

Colombia

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Lands are recovered after years of resistance in Curbaradó

ASFADDES: 25 years of demanding to know the whereabouts of their family members

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Human Rights

Oil exploration in Colombia, the people speak out in the Permanent People's Tribunal

The Permanent Peoples' Tribunal (PPT) hearing on Oil Companies was held on 4-6 August 2007, with the participation of representatives of victims' organisations and international solidarity movements. The jury, composed of eight

internationally renowned figures, tried the Occidental Petroleum Company, British Petroleum Amoco and REPSOL, three multinational oil companies accused of violating both human and environmental rights.

The judges' final statement reflects expert findings highlighting the «similarity of the aims of these three oil companies» which leads them to «remove their enemies from the picture» whether they be grassroots environmentalists, workers, peasant farmers or indigenous people, who «create restrictions to their efficient market functioning».

The statement also emphasises that «there is mounting evidence and witness statements, which show that these companies are directly responsible for environmental crimes», «for placing economic, social and cultural rights under threat and for causing displacement». The responsibility of governments in the countries of origin of these

companies is also highlighted, for «permitting impunity», and «encouraging oppression and militarisation in oil bearing regions». The statement reports serious violations of the right to life and physical integrity, persecution against trade union leaders, and the criminalisation of civil protest through the use of arbitrary judicial proceedings and mass arrest».

Finally, the judges state that the reigning situation of impunity is «aimed at silencing victims and ignoring society's rights to truth, justice and reparation».

The accusation mentions collaboration and concertation between the companies and armed groups, which persecute those individuals or organisations who «show any kind of opposition to oil exploration activities, the development of policies for such exploration, or the conditions in which they are carried out». The judges also highlight the responsibility of the Colombian State to protect political, social and trade union activists.

The statement ends with a rousing call to intellectuals and members of social organisations to draft proposals to regulate the work of these companies, and urges the international community to take greater responsibility for the actions of transnational



Poster for the PPT hearing on oil companies

companies. Moreover, the judges also draw attention to the situation of insecurity in which human rights defenders live and work, in particular those people who have given witness statements in this and other PPT hearings.

To read the full statement, visit: www.pbi-colombia.org/

Paramilitary demobilisation and the International Criminal Court

On 5 October 2007 Souhayr Velasen, president of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) presented a new report in Bogota entitled *Paramilitary Demobilization in Colombia: On the road to the International Criminal Court*. This report analyses how the legal framework behind the demobilisation is currently being implemented, and discusses the process in terms of International Criminal Court jurisdiction.

Since international bodies recognise the rights to truth, justice and reparation, and other guarantees for non-repetition, international jurisprudence has advanced towards avoiding the consolidation of impunity. Nevertheless, under the current paramilitary demobilisation process the truth «is basically reduced to a criminal trial pattern without the adequate and effective participation of victims».

In addition to the lack of transparency in the way information has been handled, the effectiveness of the whole process has been questioned because of the «numerous crimes, threats and attacks which have been carried out against members of these illegal groups since they demobilised». The recruitment of minors has not stopped, nor has the

return of goods and lands been effective. The report highlights the fact that the main aim of paramilitary organisations has been the consolidation of their control over lands: «the current demobilisation process has become an instrument which has permitted the consolidation of territorial control by violent means». The report also denounces «the creation of legal mechanisms aimed at regulating the illegal take over, occupation and theft of these lands». Of the 31.000 people who are officially disappeared, only 33 bodies have been fully identified and handed over to their families. These advances «are not sufficient» and (...) «no measures have been implemented to guarantee the safety of the officials who carry out exhumations».

The fundamental right of victims to know the truth was not addressed in the design of the paramilitary trials. The report criticises these trials as «scenarios that justify the multiple crimes committed». Nor do the trials permit finding out the truth about these crimes, and as such the victims have no guarantees for taking part in these versions of the truth. The report cites 16 murders which have taken place since the start of the trials.

Although paramilitary links to political sectors are emerging in the recent "para-politics" scandal, these revelations came to light due to other investigations

unrelated to the so-called Justice and Peace Process.

The report ends with a study analysing the possibility of these cases being admitted into the International Criminal Court. The conclusion is that the legal frameworks used are not in line with international standards, and that the Justice and Peace trials demonstrate the absence of political will required to effectively judge the paramilitaries.

The report calls upon the international community to provide political, financial and logistical support for the struggle against impunity in these crimes against humanity and to achieve respect for the victims' rights. It also urges the Attorney General's Office and the International Criminal Court to open an investigation into these crimes.

The quotations in this article are taken from the report *Paramilitary Demobilization in Colombia: On the road to the International Criminal Court*, International Federation for Human Rights

Organisations/Defenders

Arrests, threats and murders continue



PBI accompanied the Peasant Farmer' Association of the Cimitarra River Valley, to Puerto Ité, Northeastern Antioquia



Orlando Valencia, peasant farmer leader, murdered by paramilitaries in Curbaradó in 2005

Over the last few months, the human rights defenders and communities accompanied by PBI have remained in a vulnerable situation in several regions of the country.

Among recent cases is the intimidation and death threat against Yolanda Becerra, director of the Grassroots Women's Organisation (OFP), on 4 November in the city of Barracabermeja. Two hooded men dressed in civilian clothing forced their way into her home, hitting her and pushing her against the wall. One of the men pointed a firearm at her, while the other said: «the story is over, you bastard - you have 48 hours to get out, if not we'll kill your family. You won't escape us»¹ The two men were in her home for around 15 minutes, during which time they destroyed and overturned furniture.

A total of six threats had been sent over the previous two months by presumed paramilitary groups, intimidating members of organisations and social movements in the city. One person named in a death list is already dead, and a group of young people who were threatened have been forced to leave their homes and flee the city.² Organisations accompanied by PBI, such as the Grassroots Women's Organisation, were also named in these threats³, which were signed by different groups belonging to the «Black Eagles».

In addition, leaders from the Peasant Farmers' Association of the Cimitarra River Valley (ACVC), Andres Gil, Evaristo Mena, Oscar Duque and Mario Martínez were arrested on 29 September (*further details on page 11*). At the time of writing, all four members of the organisation are still being held in prison, despite national and international pressure demanding «the immediate release of Andrés Gil, Evaristo Mena, Oscar Duque and Mario Martínez, if they are being held without legal and valid charges, or if there are charges against them, try them before an independent, competent, fair and impartial court, and guarantee them, at all times, their full rights to due process».⁴ In the last edition of *ColomPBlA* Miguel Cifuentes, member of the management committee of the ACVC, commented on economic interests in the Magdalena Medio region, spoke of paramilitary rearmament and focused on the risks faced by members of the ACVC.

Attack in Urabá

Meanwhile, in the Urabá region, Miguel and Ualberto Hoyos, two peasant farmers currently living in the town of Belén de Bajirá, were the victims of an assassination attempt. Both are part of a group of displaced families accompanied by the Ecclesiastical Justice and Peace Commission (CIJP) as part of their projects for the return and recuperation of lands (*further details on page 10*). According to the public statement released by CIJP, on 17 September, a man dressed in civilian clothing entered the Hoyos brothers' house, under the pretext of asking for lodgings. After checking the identity of the brothers, he fired at them. Both brothers were seriously injured.⁵

This attack is the latest in a series of threats, harassment and displacements in the area, which include the murder by paramilitaries in 2005 of Orlando Valencia, leader of the Curbaradó community council⁶. Miguel Hoyos gave a statement to the authorities regarding Valencia's case in 2006.

Crimes such as these are being committed despite the provisional measures granted by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which demand that the Colombian State protects the peasant farmers in Jiguamiandó and Curbaradó⁷. Even more alarming is that the attack took place just a few metres from the home of community leader, Enrique Petro, who has been granted permanent police protection around the perimeter of his home, after he and his family were placed under extreme risk when they were threatened by presumed paramilitary groups, known as the «Black Eagles».⁸

During this period other human rights organisations, trade unionists, and journalists have also received threats, apparently sent by new paramilitary groups. Among the NGOs who have been intimidated in this way are the Yira Castro Lawyers' Corporation, who have received a series of threatening e-mails, including a manuscript found in the home of lawyer Blanca Irene Lopez on 15 October, which read «You are going to die on 24 December, signed Mr. Popo».⁹ Before this, on 22 June, the offices of the organisation were broken into and unknown men stole computers and a video camera which contained a cassette with witness statements from displaced people and people who have had their land stolen.¹⁰

All these occurrences reflect the severity of the situation faced by human rights defenders. PBI to ask for clear support for defenders' work and exhaustive investigations into these threats, arrests, and attacks, in order to guarantee the right to peacefully defend and promote human rights. PBI continuous to receive information about new threats directed at human rights defenders, Afrocolombian and indigenous communities and trade unionists.

1 "Urgent Action Armed men break into the home of Yolanda Becerra and the intimidation of Jacqueline Rojas from the OFP and Juan Carlos Galvis from Sinaltrainal", Grassroots Women's Organisation, November 4th, 2007

2 Voces de Mujeres Urgent Action: New Threats in Barracabermeja, Grassroots Women's Organisation, August 14th, 2007.

3 "Urgent Action", public statement from the Coordination Group for Human Rights Workers in Barracabermeja, Magdalena Medio, August 2nd, 2007.

4 "Arrest of Andrés Gil, Oscar Duque, Evaristo Mena and Mario Martínez (Peasant Farmers' Association of the Cimitarra River Valley) - COL 019 / 1007 / OBS 122", Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, October 2nd, 2007

5 "Report 81 Attack against brothers MIGUEL HOYOS and UALBERTO HOYOS in Belén de Bajirá", Ecclesiastical Justice and Peace Commission, September 17th, 2007.

6 "Fear for Safety/possible 'disappearance': Orlando Valencia, Other members of the Afrodescendent communities of the Jiguamiandó and Curbaradó River Basin", UA 272/05, Amnesty International, October 17th, 2005

7 Provisional measures, Republic of Colombia Case of the Communities of Jiguamiandó and Curbaradó, Resolution of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 7 February 2006

8 Ibid; see also: Peace Brigades International, Focus of Interest, September - October 2005

9 "Attack against members of the Yira Castro Lawyers' Corporation, death threats", Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, October 19th, 2007

10 "Forced entry and theft of information from the offices of the Yira Castro Corporation", Movement of Victims of State Crimes, 25 June 2007

Organisations/Defenders

No guarantees for victims' participation in the trials of paramilitary leaders

Alirio Uribe, from the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective, offers legal aid to more than 200 victims who are struggling to obtain truth, justice and reparation in the trials of paramilitary leaders under Law 975. In this interview, he highlights some of the problems faced in guaranteeing the participation and protection of victims during these hearings.

For a lawyer such as yourself, who has spent years representing victims in the ordinary judicial system, what is your experience of accompanying victims during their participation in the paramilitary trials under Law 975?

For the Lawyers' Collective the process is really frustrating. On the one hand there have been limits on victims participating in the trials because only one person per family is allowed in. The victims have been badly treated because in many trials they have had to pass through demonstrations organised by the paramilitaries, where they have felt threatened, and have even seen armed people among the demonstrators. It is believed that at least 17 victims who tried to take part in the process have been assassinated. They do not have equal access to the trials, because they have no information on how the law works, and they have no financial support.

In what way can the victims take part in the hearings?

The victims' participation is very precarious. They are in a separate room where the trial is transmitted over a bad TV signal, and sometimes the sound is terrible too. The victims have to fill in questionnaires in order to ask questions about their cases. The methodology of the trials is appalling. The Attorney General's Office designs the questions but often they are poorly drafted or incomplete. On the other hand, many victims have been offended during the hearings. For example, one woman who went to ask about her disappeared daughter was told by 'Jorge 40' that she probably ran off with a guerrilla commander or a paramilitary. Often the paramilitaries say they assassinated someone because he was a terrorist, guerrilla or delinquent.

Could you explain more about the risks victims face in participating?

Some victims have received threatening phone calls before or after taking part in a hearing, or suspicious people have approached them and



A group of demobilised paramilitaries taking part in a demonstration in support of former paramilitary leader alias 'Macaco' in Medellín during his hearing
©Surimages/Jorge Mata

told them not to go to the Justice and Peace Trials, or that if they go to the hearings the same thing will happen to them as happened to their family members.

What should the State do in order to guarantee victims' participation?

Firstly what they should have done is publish lists and photos of all the demobilised paramilitaries. That would have genuinely contributed to the truth process. Also, the victims have not had adequate legal assistance, because there are no state lawyers assigned to them. And although the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office has assigned staff, they have only helped the victims to word their questions during the trials. We believe that the lists of victims participating in the hearings have been passed to paramilitaries. If not, how is it that the families who went to 'Jorge 40's trial have been threatened in Ibagué, Bogotá, Bucaramanga, Cucuta, Santa Marta, Valledupar and Villavicencio?

What does the Lawyers' Collective propose?

That there should be protection programmes, that the victims be offered psychosocial support, that they be given access to programmes offering real information, and that they be guaranteed financial support to attend the trials. The Government should adhere to the sentence of Supreme Court of Justice, which states that paramilitaries are not political prisoners. All the paramilitaries should be re-tried for grave offences. There should be

guarantees so that the bodies of the disappeared are returned to their families, and properties and lands returned to the displaced population.

Do you feel that any truth has been uncovered in this process?

Quite honestly more truth has come out in processes parallel to this one. For example, what has happened in the Supreme Court of Justice in terms of para-politics, where historic findings came to light because the Supreme Court had the political will to investigate. The huge truth process has come about because the media have reported all these crimes and this whole dirty war, which involves civilian and military state authorities.

What should be role of the international community in all this?

Firstly the international community should not support the paramilitary demobilisation process. There are some 70 paramilitary groups active in 23 regions. They were there before, they are there now, and they will be there in the future, supported by civilian and military authorities, by politicians, by parliamentarians... The international community should once again demand that the State dismantle these groups, and they should condition all cooperation on Law 975 adhering to the principles of truth, justice and reparation.

Impunity

National Movement for Victims: «Where is our protection?»



Participants of the Victims' Conference in Bogotá demand that these crimes never be repeated

«On 5 June 2006 the Colombian army murdered my son», states María Restrepo* before the President of the Colombian Constitutional Court, Rodrigo Escobar Gil; Human Rights Ombudsman, Vólmar Pérez; and victims from all over Colombia. «It is difficult for a mother to say this, but I haven't been able to report his murder until now. After he was killed I got a phone call. They told me that if I reported his death they would kill my other two children, my family and me». Restrepo travelled from Cajamarca (Tolima region) to give her statement during the Victims' Conference, organised by the National Movement for Victims of State Crimes. More than 2.000 people from all corners of Colombia met in Bogotá between 16 and 28 July to share their experiences and outline strategies in their struggle for truth, justice and reparation.

Restrepo had brought with her a file documenting her son's case, in the hope of handing it over personally to the Attorney General, who was invited to this hearing, but could not attend. «I hope that this case is investigated, because I see my son's murderers walking around my village as if nothing had happened», she states.

Renato García* from the Northeastern Antioquia region questioned the protection offered by the Colombian army. He reported that the peasant farming community have been labelled as members of the guerrilla and that nine farmers have been killed in 2007 alone. «They take a farmer out of his house, they say that the guerrilla is attacking the army, but the only one who ends up dead is the farmer. When the families go to claim the body in the morgue they also place themselves in great danger. They hand over the body and then later the person who picked it up also turns up dead».

Gabriel Hernández*, from Curbaradó (Chocó) denounced the links between State Security Forces and the paramilitaries in his region, and recalled the bombardments in 1997, ordered by retired army general Rito Alejo del Río, and the displacements that ensued. In April, Hernández

gave his statement to a commission in Curbaradó organised by the Attorney General's Office. They offered him assistance to leave the country, but this help never materialised. Some time later, armed men came after him at his home, now he is displaced and living in Bogotá, and asks: «Where is our protection?»

A widow travelled from Putumayo to ask the

Attorney General to investigate the deaths and disappearances in her region, including the case of her four daughters who were disappeared in 2002. «There have been so many deaths in San Miguel de la Dorada. It is almost a cemetery now» she says, and makes a plea. «I only ask the commanders that they tell me where the bodies of my four daughters are!

And the bodies of so many others, that they tell me the truth about where they are».

Daniel Maestre, from the Kankuamo Indigenous People's Organisation also spoke of the reigning impunity in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta region of Colombia, and put several questions to the State: «How can you explain that 20 minutes away from the military base in la Popa there was a paramilitary checkpoint for more than six years? How can it be that murderers walk free in the city of Valledupar? And that since being granted precautionary measures, 44 Kankuamo people have been murdered?».

These statements show that many victims continue to be threatened by the State, paramilitaries and guerrilla, and that local authorities do not respond to these systematic violations. At the end of the event the victims presented their conclusions in which they outline their claims, demands and expectations of the Colombian judicial system.



A participant observes the memory gallery displaying photos of victims of state crimes

Victims' Claims and Demands¹:

- The State has not recognised them as victims and has proved itself incapable of acting decisively in relation to their claims.
- Not only has the State failed to protect victims, it has become one of the main parties who violate their fundamental rights.
- The State is directly responsible for war crimes, and for disrespecting international agreements by turning the civilian population into military objectives, and for accusing civilians of providing help to the guerrilla or of being members of guerrilla armies.
- The State institutions responsible for administering justice have not fulfilled their functions and have acted with negligence, laziness and indifference, and on many occasions in a discriminatory manner.
- The Colombian State must recognise and respect the fundamental rights and the guarantees set out in the Colombian Constitution.
- The rights to truth, justice and reparation must be proportional to the damage suffered, and in addition there must be effective measures put into place to discover the identity of those who perpetrated the crimes carried out against them, including both the material and intellectual authors of these crimes. There must be exemplary sanctions against human rights violations and crimes against humanity.
- Processes must be created for the victims that ensure their full representation and participation, with the necessary guarantees and safety measures in place, including the possibility of international monitoring if necessary, so that the victims' claims are heard, attended to and decisively supported.

* For the safety of the witnesses, names in this article have been changed.

1 "Completion of the assembly of victims belonging to social organisations", Victims' Assembly (http://www.colectivodeabogados.org/article.php?id_article=1095), July 30th, 2007

Impunity

ASFADDES: 25 years of demanding to be told the whereabouts of their family members

They are mainly women, heads of single parent families, who came from different parts of Colombia and, united by the same pain, arrived one day at the door of the Association of Family Members of the Detained - Disappeared (ASFADDES). They are all fighting with determination to find their loved ones, disappeared in different circumstances over the past 30 years.

«Forced disappearance is the removal of a person by force, without a warrant, from their family, social and working environment, violating all their rights and refusing to give their families information as to their whereabouts. That is the difference between disappearance and kidnapping», explains Gloria Gómez, President of the organisation. «Forced disappearance destroys the family unit, and any kind of social struggle, it does much more damage because it leads to uncertainty, angst, fear and terror».

This year marks 25 years since ASFADDES was founded, 25 years of resistance and the struggle to find out the truth about family members, to obtain justice and reparation for a crime described by the United Nations as «an offence to human dignity».¹ Although the organisation was founded in 1983, these families' common struggle began in 1982 when 13 people, most of whom were students from the National University, were disappeared between March and September in Bogotá.

«To tell the story of ASFADDES we must begin by declaring that forced disappearance is a State crime, which began being employed in the 1970s in Colombia as part of a policy of national security. It began to be used as tool of repression, to eliminate opposition to the government», Gómez explains.

Inspired by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the founders of ASFADDES got together to look for answers about their relatives' whereabouts, and to «gather strength in our search, and our demand for the Colombian State to provide answers», Gómez remembers. The families met to go together to the judicial authorities, to places where bodies were dumped, to the Institute of Legal Medicine, and to prisons and towns near Bogotá. «What we noticed was an increase in cases of disappearance and at the same time an increase in unidentified bodies (called NN in Colombia, No Name), bodies burned with acid, mutilated and in advanced states of decomposition». According to Gómez, many of these bodies were never identified and became mere numbers, buried in common graves.

Motivated by student and human rights organisations, the families began to organise the first marches in the city as «a public outcry», says Gómez, and these events soon took place every Thursday, like the demonstrations of the Mothers in Argentina and other countries. Through ASFADDES' membership of the Latin American Federation of Associations of Family Members of the Disappeared (FEDEFAM), which brings together 19 associations from 13 countries, Colombian families were able to



Members of ASFADDES, during a protest, calling for the sacking of members of the military involved in enforced disappearances



Gloria Gómez, president of ASFADDES

hear other stories of disappearances in South American countries. According to Gómez, witnessing the courage of other families and the contact established with other organisations was a great support to ASFADDES members, especially in transforming pain into strength to continue their fight.

However, despite international support, the families remember that they felt very alone in Colombia during their first years of struggle, as they had no support from either public opinion or government officials.

«Society was totally indifferent to this reality which was just coming to light, when we went on marches in the street people shouted and jeered at us, they called us 'old women with nothing better to do, mad old bags'», says Gómez. «Officials in offices where we went to report our cases treated us sarcastically, saying that our loved ones must have decided to take a trip around Colombia, or gone off with their lover, or that they had surely joined the guerrilla».

Gómez says that it is entirely due to the «stubbornness, solidarity and commitment of the families» that ASFADDES is today celebrating its 25th Anniversary, in spite of all the obstacles they have faced. She also highlights that these traits have helped them to achieve important changes in legislation, like the inclusion of article 12 in the 1991 Colombian Constitution, which states that «no-one will be subjected to forced disappearance, torture or cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment». They also gained the recognition of forced disappearance as a crime under Law 589 of 2000, which establishes sanctions for perpetrators, the creation of the National Commission to Search for Disappeared Persons, and I rights for family members.

However, the ASFADDES president also points out that although this law has existed for seven years, to date no-

one has been sentenced under it, and that it wasn't until this year that the Search Commission began to function according to its mandate, pushing for investigations to find the disappeared alive, or to locate their remains.

She also emphasises that many of the members of ASFADDES, family members, partners and lawyers who participated in this process were themselves persecuted, disappeared, murdered, and more than 50 family members have been forced into exile, despite Provisional Measures granted to them by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 1997 demanding that the government protect them, and the accompaniment of Peace Brigades International since 1994.

Looking towards 2008, ASFADDES hope that «finally the State will publicly demonstrate political will through effective investigations into the whereabouts of the disappeared, the punishment of those responsible and that finally we can work on restoring memory, dignity and reputation to our loved ones». Moreover, the organisation hopes that Colombia ratifies the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 20th, 2006. According to Louise Arbour, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, this treaty could help to eradicate a practice which has already claimed the lives of more than 51,000 people, according to the number of cases reported to the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. This figure only represents the «tip of the iceberg, since many cases do not come before the working group»², explained Arbour.

PBI would like to remind its readers of the disappearance of Angel Quintero and Claudia Monsalve, members of the Medellín branch of ASFADDES, forcibly disappeared in the centre of the city, on 6 October 2000. On 5 October, 2007, the families and members of ASFADDES took part in a commemorative event, to remind us that although seven years have passed since their disappearance, they have obtained neither truth nor justice for this crime.

1 "Declaration on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance", United Nations General Assembly Resolution 47/133", 18 December, 1992

2 "Opinion Editorial: International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance", Louise Arbour UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 6th February 2007, <http://www.unhchr.ch/huricane/hurricane.nsf/view01/04EB525DFC5D8042C12572D003D38F8?opendocument>

Human Rights Violations for Economic Interests

«Our water provides us the energy they deny us each day»

The Association of Small and Medium Producers from the Eastern Antioquia region (ASOPROA) was founded in 2002 and now has over 300 members from farming communities in the areas of Granada, San Luis, and Cocorná (Antioquia). On September 24th the organisation held the First Forum on Energy in the Eastern Antioquia region, with the slogan «our water provides us the energy they deny us each day». Benito Guarín, Vicepresident of ASOPROA, tells us about the problems in this region which is so rich in natural resources, and about the exploitation of hydroelectric energy and its effects on local farmers.

The East of Antioquia is rich in water due to the abundance of rivers in the area, which provide one third of all hydroelectric energy generated in the country. In the past, different armed groups have fought for control over the region and as a consequence they have caused some of the worst humanitarian crises and human rights violations in the country. Can you describe this situation?

Over the years the guerrilla gained a lot of power in the region, because the State abandoned the whole area. The humanitarian crisis began because in 2002 the State initiated a massive military campaign to bring down the insurgency. Imagine how bringing in five or six battalions caused an acute humanitarian crisis, because they used the argument of finishing off the guerrilla to commit all kinds of attacks and injustice against the population. Also worth pointing out is that from 1998 onwards paramilitary groups began to take over the town centres and control the people from there. They killed a lot of people. And with the support of the army and the police, they too carried out all kinds of barbarities, finishing off the organisational processes in the region.

That is what happened on the one hand. On the other hand the Eastern Antioquia region produces 35 percent of the energy in the country, and this business has expanded to many neighbouring regions and countries. If you look at the companies' reports they were making huge profits. And yet in contrast, we farmers have to live a marginalized existence, in real poverty, and the State has abandoned us. That's where the humanitarian crisis comes from.



Peasant farmers from different towns in the Eastern Antioquia region met in Santuario to discuss the energy problems affecting the region



Benito Guarín, president of ASOPROA

In spite of being so close to the power plants, when farmers returned to their lands after years of displacement, many found their homes in darkness, and yet at the same time, they were accumulating massive electricity bills. How do they explain this contradiction?

There is a witness statement made by a farmer who was being displaced and so he went to talk to the energy company in the town, to tell them that he was leaving his farm. They told him that they could not send officials to suspend the service, because of the difficult security situation. And so the farmer himself cut the wires, cut off the service in his home and he left. When he returned six years later, he found a bill for 600.000 pesos (around 200 euros). There are many cases like this farmer's. As we understand it, these services were used in some areas by the guerrilla and in other areas by the paramilitaries and the army. How can this money be claimed back? One of the proposals in the Energy Forum is the cancellation of these debts, for farmers who have returned or who are returning to the region.

Can the farmers ask for these debts to be cancelled, since they were forced to leave their homes?

The company has said it will look at cases on an individual basis, for farmers who have returned. They say that by law they are not able to cancel debt or lower tariffs, but that they can change their decision in individual cases, and so there may be a faint hope of some relief for these communities who are beginning to return home.

On September 24th the farmers organised the First Forum on Energy in the Eastern Antioquia region. What were the aims of this event?

We had two main objectives. One, to make the problem widely visible in relation to the services in the region and that we could tell the companies what our problems are. Two, to look for alternatives and solutions to the problem. The idea was that the Forum should be on a large scale. We think it was a success, because we achieved our two aims. We knew that we couldn't solve the problem there and then, but the idea behind the forum was that the communities and farmers could speak and that the companies would listen to them.

Do you think that the Permanent People's Tribunal on Public Services is a good way of dealing with the problem?

A lot of people came to the assembly, and we managed to discuss problems related to public services. We think that it is an effective means to articulate what we are doing at the regional level and in urban and rural areas, with the work of trade unionists. We think that there must be a result at the end of all this, because people are being suffocated by the cost of public services. They say there are more than one hundred thousand families disconnected in the city of Medellín.

Para-politics scandal continues in Colombia



Articles published in the Semana magazine reveal evidence of infiltration in a number of State's security services

The past three months have been dominated by the local and regional elections and the scandals of mafia infiltration in the state security forces. Also in the headlines were the humanitarian agreement, para-politics and the demobilisation process under Law 975.

The pre-electoral atmosphere was tense; a report released by the Electoral Observation Mission informed that 567 of the 1097 local administrations in the country were at risk during the elections, a figure which was not shared by the government who put the figure at just 79. Things were further complicated by the para-politics scandal, and the assassination of 29 candidates, mainly by the FARC¹. More than 50% of mayors and governors elected were members of the Conservative Party, the Liberal Party and the Social Party for National Unity «la U». In the capital, the Alternative Democratic Pole won the city council with their candidate Samuel Moreno Rojas.

Meanwhile, the para-politics scandal continues to feature regularly in the press. During the past months, the Colombian state intelligence service handed over files to Supreme Court investigators which contained more than 40 pages of emails exchanged between several congressmen and the notorious paramilitary 'Ernesto Báez'. There are currently more than 40 parliamentarians under investigation for presumed links with paramilitaries. However, para-politics is not the only subject on the current news agenda. In August and September political magazine

Semana published a series of reports entitled: *Infiltration at the heart of the army*; *The infiltrated*; *Corrupt up to the eyeballs*; *Dangerous conversations*. These and other articles describe the infiltration of various parts of the armed forces and Attorney Generals' Office by the mafia and drug traffickers. The Attorney General's Office carried out an investigation into several army members presumed to have worked for drug trafficker Diego Montoya. Later it was discovered that the investigation itself had been infiltrated and that conversations had taken place between investigators and drug traffickers. Another similar scandal involved members of the navy who had allowed drug traffickers access to official confidential information on navigation routes. During the second day of his trial in court, paramilitary commander Ever Veloza testified that General Rito Alejo del Río had collaborated with the paramilitaries, something which Salvatore Mancuso had already testified to and which has been reported by numerous national and international human rights organisations.

The paramilitary demobilisation process under Law 975 continues. «According to the Attorney General's Office (...), of the 2914 combatants who presented themselves for demobilisation, 2183 have not even reached the stage of preliminary investigation. Nobody knows whether this is because the AUC presented people for demobilisation who had not committed crimes in order to use them as a smoke

screen to overwhelm the Attorney General's Office with cases, or whether so many people had indeed committed serious crimes which remain in total impunity². In several cases, «men with no criminal record took the place of the real criminals». Several demobilised paramilitaries deny having committed crimes against humanity, like 'Ernesto Báez' who «said that he had committed no crimes other than that he had once bribed a police officer and used a false identity». Moreover «the AUC ex bosses use euphemistic language to disguise as regular wartime activities, crimes which violate all the norms protecting civilians». One of the most serious and repeated facts is that many of the paramilitaries' victims continue to be intimidated and harassed, even outside the doors of the Attorney General's offices, and that at least 17 victims have been assassinated.

Gustavo Moncayo's 900 km walk from the region of Nariño to Bogotá, and the handover of the bodies of 11 politicians from Cali to an international commission, have raised hopes again for the possibility of a humanitarian exchange. Parallel to the State's 'No to a demilitarised zone' ('No al Despeje') campaign, the Colombian government has given authorisation to Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and Colombian Senator Piedad Córdoba to hold talks with the FARC in order to reach an agreement for the exchange of prisoners and hostages. This initiative has given new hope to families, however, the process is still uncertain and various initiatives proposed by the Venezuelan President have been rejected by the Colombian government.



In October, Colombians elected new mayors and governors ©IPC

1 "Four who saved themselves from being killed in this campaign", El Tiempo, October 24th, 2007 http://www.eltiempo.com/tiempoimpreso/edicionimpresa/primerplano/2007-10-25/ARTICULO-WEB-NOTA_INTERIOR-3782286.html
2 "Justice and Peace from the inside", Semana, n°1318, August 4th, 2007

Peace Brigades International

Urabá

Lands are recovered after years of resistance in Curbaradó



The peasant farmers cut the african palm in Curbaradó to clear their land to replant it with food crops



A threat directed against international accompaniers carved into one of the african palm branches

In the Curbaradó river basin, displaced farmers decided to return to the area to recover their lands. This process included cutting down the african palm, planted by several companies over most of their land during their displacement. Communities from Curbaradó and Jiguamiandó in the Chocó region, which include indigenous and afrocolombian populations, were forcibly displaced between the end of 1996 and the beginning of 1997, during «Operation Genesis», a Colombian Army offensive carried out under the command of General Rito Alejo del Río, with alleged paramilitary participation.¹ The inhabitants of the area were killed, disappeared or displaced, thereby losing their homes and belongings. While the people of Jiguamiandó returned to their lands, organising their communities into Humanitarian Zones, farmers from Curbaradó found their properties illegally sown with african palm, making it impossible for them even to grow the crops they needed to survive.²

Although the Inter-American Court of Human Rights recognised in March 2005³ that the palm had been planted illegally, and in spite of a declaration issued by the Ministry of Agriculture in October of the same year, declaring that palm companies must return 25 thousand hectares to the legitimate owners of the land, to date the victims of this forced displacement have seen no concrete action on their behalf.

The return to the Curbaradó river basin began at the start of 2006 when Enrique Petro decided to recover his farmlands and declare them a Humanitarian Zone, with accompaniment from the Inter-Ecclesiastical Justice and Peace Commission and international organisations. The community suffered threats and surveillance from the companies and the State security forces, nonetheless they continued to return to their homes.⁴

The Colombian Institute for Rural Development (INCODER) carried out a survey of the lands, and as a result of this investigation, at the end of June the displaced owners began to clean up their lands, cutting down african palm and replacing it with subsistence food crops. For ten days the farmers received support from members of communities in Jiguamiandó, Cacarica and Dabeiba, who worked together to show their solidarity with the returned communities in Curbaradó. There were also several international organisations present, including PBI, accompanying the Ecclesiastical Justice and Peace Commission.

The farmers worked with just two chain saws, various machetes and axes in the Caño Claro Humanitarian Zone and the Cetino Biodiversity Zone, but they did not manage to completely clear the lands. A meeting was called with state authorities to explain the situation, as the displaced people could not wait any longer without sowing crops and harvesting the land. Also invited were the palm companies and CODECHOCO, the State corporation responsible for managing natural resources in the region, however, these institutions failed to attend.

The farmers continued to cut down the palm but were unable to complete the work due to the lack of technical support. Meanwhile the Police, officials from CODECHOCO and administrators from the palm companies arrived on the scene, demanding for names and videoing the farmers.⁵

Soon after, *El Heraldo de Urabá*, a regional newspaper, published an article in which they sought to discredit the farmers' actions by describing them as «terrorist acts», accused national and international NGOs of orchestrating the event, and published the name of one of the farmers who owned the land.⁶ Articles such as this not only put at risk the work of human rights defenders, but also endanger the lives of the local people they name. A similar threat against the international accompaniers was found written on the branch of one of the palm trees.⁷

In addition to these threats, two local peasant farmers Miguel and Ualberto Hoyos suffered an assassination attempt in Belén de Bajirá. The Hoyos brothers recently played a fundamental role in the return of 80 displaced families to the village of Caño Manso, near the town of Carmen del Darién which borders with Belén de Bajirá. These families were forcibly displaced in 1997 by the military operation carried out in parallel with Operation Genesis. Their lands were then occupied and now as they struggle to return, they are once again being pressured to leave their lands. Fortunately the two brothers survived the attack but the threat against the lives and the rights of farmers in Curbaradó remains. Meanwhile, communities from the region continue to return, in places like Las Camelias, Caño Manso, and Caracolí, driven by the need to recover their lands to live and work in dignity and peace.

1 "Sin Olvido 71, 20 murdered and 11 forcibly displaced in Jiguamiandó y Curvaradó (Lower Atrato, Choco, 5th and 31st December 1997)", Ecclesiastical Justice and Peace Commission, 30 December 2006

2 La Tramoya. Human Rights and African Palm. Curbaradó y Jiguamiandó. Justice and Peace and CINEP Data Bank, October 2005. P. 69-89.

3 Provisional Measures. Colombian Republic. Case of the Communities of Jiguamiandó and Curbaradó, Resolution of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, March 15th, 2005

4 "Jiguamiandó Curbaradó. Intimidation and warnings to the inhabitants of the Humanitarian Zone and Accompaniers", Report No. 72, Ecclesiastical Justice and Peace Commission, July 21st, 2006.

5 "From cutting palm, to sowing it", Ecclesiastical Justice and Peace Commission, August 18th, 2007

6 El Heraldo de Urabá. No. 304, August 2007.

7 "From cutting palm, to sowing it", Ecclesiastical Justice and Peace Commission, August 18th, 2007

Peace Brigades International

BARRANCABERMEJA

Growing unease in Barrancabermeja

The third quarter of 2007 saw an alarming rise in threats being made in the city of Barrancabermeja against the majority of social organisations in the region. During the months of July, August and September, there were no less than six collective threats, which took the form of death lists and emails directed at different social groups and various members of organisations accompanied by PBI, including the Grassroots Women's Organisation (OFP), the Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS), as well as the Peasant Farmers' Association of the Cimitarra River Valley (ACVC).¹

The attacks and intimidations, signed by different blocks of the «Black Eagles», are making human rights work extremely difficult in the Magdalena Medio region of Colombia, and take place against an worrying background of pre-electoral tension and declarations made by the paramilitary leader, known as 'Julían Bolívar', who has accused the heads of social organisations of being «linked to armed Marxists in Barrancabermeja». In response to these obstacles to human rights work, the PBI team in Barrancabermeja have increased their accompaniment to protect the work of organisations working in the region. By maintaining an international presence, providing increased accompaniment for human rights defenders, carrying out ongoing

analysis of the socio-political context and holding meetings with the Colombian authorities, PBI works to protect the lives of human rights defenders. This is also aimed at preventing the disintegration of the wider social movement, which struggles to improve communities' living conditions in a region which has been seriously affected by violence throughout its history.

Members of ACVC detained

The uneasy climate in the Magdalena Medio region worsened with events that shook the ACVC. On September 29th, four leaders of the Association were arrested during an investigation into charges of rebellion. It later transpired that there are a total of 14 arrest warrants against members of the organisation.³ Given that the ACVC is a legally registered social organisation which strives for the rights of displaced people and for dignity for all men and women living in rural areas of Colombia, it is feared that these arrests, just like the two raids carried out in the offices of the organisation, are another way of delegitimising the work of grassroots social organisations.⁴ Social organisations in the region demand the respect for the life, personal integrity and the right to due process, recalling that on other occasions international organisations have reported



March by members of the ACVC through the streets of Barrancabermeja

that in Colombia «The authorities appear to be misusing the law by opening investigations on spurious or unsubstantiated charges against human rights defenders in order to stigmatise and harass human rights defenders and prevent them from carrying out their work».⁵

For this reason, PBI will continue to seek respect for the lives of human rights defenders and will ask the Colombian State to provide guarantees for their work, as recommended by the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights.

BOGOTÁ

For one day the world listened to Arauca

Arauca is one of the regions of Colombia which borders with Venezuela and is one of the most militarised areas of the country, where different insurgent groups are fighting and police patrol with helmets and grenade launchers. On September 27th, the Senate Human Rights Commission and social organisations held a public hearing in the city of Saravena.

The sports hall in Saravena in the west of Arauca is full, with around 3000 people gathered from the surrounding region. Also present is the Senate Human Rights Commission, the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, the Argentinean Ambassador and several human rights organisations. PBI is accompanying the Committee for Solidarity with Political Prisoners (FCSPP), the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective (CCAJAR) and Minga the Association for Alternative Social Promotion. Today all eyes are focused on Arauca.

Opposite them, on the other side of the sports hall, the Police and the Army are seated, among them the commander of the Cavalry Group Reveiz Pizarro, accompanied by the human rights officers of the II Division and the XVIII Brigade.

A witness takes the stage. He is extremely frightened. The day before he told PBI that he did not know if he dared speak in public how a paramilitary killed his

teenage son by shooting him in the head. When he later reported the crime, he himself was threatened.

Other witnesses accuse the armed forces of having carried out extrajudicial killings and covert operations. The army commander, replete in military garb, remains silent. Earlier he stated in a meeting with PBI volunteers that the hearing is important. The event focuses on reports of human rights violations, although the Arauca region is also affected by in-fighting between guerrilla groups the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), who have assassinated social leaders perceived as being «from the other faction».

Previously, the Governor's Office in Arauca announced that there would be no electricity the day before and during the hearing, due to maintenance works. «They cut off the electricity in San Onofre too», said Franklin Castañeda, from the FCSPP, referring to another hearing in the Sucre region.

Luckily the organisations were prepared, and had brought their own electric generator so that the loudspeakers worked. However, the inhabitants of Arauca were not able to hear the radio transmission of the event. During the hearing, the Internet service went down, which meant that there could be no transmission through this medium either. Senator Alexander López stated to the audience that he will report this as an attempt to sabotage the event.



During the audience Franklin Castañeda and other organisations gathered 217 testimonies, mostly against the State but also against the FARC

- 1 "Urgent Action, New Threats in Barrancabermeja", Grassroots Women's Organisation, Voces de Mujeres, August 14th, 2007. Coordination Group for Human Rights Workers in Barrancabermeja, Magdalena Medio Region, Urgent Actions, 2 and 1 August 14th, 2007.
- 2 "Urgent Action", Coordination Group for Human Rights Workers in Barrancabermeja, Magdalena Medio Region, September 13th, 2007.
- 3 "Attorney General issues arrest warrant for 18 members of the ACVC", Vanguardia Liberal, October 2nd, 2007
- 4 "Urgent Call to Action", COL 019 / 1007 / OBS 122, Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, October 2nd, 2007.
- 5 "Colombia: Fear and Intimidation The dangers of human rights work", AMR 23/033/2006, Amnesty International,

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MEDELLÍN

Verification mission on Extrajudicial Executions and Impunity in Colombia



The international mission in two moments: registering the victims' claims in Valledupar and during its visit to the Eastern Antioquia region

In May this year the Seeds of Freedom Human Rights Committee (Codhesel), a network of human rights organisations in the city of Medellín, launched a report as part of the Colombia-Europe-United States Coordination Group, detailing 74 cases and 110 victims of extrajudicial executions in the Eastern Antioquia region. Extrajudicial executions are defined as «murders carried out by State agents who place the victim in a situation in which they are defenceless and overpowered». In the case of Colombia the victims of this crime have in the main been community leaders, homeless people, subsistence farmers, and in general, vulnerable sectors of the population. The victims are usually disappeared, then their bodies are presented as though they were killed in combat, wearing camouflage gear and carrying weapons, and hereby claimed as positive results in the fight against insurgent groups.

In order to show that extrajudicial executions are a systematic practice carried out by the Colombian Army in many regions throughout the country, the Colombia Europe United States Coordination Group organised a mission of international observers composed of renowned judges, journalists, forensic anthropologists, and experts in human rights and international humanitarian law. This mission took place between 4 and 10 October.

PBI and 13 members of the international community accompanied the mission to the cities of Bogotá, Medellín and Valledupar. The mission verified the situation through statements from witnesses, family members of victims, and interviews with civilian and military authorities. A final report will gather their conclusions and recommendations, to put an end to a practice which has been reported by numerous Colombian human rights organisations.

After several meetings with attorneys, military judges, members of the army and civilian authorities, the observers noted, as mentioned in their preliminary report, that almost all cases of extrajudicial executions are processed through the Military Justice System which does not guarantee an impartial investigation or trial.² The mission expressed serious concerns over legal proceedings which enable these crimes to go unpunished, and which are result of systematic and premeditated actions.³

The preliminary report also states that the problem of investigation goes further than a simple conflict between Ordinary and Military Justice. Key evidence should be collected at the scene of the crime, and yet the bodies are moved from where the killing took place and are interfered with before the relevant tests are carried out, thereby making the gathering of evidence extremely difficult and ensuring that the crime remains unpunished.

Despite a directive signed by the Defence Ministry and the Attorney General's Office in June 2006, which states that cases of executions of protected persons must be processed by the Ordinary Justice system⁴, and similar statements issued by the Constitutional Court, the mission noted a lack of proactivity on the part of the Attorney General's Office to assume these investigations, and a lack of willingness on the part of the Military Justice System to hand over the cases.⁵

On October 10th, the preliminary report was released during a press conference in Bogotá. As well as affirming that in Colombia extrajudicial, unlawful and summary executions follow a common pattern over a protracted amount of time and in several different regions and underlining the lack of legal guarantees for their investigation, the report also highlights another serious aspect: the lack of access to justice for families of the victims and their total lack of protection.⁶

The Mission made recommendations to the Government relating to forensic practices and legal procedures in order to guarantee exhaustive, immediate and impartial investigation. Moreover, the mission recommends that the executive branch revise the incentives offered to soldiers for the numbers of killings they make, as this could stimulate the perpetration of extrajudicial executions.

The Mission delegates also emphasised to the international community the need to put pressure on the Government so that the recommendations made by human rights organisations are implemented, and that foreign governments condition their military aid to Colombia on an effective end to this practice.

1 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
<http://www.hchr.org.co/publico/pronunciamentos/ponencias/imprimir.php3?texto=po0575.txt>
 2 Preliminary report, Internacional Verification on Extrajudicial Executions and Impunity in Colombia. 4-10 October 2007.
 3 Ibid
 4 Directriz Fiscalía General de la Nación y Ministerio de Defensa. June 2006
 5 Preliminary report, Internacional Verification on Extrajudicial executions and Impunity in Colombia. 4-10 October 2007
 6 Ibid

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United States Representative

Political work in Washington and New York

In August, Juan Carlos La Puente, member of the coordination team in Colombia, travelled to Washington and New York, and together with Eric Lopp, PBI Representative in the United States, held a series of meetings with international organisations and the Department of State (DOS).

During the visit, the representatives met with human rights organisations, such as the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), U.S. Office on Colombia (USOC) and Human Rights First. They also worked with the PBI USA National Group to strengthen links between the two PBI entities to provide support for ex-volunteers to carry out speaking tours in the United States. The representatives held a meeting with the DOS to express PBI's concerns over the vulnerable situation of accompanied organisations in Colombia.

The visit was aimed at supporting the changeover in the US Representative in Washington. PBI would like to thank Eric Lopp for all his efforts in the post, which he formally left in August 2007. From November onwards, Alice Garside will take over the position. Garside is a lawyer and has just finished 18 months as a volunteer in the PBI Colombia Urabá team.



Volunteers from the Mexico and Colombia Projects, Jamie Wick and Liza Smith, respectively, during one of their presentations on PBI's working in the United States

PBI on tour

For six weeks, between the 4 September and 12 October, Liza Smith, volunteer with the Colombia Project between 2005 and 2006, together with Jamie Wick, a volunteer from the Mexico Project, undertook a speaking tour of the United States to talk about the work of PBI with congressmen, United Nations representatives, members of the DOS, students and schools, universities and churches of different denominations. They also organised talks in cafés and bookshops. Smith shared concerns over threats to the work and physical safety of human rights

defenders accompanied in Colombia. The tour was carried out in coordination with the PBI-USA National Group, and visited eight states and 12 north American cities.

"In general people were really impressed by the work of PBI. Many could not believe that we manage to protect threatened defenders through non-violent means. I felt proud to share the message that non-violence works, especially with people from this country who usually only hear from the media and politicians that weapons are the answer", Liza commented at the end of her tour.

European Representative

Colombia will participate in United Nations Human Rights Council

The sixth session of the United Nations Human Rights Council was held in Geneva in September 2007. Since the dissolution of the former Human Rights Commission in 2006, the international human rights community has felt great uncertainty with regards to the new Council's procedure. Nevertheless, several concrete answers have emerged this year during the Council sessions held in June and September.

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) has is a new instrument which enables the Council to examine the human rights situation in each country every four years, thus giving the international community a tool "undertake a universal periodic review, based on objective and reliable information, of the fulfillment by each

State of its human rights obligations and commitments"¹ mainly to look at situations in countries where this mechanism did not formerly exist. In its fifth session, the Council clarified that not only States and United Nations bodies can present information to this mechanism; civil society input will also be considered.

For Colombian human rights defenders 2008 will be an important year. Colombia will take part in the UPR process in December 2008, together with 15 other countries. There is still some uncertainty as to how this new instrument will complement other United Nations human rights mechanisms which already exist in the case of Colombia.

One of PBI's concerns regarding the changeover from the Commission to the Human Rights Council

continues to be the special procedure mechanisms and their independence within the Council. In September work began to revise the mandates of all special procedures which existed in the Commission and continue to exist, and this work will continue into next year. PBI is particularly concerned over the fate of the special procedures for displaced people and human rights defenders (the revision takes place in December 2007 and March 2008, respectively) due to the fundamental role they play in guaranteeing protection for the most vulnerable populations in Colombia.

1 Information note for NGOs regarding the Universal Periodic Review mechanism
http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/upr/noteNGO_041007.htm

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National Groups

European National Group conference in Spain

Between 28 and 30 September PBI Cantabria organised a conference for the various PBI European national groups. The meeting was held in las Fraguas, Cantabria, with the participation of PBI national and regional groups from Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Spain (Cantabria, Catalunya and Madrid). There were also representatives from the PBI Guatemala and Colombia Projects, and a representative from the PBI International Council. The conference tackled the subject of how to strengthen the PBI national groups, including their advocacy work, with a special training session on changes in the UN Human Rights Council. Other subjects included education and volunteer recruitment, and

several practical examples of activities were presented by the national groups themselves, leading to an exchange of ideas and ways of working. The meeting brought together people from different areas of PBI, with anything from two months to fifteen years of experience, such as fundraisers, trainers, advocacy workers and coordinators. They all had the chance to get to know each other better, thus strengthening the unity and cohesion of the organisation.

PBI Belgium

PBI Belgium, in collaboration with the Belgian cooperation agency Broederlijk Delen, invited the European press to a press conference on 5 September in Brussels to present visitors from the San José de Apartadó Peace Community, Gildardo Tuberquía and Noelia Tuberquía. Among the participants in the event were two PBI Belgian volunteers, Ina Vandenberghe and Catiane Vander

Kelen, who were preparing to set off to work as volunteers in the Colombia project. This is the first time that Broederlijk Delen is funding a PBI volunteer, namely Flemish citizen Ina Vandenberghe. This meeting between accompanied Colombians and their Belgian accompaniers offered an excellent opportunity to talk about PBI's work in Colombia. "We are worth nothing in the eyes of the Colombian government" explained Noelia "but they do respect foreigners. We don't feel safe travelling alone to our village. But when we are accompanied by an international observer, we feel safer".

The representatives from the Peace Community travelled to Europe to receive the Peace Prize from the city of Aquisgrán in Germany. They took advantage of their stay in Brussels to meet with the European Commission, the Belgian government, Belgian Senator Sabine de Bethune, and with representatives of civilian society from Amnesty International and Oxfam Solidarité.

Other Projects:



© PBI Guatemala

All PBI projects have now launched their new web pages. Visit the sites to hear the latest news:

"The tortilla food or fuel?" the problem of biofuels is not only up for discussion in Colombia, but also in Guatemala. Read more at: www.pbi-guatemala.org

Hina Jilani, United Nations Special Representative for Human Rights Defenders, makes a declaration after visiting Indonesia. Find the document at: www.pbi-indonesia.org

"Mexico is not adhering to international human rights agreements", international organisations report. Read why at: www.pbi-mexico.org

In an interview Kopila Adhikari, lawyer from the accompanied organisation Advocacy Forum, explains the human rights situation in the pre-electoral period running up to November: www.pbi-nepal.org

Visit the Colombia Project site: www.pbi-colombia.org

We also recommend two new reports, found on the PBI European Office (BEO) interactive website for human rights defenders, www.protectionline.org. The first, from Human Rights Watch, entitled "Colombia's Human Rights Defenders in danger", tackles the subject of arbitrary judicial proceedings, while the second is the new annual report from the International Trades Union Federation (ITUF), which deals with violations of trades union rights in 2007.

PBI continues to grow in Latin America

In Argentina there is a growing interest in the Colombian situation among several sectors of society. In the Lecture Series "Towards the teaching of memory" held in Argentina on 6 and 7 September, human rights defender Claudia Girón, member of the Manuel Cepeda Foundation which is accompanied by PBI, was specially invited to give a talk on "Social Teaching Methods on Historical Memory in Colombia". This invitation from the Provincial Memory Commission, met with much interest from professors and journalists all over Argentina. The visit was made possible thanks to the support of Bettina Priotti, an Argentinian volunteer with PBI, as part of her work spreading the word on PBI's work in Latin America. This year the Colombia Project already has half a dozen candidates from Argentina, who are interested in joining our team.



Claudia Girón of the Manuel Cepeda Foundation, during her visit

Peace Brigades International

Personal

How did the Training Sessions first come about?

When we got back from Central America, Francesc, one of the founders of the PBI Colombia Project said: "We need a hand to train people". That was how it all started, and it's the philosophy we still base our work on today.

It was 1996 and PBI was increasing the areas where it worked. The El Salvador Project had closed and there were other projects in Guatemala, Sri Lanka, North America, Haiti, the Balkans, and the recently opened Colombia project. But there was no structured "training process" like the one we now have. In spite of their growing influence, the PBI projects were still relatively small operations which brought a defined number of people together to work towards the same ends. In fact, the main way to find volunteers was by word of mouth, between friends with similar interests and beliefs.

Nevertheless, PBI was growing in more ways than one. The organisation's experiences, particularly in Central America, were calling for a new way of working in conflict zones. And the complexity of the Colombian conflict made for a new challenge in terms of our role as an international organisation. Part of this challenge was how to prepare those who were going to work for the Project.

Our past experiences in PBI Projects led us to consider several elements as vital to the training process:

- Knowledge and capacity for analysis of the socio-political context,
- Knowledge and experience of the psychosocial effects of conflicts
- Capacity building for life on a PBI team.

And so we began to structure activities around these three objectives, as we developed the training programme. We always felt that the direct participation of the people involved in the Project was of the utmost importance, both volunteers and accompanied human rights defenders and communities.

We organised the first sessions around these basic ideas, with a great deal of work required from both trainers and participants. In some sessions, we worked until three in the morning getting the news information package ready, debating the convenience of accepting an accompaniment, or resolving a team conflict... meanwhile the facilitators were preparing food for the next day.

In those early sessions Javi, an exvolunteer and project founder, would sit constantly at the computer writing everything down, and in this way we built the working scheme we use today. Apart from case studies, we have found other ways of working on psychosocial aspects, or on group mechanics (the games help a lot...) and



Training which brings new challenges

we have been lucky enough to count on the help of Carlos Beristain, expert in psychosocial health and long-time PBI collaborator, who has always contributed to the process.

Fortunately, we have always had the help of people who, although not directly working for the project, have made a massive contribution to the smooth working of the training sessions. Miguel and Miriam, have looked after us and fed us in the Casa Santana, and as such were a vital support for many years, as now are Pady and Ricardo in Las Cortas de Blas centre, in Valladolid.

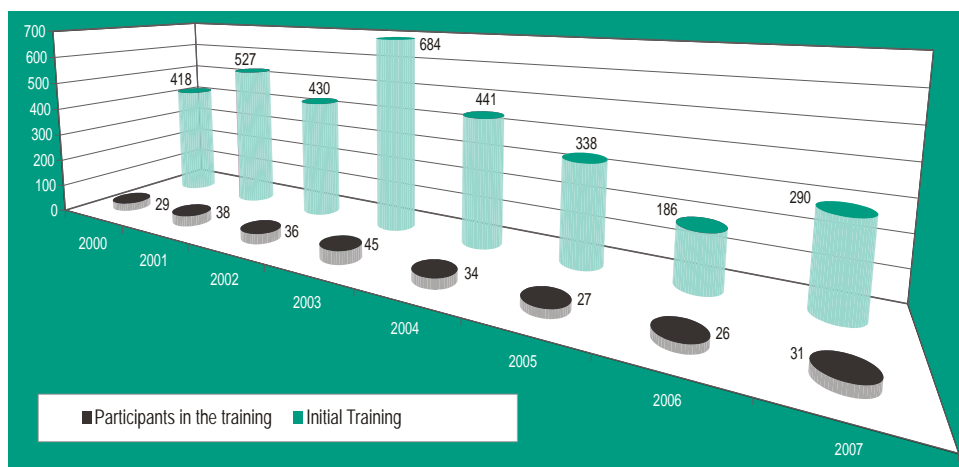
Apart from the miraculous fact that there are always so many people who wish to take part in these training sessions, it has taken the efforts of many people to ensure that our week-long courses are such an important and enriching experience for all concerned. In this



Training which energises and brings together

interview I want to give testimony to this fact alone. Maybe another day I'll tell you in more detail what is behind preparing one of these weeks.

Luis Pérez worked between 1988 and 1990 in the Peace Brigades International El Salvador Project, and since 1998 he has prepared the training sessions and answered questions from more than 300 volunteers during the training process for the Colombia Project.





www.peacebrigades.org/colombia



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)

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