taken place several times. In 1998, Jesús Emilio was stopped and tortured at an illegal checkpoint. And some of the women have been raped by the army. Then, when the women filed their complaints, the Attorney General's Office summoned the soldiers so the women would have to make their statements in front of them. These violations the 500 cases we speak of- have been committed in less than eight years and have been reported. However, many of the persons who reported these abuses are no longer with us.

What have been the most critical moments for the Community?

Jesús Emilio: There have been several, such as the first displacement when we travelled in the midst of gunfire and bombardments, through paramilitary checkpoints, and economic blockades, it took us by surprise and we didn't know what to do. There were massacres, which have been difficult to overcome. However, on an organisational level, having a structure has helped a lot, especially on a psychological level.

In February 2005, the Community experienced the massacre of eight civilians, among them Community members, including Luis Eduardo Guerra, one of your historical leaders. What is the explanation for this crime?

Wilson: For some time, we had been warning the government about the threats against Luis Eduardo and that the Community felt another massacre would take place. We just didn't expect the army would kill him. We have evidence to explain all of the massacres that have occurred over the last ten years so investigations can begin and find those who are responsible; nonetheless, there is no political will.

Jesús Emilio: The President [of Colombia] has publicly stated, "this community has to be finished." But we say, "we are here and here we stay." The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has demanded respect for and protection of the Community, but the State has ignored this.

Within this context, what does it mean for the Peace Community to receive this award from the city of Aachen?

Jesús Emilio: This award lets us present a difficult reality experienced in an area with threats and collusion between the army and paramilitaries. Furthermore, it also gives us hope that we are not alone in the search for dignity. In Urabá, demobilisations are spoken of when paramilitarism remains intact

Impunity

The voluntary confessions provided by AUC leaders shed little light on the demands for truth, justice, and reparation

Murderer!, Murderer!, Murderer!".

These words – spoken by the victims of the crimes perpetrated by paramilitary groups- greeted Diego Fernando Murillo Bejarano (former commander of the Cacique Nutibara, Héroes de Tolová, and Héroes de Granada Blocs) at the entrance of the Law Courts in Medellín. PBI was present accompanying organisations, members of the Movement of Victims of State Crimes. On July 16th, this demobilised commander, also known as 'Don Berna' or 'Adolfo Paz', began to provide his voluntary confession on the crimes perpetrated by the paramilitary groups under his command.

Murillo Bejarano is one of the 2,000 paramilitaries that have participated in the demobilisation process, within the framework of the Justice and Peace Law, which allows a reduction in prison sentences from 40 to eight years for former members of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), in exchange for confessions on disappearances, displacements, homicides, and massacres committed by their men.

Don Berna began his confession by reading a letter from María Teresa Toro, member of the NGO Mothers of the Candelaria – Founding Line. In this letter, Toro had asked the paramilitary boss to help locate the whereabouts of five of her loved ones as well as requesting an explanation of their deaths. Bejarano replied that he knew nothing of these crimes. However, he stated that the letter encouraged him to personally investigate the matter and he located a common grave where they were buried. Nonetheless, after carrying out 15 excavations in the area, nothing was found.

Ramón Isaza, the oldest paramilitary boss in Colombia, stated he could not remember any of his crimes because he "had Alzheimer's."² As a part of their fight for truth, justice, and reparation, the victims are not willing to accept this as an excuse. Flor Gallego is one of these people; Ms. Gallego, who is from La Esperanza in the Eastern Antioquia region, is a survivor of a paramilitary incursion, attributed to the Magdalena Medio Self-Defence Forces, under the command of Ramón Isaza, which resulted in the forced disappearance of 17 peasant farmers from this rural community (see page 10 for further information). "In 1997, [Ramón Isaza] accepted [his responsibility for] the disappearance of the campesinos from La Esperanza; now that he surrendered he says he doesn't know anything about this, that

those that knew, among them two army officers and his son Omar, are dead," stated Gallego.³ Her case, like those of many other victims in Antioquia, is represented by the Judicial Liberty Corporation, an organisation accompanied by PBI since 2001.

The absence of a real confession by the paramilitary leaders is further worsened by the ongoing demonstrations of support by the demobilised paramilitaries for their former leaders. While family members of the victims expressed their suffering by showing photos of their loved ones who have been disappeared and murdered, almost 370 demobilised paramilitaries invaded the square in front of the Law Courts in Medellín to support the "good deeds" of Fredy Rendón, alias 'El Alemán', another paramilitary leader, by organising a party that included confetti, a Vallenato band, and pop music.

s a way to put a halt to this new confrontation with paramilitaries, at a press conference during the voluntary confession of Bejarano, Iván Cepeda, on behalf of the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes, announced that the victims would present a right to petition the Medellín city government in order to stop the public demonstrations by the demobilised paramilitaries.

"The mayor cannot treat this situation as if it were between two opposing groups. These hearings are for the victims. They are not for the criminals. They are not events for public festivities or for paying homage. In these supposed acts of justice, the victims should speak, the victims must have the right to the public space." 5

"The hearings have become tribunals where the 'paras' come to present themselves as national heroes," according to Soraya Gutiérrez of the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective (CCAJAR). "All of their actions are presented as acts of war, while the victims are presented as members of the guerrilla killed in combat. The victims are very indignant with the way in which 'Jorge 40' and others present the truth."

- Según don Berna, las Auc no Metieron Mano en Orión. El Colombiano newspaper, July 18, 2007.
 La Estrategia del Olvido. Semana magazine, May 5, 2007.
- La Estrategia del Olvido. Semana magazine, May 5, 2007.
 Quote taken from: En la vereda La Esperanza esperan Justicia. IPC
- press agency, February 28, 2007.
 4 El Alemán contradijo Versión de Mancuso. El Colombiano
- newspaper, June 6, 2007.

 5 Cepeda, Iván. <u>Las Audiencias son de las Víctimas, No de los Criminales IPC press agency July 16, 2007</u>
- Criminales. IPC press agency, July 16, 2007

 6 Amenazas y Hostigamientos a Familiares de los 7 Miembros del CTI
 Desaparecidos en 2000. CCAJAR, July 9, 2007.



Victims attending the voluntary confession by Jorge 40 in Barranguilla.

During the voluntary confessions, there has been a lack of guarantees that allow the victims and their family members to participate. "It is not a process that allows the victims to participate," stresses. Gutiérrez. "All of the [victims] have questions about their own cases, but they don't know how to present them." Gutiérrez explained that the victims are afraid to formulate questions because they are required to fill out a questionnaire with their name and address, which puts them in danger due the absence of guarantees of protection.

"On the other hand, we are concerned that demobilised paramilitaries are being mobilised for the hearings with the purpose of intimidating the victims," stated Gutiérrez.

his situation becomes even more serious when taking into account that family members have been victims of death threats, according to a press release by CCAJAR. As is the case of the family members of the seven members of the Technical Investigation Agency (CTI), who were forcibly disappeared on March 9th, 2000, in the rural area of La Paz, Cesar. On July 6th, 'Jorge 40', the former commander of the Northern Bloc, recognised his responsibility for these disappearances during his voluntary confession. The family members of the victims, represented by CCAJAR, had planned to attend this hearing. However, the day before in the city of Valledupar, several of them were approached by two men on a motorcycle, one of whom said: "I am warning you not to go to the Justice and Peace hearings, if you don't want to end up disappeared like your family members.;,6

Human rights violations

for economic interests

The issue of land and natural resources in the Magdalena Medio region

The Peasant Farmer Association of the Cimitarra River Valley (ACVC) is an organisation that works in the Southern Bolivár region (Magdalena Medio) and brings together the community's proposals to follow up on the agreement between campesinos and the government of Andrés Pastrana -after the peasant farmer exodus in 1998-, to create the Peasant Farmer Reserve Area (presently suspended). Miguel Cifuentes, member of the ACVC board of directors, spoke with PBI about economic rights, natural resources, and land in this region of Colombia.

¿Could you give us a general outlook of the natural resources and companies present or interested in the region?

Northeastern Antioquia and Southern Bolívar have an immense wealth in terms of natural resources. For instance there are almost a million hectares of virgin forest. The biodiversity is beyond measure.

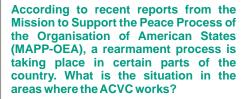
Moreover, the region has the largest gold reserve in Latin America. For decades now, multinationals have been interested in exploiting these mines. In Northeastern Antioquia, the multinational company, Kedhada, has already made claims and Governor's Office of Anitioquia is going provide them with a licence to exploit 36,000 hectares. In Southern Bolívar, it is speculated that the same company is requesting concessions to some 1,300,000 hectares, regardless of who owns the land.

In terms of oil interests, there is the Schlumberger Company, Furthermore, in preparation for the signing of the Free Trade Agreement, roads are being constructed to connect Barrancabermeja with Northeastern Antioquia and a French multinational has been contracted to dredge the Magdalena River so raw material may be shipped from the region for export. In the surrounding areas, African palm is grown, which has displaced people to urban centres, since -according to the government's theory of national securitywherever there are campesinos, there is the guerrilla. With African palm, there aren't any campesinos, so there isn't any guerrilla. Through the Campesino Reserve Area, we are formulating a comprehensive development plan so campesinos may stay on their farms.

This year, in June, the ACVC organised a forum to debate the human rights situation and the issue of land and natural resources in the areas it works. What were the forum's conclusions and achievements?

The forum was part of a year-and-a-half long process in which the communities identified three regional issues: humanitarian crisis, land and natural resources, and illicit crops.

Since the government didn't seek to resolve any of the issues, a humanitarian camp was set up in Barrancabermeja. [President] Uribe then proposed establishing working groups with State institutions in order to reach agreements on four points. First, the lifting of the suspension on the Peasant Farmer Reserve Area. Second, the issue of illicit crops, while the government speaks of eradication, we favour substitution; we have conflicting interests, but with opportunity for dialogue. There was a proposal to provide compensation for fumigated illicit crops. Third, the humanitarian crisis, an official from the Vicepresident's Office was assigned to be the contact with the community and social organisations and periodically evaluate human rights violations. Two verification commissions were established for the region. Lastly, Acción Social² funded the food and transport.



The campesinos have been clear in their position. We never recognise paramiltarism as an actor in the conflict. We always claim that it is the State. For us, paramilitarism continues to exist and has not been demobilised. Within the army, there are men dressed in black, who identify themselves as Black Eagles. Or the army itself, justifies [paramilitarism] by saying [paramilitaries] will come after them. So many campesinos are murdered and passed off as members of the guerrilla. These are not mistakes. To the contrary, it is a systematic plan carried out by the army to cause displacement and uncertainty. They kill and then legalize it. So we file lawsuits, since they kill a colleague of ours. These cases go before military tribunals, which acquit the members of the military, who remain unpunished. Another constant element of this situation is the torture perpetrated by the army. During two verification commissions in La Poza and San Pablo, 87 accounts [of torture]



Miguel Cifuentes of the ACVC.

were collected against the army. These figures show that we peasant farmer are always harassed, accused, and stigmatised by the

Faced with this situation, what strategies have you thought about developing?

Our strategy is to maintain the communitybased organisation. The Peasant Farmer Reserve Area provides a legal framework for the area's population, which is undertaken through visibilisation and accompaniment strategies.

It isn't a secret they are looking to kill us. Myself, as well as several of my colleagues, survived an armed attack on the river. For us, walking in the region constitutes an imminent danger. International accompaniment allows us to travel within the region; it allows people to have hope, organise, and participate.

Where coca was previously grown, we currently have projects for water buffalo, goats, rice, among other things, which provide us with food security. This is an experience of resistance. We continue to develop projects for communities in need. If we could reinitiate the Peasant Farmer Reserve Area and implement the sustainable development plan, there would be more guarantees for campesinos to stay in the area.

- PBI has been present as an international observer on several commissions convened by the ACVC
- PBI has been present as an international observer on several commissions convened by the ACVC.

 The Peasant Farmer Reserve Area in the Cimitarra River Valley was established on December 10, 2002, by the then Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform (INCORA) to benefit the municipalities of Yondó, Cantagallo, San Pablo, and part of Remedios. The process, which began in 1998 by ACVC, was the result of a commitment made by then President of Colombia Andrés Pastrana during the peasant farmer exodus from the Magdalena Medio. This Peasant Farmer Reserve comprises 560 thousand hectares in these municipalities in the departments of Antioquia and Bolivar. According to then Minister of Agriculture Carlos Gustavo Cano, "the project seeks to protect this area [the Magdalena River, the wetlands of the Magdalena Medio, the Serrania of Santo Domingo, and areas close to the Cimitarra River] from the expansion of the agricultural land, its natural resources, and the species in danger of extinction." In April 2003, INCORA's board of directors decided to suspend the legal effects of Resolution 028 of December 10, 2002, which constituted the Peasant Farmer Reserve Area in the Cimitarra River Valley, "for reasons of general interest and to guarantee a space allowing greater participation of all community members." This suspension has been an issue of debate between the communities and the government.
- Acción Social is a government department, responsible for channeling national and international cooperation funding to carry our social programs that work with vulnerable populations affected by poverty, drug trafficking and violence.

Current Events



The death of the 11 Colombian local councillors draws attention once more to the drama of the kidnap victims



t the end of June, Colombia was once again the setting for tragic events, when the country learned of the death of 11 of the 12 local councillors from the Valle del Cauca departmental assembly, kidnapped by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2002. According to a FARC communiqué, the politicians died after gunfire was exchanged between the FARC and an unidentified military group.¹ In response to the FARC communiqué, the government and the army denied having carried out any kind of rescue operation in the area. Both the government and the international community condemned the FARC as responsible for the death of the 11 local councillors. Demonstrations against kidnapping were carried out in all of Colombia's major cities. Although repudiation for this crime was universal, opinion was expressed both for a humanitarian agreement and military rescue operations (the government position).

The death of the 11 local councillors put paid to diplomatic initiatives by the French government to achieve the liberation of the other kidnap victims. According to the Colombian press, the liberation of Rodrigo Granda, the so-called chancellor of the FARC, was offered by the Colombian government in exchange for President Sarkozy's efforts with the G-8; through French lobby, the G-8 included Colombia in its final statement.

un macabro y triste récord: más de 3:000 hombres, mujeres y niños -sí, miños y niñas

se cuentan por docenas entre ellos- están privados de su libertad por quieres los usan

como moneda de cambio, en una violación del derecho internacional humanitario.

Although this statement expressed support for the Colombian government, the document also urged the parties to seek a humanitarian agreement.²

fter the death of the 11 local councillors, under the pretext that there is no armed conflict in Colombia, the Colombian government rejected the proposal made by France, Spain, and Switzerland to implement the mechanism for the Survey Mission, a body created to investigate breaches to international humanitarian law within an

armed conflict.3 which entails not applying the norms of international humanitarian law (IHL) that protect the civilian population in situations of armed conflict. Nonetheless, the Constitutional Court issued a ruling in July, according to which all persons affected by acts occurring within the framework of the armed conflict may demand reparation from the State. This decision is based on IHL norms applicable in internal armed conflicts.4

Some national news pieces on the

death of the 11 local councillors

Meanwhile, conversations began with Pablo Beltrán, member of the National Liberation Army (ELN) Central Command and negotiator for this guerrilla group with the government. In Havana, he stated that if the provisional six-month cessation of hostilities begins next July, this group would free all kidnap victims they hold and would engage no further in this crime.5

Farc aseguran que 11 diputados secuestrados murieron en fuego cruzado. Semana magazine, June 28, 2007.

² Semana magazine, June 11, 2007. El Tiempo newspaper, June 9, 2007.

³ El Tiempo newspaper, July 1, 2007. El Tiempo newspaper, July 11, 2007.



Iván Cepeda awarded for his commitment to human rights in Colombia



Juan Carlos de la Puente, PBI project coordinator in Colombia, symbolically presents the award to Iván Cepeda, who PBI has accompanied since his return from exile in 2004.

For several years now, Peace Brigades International has been accompanying Iván Cepeda and Claudia Girón in Colombia, members and directors of the Manuel Cepeda Vargas Foundation, which is named after the Patriotic Union senator and presidential candidate, who was brutally murdered on August 9, 1994. Since the death of his father, Cepeda has been dedicated to the promotion and protection of human rights, which is why he has received death threats and, along with his spouse, was forced into exile on two occasions. In June, the US-based NGO, Human Rights First, recognised this dedication by awarding him the 2007 Roger N. Baldwin Medal of Liberty for international human rights defenders.

"This Award recognizes the importance of Ivan's human rights work and that of other Colombian human rights defenders who are unfairly stigmatized by the Colombian

government," stated Maureen Byrnes, executive director of Human Rights First.

This NGO chose PBI to be its delegate in presenting the award to Cepeda in Bogotá, which represented another chance to support his and the Foundation's- undeniable, legitimate, and valuable human rights work, as well as the work carried out by other Colombian human rights defenders, who one way or another have been stigmatized for their fight to construct a social and democratic rule of law in Colombia.

Presently, as thousands of victims demand truth, justice, and reparation, this award is a recognition of Colombian victims' associations, which currently find themselves in grave danger, as well as of journalists promoting human rights. On several occasions, Colombian human rights organisations have designated Cepeda to be a spokesperson, including the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes, which is made up of more

than 200 organisations. Along with other human rights defenders, he has participated in the documentation of approximately 40,000 cases of crimes against humanity perpetrated in Colombia since 1966. Through his outstanding perseverance, he has spoken out against the grave human rights violations perpetrated by paramilitary groups, frequently in collusion with members of the Colombian State.

Human Rights First received distinguished nominations of human rights defenders from all over the world. An international selection committee reviewed these nominations and recommended the selection of Cepeda. In honour of Roger Baldwin, founder of the American Civil Liberties Union and the International Human Rights League, Human Rights First grants this award every two years to an activist or human rights organisation from outside of the United States that has made a distinguished contribution to the protection and promotion of human rights.



BOGOTÁ

From the sierra to the city: A trip along the Caribbean coast

For five days, PBI volunteers Kristina Johansen from Norway, and Sebastián Roetters from Germany, accompanied lawyers from the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective (CCAJAR) along the Colombian Caribbean coast. In this short account, they describe some of their impressions of the contact they had with the indigenous peoples from the Sierra Nevada and the fishing communities in this region.

Accompanying the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective allowed us to see the comprehensive work carried out by these human rights defenders, while at the same time begin to understand the contrasts of Colombia. For five days, we travelled along the Caribbean coast in pick-ups, buses, taxis, canoes, and on foot with Alirio Uribe and Pilar Silva, two lawyers from this organisation. We visited an Arhuaco community along the Guatapurí River in the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta (Cesar Department) and also spent a night in Nueva Venecia, a fishing community, whose inhabitants live in wooden houses built on stilts in the Ciénaga Grande (Magdalena Department).

One of the objectives of the trip was for Alirio Uribe to participate in a meeting in Sabana de Crespo in the Sierra Nevada with the Arhuaco cabildos (political leaders) and



Alirio Uribe, lawyer from CCAJAR, at a meeting with the Arhuaco people in Sabana de Crespo in the Sierra Nevada of

mamos (spiritual leaders). They spoke of the construction of the Los Besotes Reservoir, which greatly concerned the indigenous people since it entails flooding part of their ancestral territory of forests, rivers, and sacred places. The meeting took place outdoors and principally in the Arhuaco language. The conversation was also accompanied by men rhythmically drumming on totumos and women weaving shoulder bags.

Passing through Valledupar, the capital of Cesar, we continued on to Santa Marta and reached the city of Barranquilla, where the lawyers met with prosecutors from the Justice and Peace Unit. Uribe also met with students and trade unionists, who were victims of the

violence on the Caribbean coast and were participating in the strengthening of the National Victims' Movement regional chapter.

Lastly, we accompanied Pilar Silva to Nueva Venecia. In order to reach this community, we travelled through the swamp on a "Johnson" canoe, following the same route used by a group of heavily armed paramilitaries (presumably supported by members of the army) to enter the community in 2000. They massacred 60 people and caused the displacement of 4,000 more. Members of CCAJAR arrived a few days after the massacre and since then have taken on the civil case, representing the interests of the victims and family members in the criminal process, which has, to date, implicated and brought to trial three military members and 14 paramilitaries, including paramilitary boss 'Jorge 40'. The Lawyers' Collective is currently dedicated to achieving collective reparation for the victims. Many people have already returned to the community and the canoes that transport the people from one house to the next have names like "Volver a Empezar" (Beginning Again) and "Hago lo que Puedo" (I Do What I Can), which reflects the life strategies of their owners.

2000 Annual Report, Inter-American Court of Human Rights, April 16, 2001 http://www.cidh.org/annualrep/2000eng/chap.4b.htm.

The victims of the murders committed against the Patriotic Union do not forget

June 3, 1992

Six people in a car crossed a deserted highway in Caño Sibao, Meta. Maria Mercedes Méndez de García, outgoing mayoress for the town of El Castillo, among others, was in the vehicle. After a life of religious work, she had decided to join the Patriotic Union political party and became the first woman to win the election for mayor in this municipality.

The group was returning from Villavicencio, capital of the Meta department, where she had spoken out against human rights violations committed against the civilian population by the armed forces. Previously, she had received death threats.

The group never reached its destination; a group of men were waiting to ambush them. They launched grenades and gunfire against the vehicle, killing everyone inside.

June 3, 2007

Fifteen years later, the perpetrators of the crime are still at liberty and the Colombian State faces a judicial process before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights for the death and disappearance of more than three thousand members of the Patriotic Union and the communist party from 1985 to 1996.2 (30 percent of the cases occurred in the departments of Meta and Guaviare.)3

On this day, approximately 600 people, in 16 buses, came to Meta to share in a commemoration mass on the very same road where the massacre had taken place. During the mass, they raised a monument in memory of the victims and then marched to the community of El Castillo and remembered the massacre with an event in town's main square, along with music and speeches.

Several PBI-accompanied organisations were present, among them Iván Cepeda, member of



A march in the community of El Castillo in memory of the Caño Sibao massacre

the Foundation Manuel Cepeda as well as the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes. Iván is the son of Patriotic Union Senator Manuel Cepeda, murdered in 1994 when hit men intercepted his car on the way to work.

- Sin Olvido 54. Intereclesial Commission of Justice and Peace, May 16, 2007.
 1996 Annual Report of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Case 11.227. (Admissibility of the case of genocide against the Patriotic Union, March 12 1997.)
- Parti-Si-pa 84: Acto de Presentación Homenaje a Maria Mercedes Mendez, Interecclesial Commission of Justice and Peace, May 16, 2007.

URABÁ

Members from the Blanquicet Cooperative recover their land

In 1991, ten families, affiliated to the **Blanquicet Township Agricultural** and Livestock Workers Cooperative in Urabá (Department of Antioquia), acquired the La Esperanza farm. However, in 1998, they had to abandon their productive project due to a paramilitary attack that displaced 240 families from this township.1 Four years after their displacement, four of the ten families have decided to overcome fear and speak out. In 2005, they won the court case for the restitution of their property, but only on June 7th, 2007 did the families obtain minimum quarantees of safety to return to their property. PBI volunteers Kevin Coulombe, from Canada and Alice Garside, from the United Kingdom were present in this commission as international observers

In early morning hours of June 7th, we arrived to Blanquicet with the Interecclesial Commission of Justice and Peace as well as some of members of the Blanquicet Township Agricultural and Livestock Workers Cooperative from the La Esperanza farm. Several army officers were already conversing at the farm, while their men spread out to the surrounding areas to protect the soon-to-arrive government delegation. The objective of the government's commission was to fulfil the requirements of turning over the land to the true owners, as stipulated by the Chigorodó No. 72 District Attorney's Office, which included "the detailed verification throughout the farm for possible remains of war material, explosives, antipersonnel mines, mass graves, human remains, illicit crops, or other evidence of possible crimes."2



Volunteers from the Urabá team accompany the devolution process of the Blanquicet Cooperative.

The Cooperative is located at kilometre 18 along the road connecting Chigorodó to Lomas Aisladas in the region of Urabá (Department of Antioquia). This area also comprises the last kilometres to left to complete the construction of the Pan-American Highway, which would join Alaska to Patagonia.

In 1991, cooperative members acquired the *La Esperanza* farm through funding offered by a Dutch governmental program. However, in 1996 and subsequent years, when Álvaro Uribe Vélez was governor of Antioquia, the civilian population in Blanquicet was forcibly displaced, leaving their assets and property in the hands of paramilitaries.³ On several occasions, the campesinos were forced to sell these properties under torture or threats, such as "Surrender the property or we'll buy it from your widow."

The delegation was made up of representatives from the President's Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Procurator General's Office, and the army. After demining specialists from the national army quickly swept the *La Esperanza* farm, the delegation turned the land over to cooperative members, nine years after presumed paramilitaries with false signatures forced them to sell the farm.

Nonetheless, today the Cooperative members are still threatened by presumed paramilitaries and farm machinery has been damaged, even though in 2006 these families were granted precautionary measures of protection from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which recognised the special vulnerability of this population.⁵

Pilgrimage to Miramar in honour of Francisco Puerta



PBI accompanied members of the Peace Community in the pilgrimage for the memory of Francisco Puerta.

On June 24th, PBI accompanied the pilgrimage in honour of the memory of Francisco Puerta, active member of the Peace Community murdered in May 2007.¹ Puerta was a peasant farmer leader and former coordinator of the Miramar Humanitarian Zone, a place of refuge for the civilian population in the case of combat.

Members from the Peace Community, Father Javier Giraldo, representatives from the Luis Eduardo Guerra Human Rights Committee, and international accompaniers left from La Holandita (the Community's principal settlement) to Miramar, where mass was celebrated in commemoration of Puerta. During the ceremony, other murdered Peace Community members were remembered as well. Additionally, special mention as made of their commitment to peace, the construction of a more just world, and a dignified life for everyone.

Soon after the pilgrimage, on July 13th, the region suffered another heavy blow with the murder of Dairo Torres, member of the Peace Community and coordinator of the Alto Bonito Humanitarian Zone. The community urgently requests international and national solidarity to demand the State stop the extermination and respect the rights of the civilian population within the armed conflict.²

- 1 Informe 1 Blanquicet: Devolución Dilata, Amenazas y Destrucción de la Propiedad Apropiación Paramilitar de Tierras. Interecclesial Commission of Justice and Peace, May 10, 2007.
- Ilmiplantación de la Muerte: Violación de Derechos e Inseguridad (In)humana de Comunidades en Resistencia de Colombia.
 Interecclesial Commission of Justice and Peace, Tricontinental Centre (Lovaina, France), PTM-Mundubat (Basque Country).
 Informe 1 Blanquicet: Devolución Dilata, Amenazas y Destrucción de la Propiedad Apropiación Paramilitar de Tierras.
 Interecclesial Commission of Justice and Peace, May 10, 2007.
- Megación de Derecho a la propiedad, a la Tierra, Comisión Institucional Cooperativa de Trabajadores Agrarios Blanquicet. Interecclesial Commission of Justice and Peace, May 11, 2007.
- Peregrinación por Francisco. Peace Community of San José de Apartadó press release, May 22, 2007.
- 2 <u>Paramilitares asesinan a Dairo</u>. Peace Community of San José de Apartadó press release, July 15, 2007.

MEDELLÍN

The voice of the victims at Ramón Isaza's voluntary confession

PBI accompanied Elkin Ramírez, lawyer from the Judicial Liberty Corporation, from Medellín to Bogotá to participate in the voluntary confession of former paramilitary boss Ramón Isaza, who provided his voluntary confession within the framework of the Law of Justice and Peace at the Palace of Justice in the Colombian capital on April 30th, 2007.

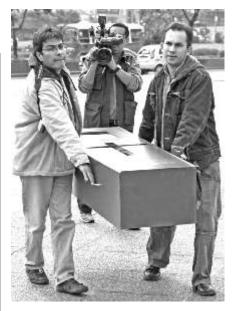
Two victims of actions perpetrated by Ramón Isaza also travelled with Ramírez. The two women came from the communities of La Esperanza and Carmen de Viboral in Eastern Antioquia. Ramón Isaza, "the founder and sponsor of death squads in the Magdalena Medio" had already admitted having ordered the murders. After the disappearances of their spouses, the women were forcibly displaced along with many other persons from these communities.

In Bogotá, the three of them met with members of the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes in front of the Palace of Justice, where they took part in actions to

draw the public's attention so victims could tell their stories on radio and television.

For Ramírez, who handles the cases of these women, it is hard to find victims willing to publicly denounce their cases, since many persons are still afraid as is the case for many other lawyers. On the trip to Bogotá, the two women told the PBI volunteers that denouncing their cases was the only way forward for them. Furthermore, they stated that, after all they had suffered, they only hoped this painful process would find the truth about their loved ones and enable a fair punishment for the perpetrators of the crimes. Although they were quite afraid of exposing themselves, they also saw the need to support the legal process as witnesses.

Nonetheless, for the victims, Elkin Ramírez, and other members of the Victims' Movement, listening to Ramón Isaza from the victims' room at the Palace of Justice was a disappointing experience since Ramón Isaza's voluntary confession shed little light on the



Yvonne Berner, German volunteer, during the trip by the Observation Mission of the Sub-Regional Working Group on Human Rights in Eastern Antioquia.

La Estrategia del Olvido. Semana magazine, May 7 to



Demonstration during Colombiamoda to protest against violations to labour rights in the textile industry.

"Cloth should be cut, not labour rights"

"Great!" "Magnificent!" These were just some of the many positive comments made by people walking past the demonstration carried out by several dozen women and some men in protest against the violation of labour rights in the textile industry. The demonstration occurred on July 10th at the

entrance to the Exhibition Centre in the centre of Medellín, where Colombiamoda 2007 was taking place, a Colombian fashion design three-day event. Prior to this, a seminar was held, called 'Women's Labour Rights and Social Responsibility in the Garment and Textile Industry', which was organised in Medellín by the National Labour School and convened by the Popular

Training Institute (IPC) and the Oxfam Make Trade Fair campaign. The seminar dealt with such issues as violations to labour rights in sweatshops in Colombia (and especially in Medellín) and strategies to demand internationally recognised labour rights. During the demonstration in the afternoon, the demonstrators received a lot of positive attention. Two young women were applauded when they participated in the protest by catwalking in bathing suits with banners reading: "Cloth should be cut, not labour rights." PBI accompanied the demonstration.

Asfaddes speaks out against the "Double Forced Disappearance"

On May 30th, as part of the "International Week of the Detained-Disappeared," the Association of Relatives of the Detained-Disappeared (Asfaddes) carried out a street demonstration in the centre of Medellín. The act consisted of displaying banners and portraits of disappeared people, which covered a large part of the square between El Palo and Oriental Avenues. Several members of Asfaddes and the coalition Human Rights Collective Seeds of Liberty (Codhsel) spoke through loudspeakers to demand truth, justice, and reparation as well as for the end of impunity. According to Asfaddes, "despite the denunciations in the Attorney General's Office, most of the cases are still in the preliminary stage, which demonstrates an impunity level of 100%." The NGO also expressed its disapproval with the way in which the Technical Investigation Agency (CTI) of the Attorney General's Office is carrying out the exhumations of mass graves. Asfaddes "is concerned about the 'double forced disappearance' that occurs when the body is at last found, yet during the identification the victim's remains are lost



MEDELLÍN

International observers in the Eastern Antioquia region

In 2000, a working group was established for the Eastern Antioquia region with the aim of creating a space for public, private and community institutions as well as international organisations to meet and coordinate. In addition to local NGOs, like the Judicial Liberty Corporation (CJL) the group included such international organisations as the International Committee of the Red Cross, UN agencies, the Italian NGO International Committee for the Development of Peoples, and PBI (as an international observer). In 2006, this process broadened its mission as well as the number of participants, opening the initiative to other local NGOs and government agencies, such as the Permanent Assembly of the Civil Society for Peace, the Antioquia Campesino Association, the Popular Training Institute, mayor's offices from Eastern Antioquia, the Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Unit of Governor's Office of Antioqui, local Procurator Offices from Eastern Antioquia, and the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office.

During its short history, the working group (called the Sub-Regional Working Group of Development for Human Rights, International Humanitarian Law and Humanitarian Protection) has followed up on and documented the region's human rights situation.

From May 7^{th} to May 9^{th} , 2007, PBI participated in a trip to the Bosques area, where a commission from the Sub-Regional Working Group met with the communities to listen to their situation and hear complaints concerning legal and illegal armed actors. The communities expressed their appreciation for the accompaniment by the working group and took advantage of the visit to describe their experiences of abuse, intimidation, occupation of property, and threats by the army.1 The people also said they felt safer due to the accompaniment provided by Colombian and international organisations. Furthermore, the information obtained by the organisations and institutions



Yvonne Berner, German volunteer, during the trip by the Observation Mission of the Sub-Regional Working Group on Human Rights in Eastern Antioquia.

participating in the Sub-Regional Working Group helped to broaden their knowledge of the region, adapt their work to the needs of the local campesinos, and transmit the information to the legal field, with the purpose of stopping the acts of barassment

1 Informe Misión de Acompañamiento y Visita Zona Bosques. Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Working Group for Eastern Antioquia, May 7, 2007.

BARRANCABERMEJA

Anniversary of the massacre on May 16 1998

In order to commemorate the ninth anniversary of tragic May 16, 1998 (when seven people were murdered in Barrancabermeja and another 25 were disappeared), an event was celebrated, which began with the traditional ecumenical ceremony on the football field in the El Campin neighbourhood, where the massacre occurred. During the ceremony, the memory tree was adorned with the names of all the victims, while flowers were given to all of the family members.

PBI accompanied the celebration, which included the participation of the Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS), the Victims



PBI volunteers accompany the ninth anniversary of the May 16th massacre.

Association from the Magdalena Medio (ASORVIM), the Popular Women's Organisation (OFP) and the Association of Relatives of Detained-Disappeared (ASFADDES).

The event finished in the Camilo Torres Park in front of the CREDHOS office, where the organisations installed a photo gallery with the portraits, names, and histories of the victims while candles were lit and songs were sung.

Nine years after the massacre, the family members are still waiting for guarantees from the Colombian State for the truth, justice, and reparation.



Barrancabermeja

The Popular Women's Organisation celebrates its 35th anniversary in Barrancabermeja

On July 20th, the Popular Women's Organisation (OFP) celebrated its 35th anniversary. Throughout its long history in Barrancabermeja and surrounding municipalities, the OFP has been carrying out valuable work to raise awareness on the issue of the civilian population in the midst of the conflict, as perceived through the experiences of women in the region. Yolanda Becerra, the organisation's director, remembers part of the NGO's history and comments on the human rights situation currently experienced in this part of the country.

The OFP just celebrated its 35th anniversary. What significance does this have for the Organisation?

For the OFP, July 20th signified the completion of 35 years in this social and political organisational process. It represents a real challenge since this reaffirms our commitment to life, human rights, the defence of territory, and the dignity of a people.

What is the OFP's current role in Barrancabermeja?

In this city and region, the OFP contributes politically in several ways. Firstly, in the reconstructin on of the social fabric and, secondly, by maintaining hope in the midst of barbarity and impunity. A fundamental aspect has been at a symbolic level; for instance, in this event our demand for truth was represented by wearing masks. Another symbol we use is the recognition of the other, which has been done through a woman with major historical importance for Barrancabermeja and the Magdalena Medio: Yarima, one of the Cacicas of the Yariquie indigenous people.

We've done a lot, but there's still much to do. The OFP has made politics a woman's affair again. Colombia has made progress in law and international treaties, but it all remains on paper. We've made progress in the area of raising awareness on and making women's issues visible, as well as through



OFP members celebrate 35th anniversary of this organisation. © Jorge Mata/Surimages

the ability and the role of women in different spaces.

What is the human rights situation in Barrancabermeja and the municipalities?

We are experiencing a humanitarian crisis. At the end of 2005, a demobilisation process of the Central Bolívar Bloc began in the region. However, everybody knows this process is not a real peace process. Those of us who experienced the paramilitary takeover of Barrancabermeja and the region, know this was a takeover promoted and supported by the legally constituted State institutions. Consequently, we are speaking of a demobilisation that does not concern an armed actor in opposition with the State. The illegal economy is still controlled by the paramilitaries. Following the demobilisation, they reorganised the business, centralised it, and strengthened it. The paramilitary structure remains the same and social control continues. There is a real paramilitary control in the barrios. People are still murdered and disappeared.

A very subtle threat exists. At this moment, the OFP feels threatened. For instance, in the southeastern section [of the city] our colleagues are followed from the community kitchens. And there is also a concealed threat. People arrive and ask who the coordinator is, who manages [the place], and when do they leave. People know the people talking are paramilitaries. These are ways to control and terrorise. We know of a youth event at a field, where the neighbourhood action board said they

would support the youth, but on the condition that the OFP didn't attend. This is a threat. Or when the women are told they can be in the OFP, but they should be very careful since they know what the consequences are, if they get into things that are not of their concern. And getting into things that are not of their concern means speaking out against what is happening.

So the situation is very difficult and even more difficult for women. The war affects all of us, men and women. But we women are affected even more deeply in specific ways, in that as women have had to hold out a permanent resistance. It is us women who have to face the situation of impoverishment caused by the war and a State that does not generate development and is not at the service of human beings. It is us women who have to face this. What war destroys everyday, us women have to mend -24 hours a dayin the search for social justice.

What are the challenges for the OFP in the future?

We have a proposal that brings together many of our commitments and gives us the chance to bring this challenge to a national level: the Social Movement of Women against the War. We are working on this in our city, region, and country. And this movement is always being further visibilised. We believe the event taking place on November 5th of this year will raise awareness, reaffirm, and reinforce this process and this political project at a national level.



INTERNATIONAL

International Conference on Human Rights in Colombia warns that Colombian democracy is in danger



International Conference for Human Rights in Colombia, which took place in Brussels.

As a part of the Second International Conference on Human Rights in Colombia, non-governmental organisations, politicians, government officials, and representatives from such multilateral organisations as the United Nations and the Organization of American States, met in the European Parliament in Brussels.

The objective of the meeting, which took place in April, was to evaluate the situation of human rights and humanitarian law in order to guide the formulation of strategies and policies to contribute to overcoming the serious social and political crisis that Colombian is undergoing. Coordination Colombia-Europe-United States (CCEEU) hosted this event, which took place twelve years after the First International Conference on Human Rights in Colombia, with support provided by European deputies Jens Holm

(Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left), Raul Romeva (Greens/European Free Alliance), Richard Howitt (Socialist Group in the European Parliament), and Josu Ortuondo (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe), the International Office of Human Rights-Action Colombia (Oidhaco)

In addition to all of these institutions and organisations dedicated to work on Colombia, several PBI-accompanied NGOs took the opportunity to participate and contribute to the debate, including the Luis Carlos Pérez Lawyers' Collective, the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective, the Committee for Solidarity with Political Prisoners, the Manuel Cepeda Vargas Foundation, the Popular Training Institute, the Ecclesiastical Justice

and Peace Commission, and the Popular Women's Organisation.

The event's findings warned of "the increasing paramilitarisation of society and Colombian institutions", which is shown through "the historical links between State agents and paramilitaries. "I The conclusions also warned that Colombian democracy is in serious danger, "since its validity depends on respect for human rights, which clearly does not currently exist in Colombia."2 Furthermore, the event concluded that, in the process between the Colombian government and paramilitary groups, the latter "have benefited from a legal framework, which does not comply with international human rights standards protecting and seeking to establish the truth, justice, and reparation for the victims."3

- 1 Oidhaco/CCEEU press release, April 20, 2007.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Conference Statement, April 18, 2007.



Country Groups



Children participated in the First Race for Peace in Hamburg, Germany.

PBI Germany

Marathon for Peace: More than 1,700 students run for peace

On July 9th, more than 1,700 students from four to 18 years of age took part in the First Race for Peace in Hamburg, which was sponsored by the Dalai Lama and organised by PBI Germany and Forum Ziviler Friedensdienst (ZFD), a civil society initiative supported by the German government to promote the "peace civil service" with PBI and other organisations- in areas of conflict. For each lap, the participants received a donation from friends and sponsors designated to support these organisations' peace projects. Through talks and meetings with PBI volunteers, the students had the opportunity to learn about PBI projects in Colombia and Mexico as well as issues of peace and civilian conflict resolution. "By participating in this race, we activate for peace and draw many people's attention to this issue. We run through the city centre to reach the greatest number of people possible and show everyone can support peace. As a student said from the FriedrichEbert High School in Hamburg: "Take the first step; run for peace!"

PBI Netherlands

Netherlands debates the impact of biofuels

Representatives from PBI Netherlands were present when several nongovernmental organisations from Asia, Africa and Latin America visited the Netherlands at the end of July on their trip through Europe to speak about the impact of producing biofuels in their countries. On July 29th, representatives from the principal

political parties and Ms. Cramer (Minister of Housing, Social Affairs, and the Environment) met with said delegation in the Dutch Parliament. Representatives included people from Global Forest Coalition, Corporate Europe Observatory, the Landless Workers Movement (Brazil), Friends of the Earth - Europe, Friends of the Earth - Colombia, the Interecclesial Commission of Justice and Peace, and community members from the Curbaradó River Valley (Chocó).

PBI Switzerland

Representative of the **Swiss country group** visits the four regions where PBI Colombia works

Christa Dold, from the PBI Switzerland office in Bern, visited Colombia in the month of June to learn more about the Project. In order to understand the daily life of the volunteers in the Colombia Project and the work of the accompanied organisations in different parts of the country, the representative from PBI Switzerland visited the four teams. In addition to visiting the offices of human rights organisations in Medellín and Bogotá, Dold had the chance to be in communities accompanied by PBI in Urabá as well as go to the OFP kitchens in the neighbourhoods of Barrancabermeja.



Christa Dold, PBI Swiss representative, along with Swiss volunteer Nadia Akmoun, during an accompaniment in Urabá



Other projects

Project Guatemala

Good News

The Constitutional Court issued a pronouncement in favour of creating the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). Now it only needs to be passed by Congress. A delegation from the European Parliament travelled to Guatemala to advocate for Congress to pass the treaty signed with the United Nations, which would establish this Commission. The European Delegates said they were motivated by their concern for the violence occurring in Guatemala and that little done to combatit.

Attacks against international organisation

PBI accompanies a Guatemalan member of PCS (Project Counselling Service, an international aid agency), who was beaten and sexually attacked, after an official PCS vehicle was robbed. (It was identified with a licence plate for the international mission.) Minutes after the incident, the PCS office received threatening telephone calls, which continued for several days. In Guatemala, the organisation has been committed to processes in the fight against impunity and the search for justice for the human rights violations committed both during and after the armed conflict in Guatemala.

Indonesia Project

Women facilitating in conflicts

57 women leaders participated in the first needs assessment undertaken by the PBI team in Aceh, along with FORPWAT (Forum Pemberdayaan Wanita Aceh Tengah, Forum of Central Aceh for the Empowerment

of Women) to prepare for training in peace education. These training sessions will be carried out to improve women's capabilities to facilitate in conflicts.

Hina Jilani in Indonesia

Several PBI-accompanied organisations, along with other local NGOs, met with Hina Jilani, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, to present their concerns in Jayapura (District of Jayapura).

Mexico Project

International justice intervenes case of disappearance in Guerrero

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) admitted the case of Faustino Jiménez, who in 2001 was detained by the Guerrero Judicial Police and continues to be disappeared. Because of the ineffectiveness of Mexican authorities, the Centre for Justice and International Law (CEJIL) and the Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Centre for Human Rights (Centre Prodh), along with Faustino's family, had presented the case before the IACHR.

More cases of disappearances in Guerrero

In the same state of Guerrero, the PBI team provides accompaniment to Tita Radilla Martínez, vicepresident of the Association of Relatives of Detained-Disappeared and Victims of Human Rights Violations in Mexico (AFADEM). Radilla Martínez is at high risk, due to her denunciations lodged before several Mexican courts of justice implicating senior military commanders in forced disappearance and torture. AFADEM has also presented lawsuits before the IACHR against the Mexican government for the forced disappearance of Radilla

Martínez's father, Rosendo Radilla Pacheco.

Nepal Project

Renewed violence in Terai

After much hope in the peace process and the formation of a government including the participation of Maoists, now it seems there are more and more armed groups emerging to terrorise the civilian population through extortion and murder. According to PBI, there are already nine illegal armed groups putting at risk the peace process and the civilian population in the eastern region of Terai. PBI offers protection to the lawyers' organisation, Advocacy Forum, and the Committee of Victims of the Conflict Bardiya (CVC), which are dedicated to the fight against impunity and speak out against the crimes by all parties to the conflict.

Bureau Europeén/ European Office -BEO

Parliament passes resolution in favour of defenders

On July 19th, due to an initiative promoted by PBI BEO, PBI Spanish State, and Amnesty International, the Spanish Congress unanimously approved a non-binding proposition in favour of supporting human rights defenders. The ceremony was accompanied by human rights defenders from Colombia and Guatemala.

World protection workshops - Indonesia

In May, as a result of the cooperation between the Indonesia Project and the BEO, three training sessions were carried out on "Cross Cutting Protection for Human Rights Defenders" in Jakarta, Banda Aceh, and Jayapura. In all, 55 human rights defenders participated, representing 30 NGOs from different provinces.



Personal

Two volunteers compare their experiences in Colombia



Marisa Ferreras



Luisa Vidal



Tiziano del Cotto



Sebastian Roetters



Anamaría Vidal



Maite Elizondo

n 2007, several former volunteers returned to support the Colombia Project. Luisa Vidal, volunteer in Urabá in 2000, returned to Colombia to ioin the PBI support team and coordinate psychosocial support for volunteers. Others returned to provide vital support in the protection of human rights defenders in Urabá, Barrancabermeja, and Bogotá. PBI thanks them for their collaboration and takes the chance to ask some of them: What are the most important differences between your first time in PBI and now?

"I came because today, just as seven years ago, PBI's work seems important to me and I still share its principles and way of working. I am very happy to be able to return to Colombia and PBI, come to Urabá (which was a pending task), see people again, and meet new people. To see that things change, but also continue. It doesn't matter that hundreds of persons have passed through here; the information, the knowledge of the area, the relationships with organisations are all still there. It's an incredible opportunity for me to be here again. This is my recognition of PBI, Colombia, and its human rights defenders, their work, and what they meant to me in the past.

What do I notice has changed? Well, me, especially. One already knows a bit about what happens. And, of course, there are fewer surprises and some expectations closer to reality. But, in particular, the situation has changed, even though I also changed teams. But from what I've read in emails and reports, the situation may be less tense than in 2000-2001 when I was in PBI the first time, which truly were very difficult years. The project has also grown; there are more people. It might be more bureaucratic, but the essence of PBI remains. It is difficult to compare: I am not even the same. What I do know is that it's sad to see we still have work here. Hopefully in the future I will only return as a tourist."

Marisa Ferreras Soto, Spanish volunteer, was in the project in Bogotá in 2000-2001 and currently works in the Urabá. team.

"I could mention several differences between my first time in PBI and this time. And the first thing I think of is seven years of difference, which means it's another period in my life (and without a doubt in the life of the country and PBI). I find the country in a different period, even though the core issues are the same. As far as PBI is concerned, I feel it's become even more consolidated than it was before. It's made up of so many people who have passed through, so many distinct contributions, with the same commitment and dream. Yes. without a doubt, there are some changes in the way it functions, along with new faces as well as some from before, but I think it has the same foundation and work philosophy. So, in spite of the changes, returning is a little like returning home. And for me, this new time entails a different stage. Now, I am not in a team with concrete fieldwork. It's a distinct view and a complementary contribution, which I am sure will enrich me and will, I hope, signify a contribution to PBI and for the accompanied human rights organisations."

Luisa Vidal (Spain) worked in Urabá in 2000-2001 and this year returned to PBI to coordinate the psychosocial area.

Maite Elizondo (Spanish State) worked in Barrancabermeja in 2005-2006 and currently works in the same team.

Tiziano del Cotto (Italy) worked in Barrancabermeja and Urabá in 2002 and currently works in the Urabá team.

Sebastian Roetters (Germany) worked in Barrancabermeja and Bogotá in 2004-2005 and currently works in the Bogotá team.

Ana María Vidal (Perú) worked in Bogotá in 2004-2005 and currently works in the same team



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Apartado aéreo 36157 Bogotá (Colombia) Tel. (+57 1) 287 0403/323 0706 info@pbicolombia.net Peace Brigades International (PBI) is a Non Governmental Organization registered with the United Nations which since 1994 has a permanent team of international observers/accompaniment in Colombia. Its aim is to protect the space of legally recognized human rights defenders, who suffer repression for their non violent work on behalf of human rights.

To achieve this objective, the PBI Colombia Team accompanies (always through local petition) people or organizations who are threatened, distributes information on the evolution of the conflict, and carries out advocacy and lobbying activities with civil and military authorities, as well as with state organisms, NGOs, the Church, diplomats and other organizations, promoting international action.

If you consider that PBI's presence is useful to protect the persons who work on behalf of human rights, you could:

- support us financially, as an individual or through an organization
- join the PBI group closest to you. Support the international network from your city
- Become a PBI volunteer (regardless of origin, race, sexual orientation or religion)