

# Colombia

Quarterly Newsletter  
Peace Brigades International Colombia

Nº 7 May 2008

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**Serious attacks after  
6 March demonstration**

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for men only**

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**For the victims' demands**

In the midst of the para-politics scandal in which almost 70 members of the Colombian Congress are under investigation for alleged links with paramilitary groups, the victims of the internal armed conflict have put their demands for truth, justice and reparation right at the centre of national and international public opinion on Colombia. The different cases described in this bulletin demonstrate that the rights of victims must be placed above all other political or economic interests. The debate around the extradition of Carlos Mario Jiménez, alias 'Macaco', is just one example of the need to judge crimes against humanity over and above any charges of drug-trafficking, as demanded by the Movement of Victims of State Crimes.

As part of this struggle for victims' rights, the demonstration on 6 March mobilised thousands of people in more than 100 cities throughout the world, clearly showing the need to take adequate measures so that crimes committed by paramilitary groups do not fall into impunity. There have been some advances in the search for truth, such as the arrest without bail of six soldiers, under investigation for the February 2005 massacre in San José de Apartadó, and with 23 representatives of African palm companies in Curbaradó, Chocó, being investigated over stolen lands and forced displacement.

Using the experiences of human rights NGOs such as the Luis Carlos Pérez Lawyers' Collective and the Social Corporation for Community Advice and Training (COS-PACC), this publication demonstrates that many human rights violations committed in Colombia are closely related to economic interests, and that extrajudicial executions continue to be committed, terrorizing the civilian population. In its annual report, the Office in Colombia of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights also voices concerns over these issues. Moreover, the Office states that several problems continue to exist because of the incomplete demobilisation of paramilitary groups, and highlights the difficult situation affecting the most vulnerable sectors of the population, including women, Afro-Colombians and indigenous people.

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# UNHCHR: concerns over the demobilisation process

The agreement between the Colombian Government and the Office in Colombia of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) was renewed in September 2007 until October 2010. Within the parameters of this agreement, the UNHCHR presented its annual report, which despite recognising some progress in the reestablishment of security in Colombia, underlines that the internal armed conflict, drug trafficking and organised crime continue to generate serious concern for the human rights situation.

The UNHCHR also pointed out several structural problems in the justice system that affect the fight against impunity. These include the under-reporting of crimes, difficulties in access to justice, insufficient financial and technological resources, lack of unified criteria for the application of laws, the high work load of attorneys and judges, and slow advances in corruption trials and cases.

The report names several cases in which members of the army or police were detained and found guilty of carrying out extrajudicial executions. The most infamous of these cases is the 2005 massacre of eight members of the San José de Apartadó Peace Community, which is accompanied by PBI, for which an army captain was arrested.<sup>1</sup> The Inter-American Court of Human Rights also found the Colombian State guilty of the extrajudicial execution of an indigenous leader and of the massacre of 12 state prosecutors by paramilitary groups in La Rochela in 1989. In both cases, the Colombian State recognised its responsibility.

In spite of the different measures adopted by the Defence Ministry and military authorities, numerous cases of extrajudicial executions attributed to the army and the police continue to take place. The common characteristics of these cases are: presenting the victims as being killed in combat, tampering with the scene of the crime, and handing over investigations to the military justice system. Moreover, the UNHCHR reports cases of torture and the excessive use of force by members of the Police and the Army, as well as illegal

and arbitrary arrests based exclusively on statements given by former guerrilla or paramilitary combatants who, in some cases, receive money in exchange for their declarations.

In relation to impunity and 'parapolitics', the report states that the Supreme Court of Justice began investigating 45 members of the Colombian Congress, of whom 18 are currently serving prison sentences for their involvement with paramilitary groups. Furthermore, four former governors and 18 former mayors are also under investigation. From the publication of the UNHCHR report in February 2008 to date, the number of politicians implicated in legal cases for their presumed involvement with paramilitaries has risen



Demobilisation of paramilitaries from the AUC.

even further. At the time of publication of this bulletin, 68 members of Congress are under investigation, and 31 have been arrested.<sup>2</sup>

The UNHCHR continues to express doubts over the effectiveness of the fight against impunity, or more specifically Law 975 of 2005, which regulates the legal process of demobilised members of illegal armed groups. The report emphasizes the obstacles faced by the victims of these armed groups in their legitimate search for truth, justice, comprehensive reparation and guarantees for non-repetition.

Among the long list of victims of the armed conflict, the UNHCHR draws attention to the situation of human rights defenders, given that in 2007 there were several murders of grassroots leaders and leaders in rural areas. Some of these cases have been attributed to the Army and Police. There were also cases of threats against human rights defenders and

the theft of information. The UNHCHR reiterates its recommendation to put a halt to declarations made by public servants that delegitimize the work of human rights defenders, as such declarations may put their lives and integrity at risk.

The report also lists a number of challenges the country faces in the demobilisation process, stating that groups which never took part in the demobilisation process continue to exist, as do other new heavily armed groups. These groups have military organisation and chains of command, and the capacity to exercise territorial control and to carry out military operations against other armed actors. Although there is no general name for these groups, which would allow them to be categorised according to their objectives, they continue to commit violent acts against the civilian population.

This phenomenon is so widespread, that to qualify all these new structures as mere criminal gangs does not describe their complexity, variety, plurality and the risk that they represent. The UNHCHR also reports the existence of information which confirms that paramilitary leaders who demobilised under Law 975 are still committing crimes from inside Itagüí prison.

The UNHCHR's concerns related to the demobilisation process are to a certain extent echoed in observations made by the Organization of American States Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP-OEA).

In its 10th quarterly report, the MAPP-OEA expresses concern at the influence former paramilitary commanders yield over criminal activities from their prison cells, and at the presence of middle ranking commanders operating in illegal armed groups. It can be concluded from these two reports that the situation for human rights defenders continues to be a source of great concern and that one of the causes of this lies in the incomplete demobilisation of paramilitary groups. ●

<sup>1</sup> In the investigation into this massacre, the Attorney General issued a warrant for the arrest of 15 members of the XVII Brigade and held six of them in custody in the month of April.

<sup>2</sup> El presidente telefonó [http://www.semana.com/wf\\_InfoArticulo.aspx?IdArt=111487](http://www.semana.com/wf_InfoArticulo.aspx?IdArt=111487), 5 February 2008.



Jorge Mata / SURIMAGES - IPA

Former paramilitary leaders on their way to the United States

# Extraditions make the search for truth more difficult

The sensitive subject of the extradition of demobilised paramilitary commanders dominated the Colombian press throughout the months of April and May this year, once more highlighting discrepancies between the Government's official line on the paramilitary demobilisation process, and the opinion of victims' organisations. The Supreme

of murders and other crimes 'Macaco' must answer for, he is also considered to be one of the most powerful drug traffickers in Colombia.

The Government of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez supported the decision to extradite 'Macaco' on the basis that the former paramilitary had continued his criminal activities from inside Itagüí

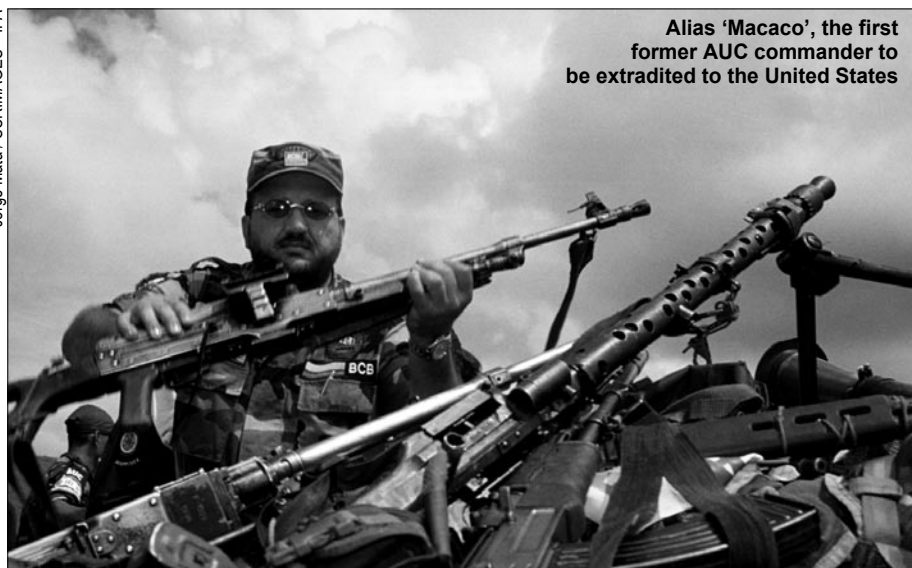
the extradition process. The objective of the organisations that supported this claim was to ensure that once 'Macaco' lost his benefits under Law 975, he would be tried under the ordinary justice system.

The petitioners argued that the extradition of 'Macaco' could violate the right to truth, justice and reparation of the thousands of people in Colombia who were victims of atrocities committed under his command. With 'Macaco' on trial in the United States, the victims fear that he will only be judged for drug-trafficking crimes, thereby leading to impunity for the crimes against humanity he committed in Colombia.

The Government nonetheless appealed against the decision in favour of the claim and on 6 May the Superior Judicial Council overturned the sentence which had halted the extradition. The magistrates decided that sending 'Macaco' to the United States did not place the rights of victims under any risk, as both the aggressor and the State are under legal obligation to respond for these rights. As soon as this decision was made public, 'Macaco' was put on a flight to the United States.

In the midst of the national debate on the propriety of the extradition process, the Colombian Government surprised the country once again when, just one week after 'Macaco' departed, it decided to extradite a further 13 former paramilitary leaders to the United States. Using the same arguments as in the Macaco case, the Government assured the country that those who had been extradited would have to answer for all their crimes from the United States, and that in this way the rights of the victims to truth, justice and reparation would be guaranteed.

Several members of MOVICE have expressed their concern over the extradition of 'Macaco', as they consider that it hampers the possibility for victims' families in Colombia to find out the truth about the whereabouts of relatives killed or disappeared at the hands of paramilitary groups. Now that a further 13 paramilitaries have been extradited, a number of voices have raised concerns that the government's decision «is an attempt to impede the identification of their political, military and economic accomplices, some of whom are under investigation by the Supreme Court of Justice». 2 ●



Alias 'Macaco', the first former AUC commander to be extradited to the United States

Jorge Mata / SURIMAGES - IPA

Court of Justice ruled in favour of extraditing Carlos Mario Jiménez, alias 'Macaco', to the United States on drug trafficking charges. The Government authorized his extradition, even though the Court had conditioned its ruling on the fulfillment of the victims' rights.

'Macaco' is the first former paramilitary commander from the notorious United Self Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) to be extradited to the United States. As head of the demobilised AUC 'Bloque Central Bolívar' regional command, he was among those listed as 'extraditable' who turned themselves in to be tried under Law 975 of 2005, which offers benefits to demobilised paramilitaries who fully collaborate with the fact finding process and provide complete confessions about the crimes committed. Apart from thousands

prison after his official demobilisation. Arguing that extradition is a necessary mechanism in the fight against terrorism, the Colombian President assured the country that «to not extradite him would be to weaken Democratic Security and increase the risk for victims and for all those citizens who could be potential victims».1 As stipulated in Chapter II of Law 975, 'Macaco' did not cease his illicit activities and should therefore lose all the benefits of this Law which reduces sentences against demobilised combatants to a maximum of eight years.

This argument was also put forward by the Movement of Victims of State Crimes (MOVICE). In addition, MOVICE challenged the Government's claims that extradition is an effective mechanism to remove benefits from those who fail to comply with the requirements of Law 975 and submitted a claim to halt

**The victims fear that he will only be judged for drug-trafficking crimes**

1 <http://web.presidencia.gov.co/sp/2008/abril/12/04122008.html>

2 'Uribe extraditó a ex paras para salvar a salpicados por parapolítica, dice la oposición', El Universal, 13 May 2008, [http://www.eluniversal.com.co/noticias/20080513/ctg\\_act\\_uribe\\_extradito\\_a\\_ex\\_paras\\_para\\_salvar\\_a.html](http://www.eluniversal.com.co/noticias/20080513/ctg_act_uribe_extradito_a_ex_paras_para_salvar_a.html)

## IV Assembly of the Movement of Victims of State Crimes

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Thousands of Colombians and people from all over the world demonstrated on 6 March.

# Serious attacks after protest against paramilitarism

Gonzalo Vargas is one of 400 campesino farmers who walked the 140 kilometres from Flandes, in the region of Tolima, to Bogotá on 6 March to pay tribute to the four million displaced people and to remember the 3,500 massacres committed by paramilitaries in Colombia. Vargas, who is a member of the National Association for Solidarity, recounted that the farmers threw thousands of rose petals into the River Magdalena as a symbolic act to remember those victims whose bodies were thrown into rivers throughout the whole country.

On 6 March, people in 20 cities in Colombia, and in 100 places around the world, went out into the streets to remember the victims of the paramilitaries: the kidnapped, displaced, disappeared and murdered whose remains lie in mass graves unrecognised by the Colombian government. According to the organisers of the demonstration, people were marching to claim truth, justice and comprehensive reparation for the victims, and to demand that paramilitarism be completely dismantled and that those involved in 'para-politics' be punished.

Taking to the streets is just one of the ways in which victims are protesting

about these atrocious crimes. Between the 7 and 8 March, during the IV Assembly of the Movement of Victims of State Crimes (MOVICE), participants had the opportunity to refine the eight strategies for political and social change proposed by MOVICE, to ensure that these crimes will not be forgotten and that the perpetrators will face justice.

Despite the success of the march, serious accusations and threats were made against demonstrators in an attempt to intimidate them. Presidential advisor José Obdulio Gaviria declared in an interview with the *El Espectador* newspaper, that the Government would not support the march because it had been convened by the FARC guerrilla group.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, more than 50 people were threatened, four trade unionists were killed and several e-mail death threats were received by NGOs and embassies, signed by the 'Black Eagles' paramilitary group. ●

Read more on the proposals of the Movement of Victims of State Crimes and the threats received by social organisations after the march, on our website: [www.pbi-colombia.org](http://www.pbi-colombia.org)

<sup>1</sup> "Gobierno no apoya marcha promovida contra los 'paras'", *El Espectador*, 11 February 2008.

Iván Cepeda, spokesperson for MOVICE:

## «An atmosphere of stigmatization»

**What was the impact of the 6 March demonstration?**

This public demonstration revealed that there are many who do not share the official version that says that paramilitarism has disappeared, or the idea that in Colombia, the State and its political and economic powers should be exempt from responsibility for the violence. This was in fact a series of demonstrations that were extremely important because they were protagonised by the victims and their organisations, including in regions where there is extremely strong paramilitary control. Also, these events give victims the encouragement to continue in their organisational processes and to struggle for access to justice, and come at a time in Colombia of intense public initiatives by citizens.

**What support did MOVICE receive to organise the march?**

I believe that in Colombia there is a growing rejection of the violence and an ever-deeper understanding of its causes. This rejection is reflected in the participation of some 400,000 people in the march, in Bogotá alone, which shows strong support from civil society. However, the situation continues to be difficult, there is a continuous climate of stigmatisation and the declarations of high ranking government officials against human rights organisations continue, which in turn lead to a climate of threats and violence against victims and human rights defenders. This was the case in the declarations of presidential advisor José Obdulio Gaviria who, in an attempt to frighten and silence the organisers of the demonstration, stated that we are part of the guerrilla's strategy. We have to ask ourselves if this is the opinion of the advisor, or of President Uribe himself, because interestingly the President has made no public announcement to rectify this statement. Fortunately, there has been a strong response from international organisations, including from members of the United States Congress and the European Parliament, rejecting this stigmatisation.



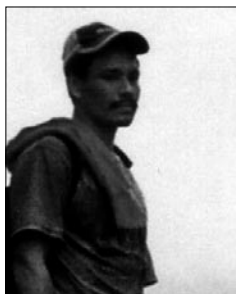
Massacre in the Peace Community in 2005

# Soldiers under investigation

Walking through the San José de Apartadó Peace Community, one comes across a circle of coloured stones. On each is an inscription, remembering more than 170 people who were killed or disappeared during the eleven years the Community has existed, crimes that to date remain in impunity. A number of these crimes occurred despite the provisional protection measures granted by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in the year 2000, ordering the Colombian Government to protect this community which in 1997 declared itself neutral in the armed conflict.

One of these stones bears the name of Luis Eduardo Guerra, leader of the San José de Apartadó Peace Community whose body, those of his family, and five others (including five children), were dismembered in the settlements of Mulatos and Resbalosa, situated at five hours' walking distance from the main Peace Community settlement, in the Urabá Antioqueño region. This massacre was committed on 21 February 2005, yet it is only now, three years after this bloody episode, that the justice system has begun to show advances in the investigations which could corroborate the Community's version of the facts.

From the start, members of the Peace Community insisted that paramilitaries and soldiers serving with the army's XVII Brigade were behind the massacre. Public declarations by the Community were corroborated by, among others, an independent investigation carried out by a group of Spanish judges and attorneys from the Medellín association. However, some of the media, the Government and the army discredited the peasant farmers' accusations and denied that state security forces had been in any way involved in the massacre. The commander of the XVII Brigade at that time, General Héctor Jaime Fandiño Rincón,



Luis Eduardo Guerra, his family and five other people were dismembered in the settlements of Mulatos and Resbalosa.



For each person assassinated, the Peace Community engraves their name on a coloured stone, and adds it to the circle of stones that represents the previous victims. There are already more than 170 stones.

went so far as to say in a written declaration that, given the way the citizens had been murdered, there was no doubt that the FARC guerrilla were responsible for this horrific crime.<sup>2</sup>

Other sectors of Colombian society turned their backs on the Peace Community, thus intensifying the smear campaign against it and delegitimising by associating it with the guerrilla. President Álvaro Uribe himself publicly declared on 21 March 2005 that «in this Community in San José de Apartadó there are good people, but some of their leaders, sponsors and defenders, have been identified by people who lived in the community as FARC collaborators and of using the Community to protect this terrorist organisation».<sup>3</sup>

For its part, the army published an article on its website questioning the neutrality of the Peace Community and reprimanding the former mayoress of the town of Apartadó, Gloria Cuartas and Jesuit priest Javier Giraldo, for accusing the army of these crimes. NGOs who acted in solidarity with the Community were also questioned: «in the case of San José all those NGOs who are sympathizers of the subversion, will surely join this campaign of misinformation in Colombia and abroad».<sup>4</sup>

It must be stressed that in the Colombian context these kinds of declarations by the Government place Community members under serious risk by insinuating that they have links with illegal armed groups. Moreover, the debate surrounding a crime against humanity such as this massacre should not be focused on alleged links with armed groups acting outside of

the law, but rather on a thorough investigation that takes into account the different versions of events.

However, times are changing for the Peace Community, after several demobilised paramilitaries declared that they carried out this massacre in collaboration with army troops. According to *Semana* magazine, a former combatant from the 'Héroes de Tolová' paramilitary group declared that «some 50 soldiers under the command of Captain Guillermo Armando Gordillo Sánchez stayed behind to 'keep lookout on the mountain' while the paramilitaries went on ahead to commit the crime».<sup>5</sup>

The evidence led the Attorney General's Office to arrest Captain Gordillo in 2007 and issue arrests warrants for 15 soldiers of the XVII Brigade, two of whom are still on the run. Of the 14 members of the military currently detained, six were charged on 15 April this year.<sup>6</sup>

On 12 May this year, Gordillo himself, who was detained last year, confessed to the Attorney General's Office that the operation had been carried out together with the paramilitaries and with the support of his army superiors. During his testimony (version libre), paramilitary commander Diego Murillo, alias 'Don Berna', also admitted that his men had carried out the massacre in complicity with the soldiers. 'Don Berna' was not able to give more details about the operation, as he was subsequently extradited.

«The soldiers have been arrested not because of any real political will to see justice carried out, but rather as a result of ▶

international pressure. The government only put them in prison to clean up its image. Those 15 soldiers will be replaced, and to date there are no arrest warrants for none of the others implicated in the crime, soldiers, paramilitaries, politicians and businessmen», declared Jesús Emilio Tuberquia, leader of the Peace Community.

Jesuit priest Javier Giraldo, who has accompanied the Peace Community since it was founded, also highlights the importance of a full investigation to discover the intellectual authors who planned the crime, and others who were also involved.

«It is clear, after hearing three or four testimonies, that there was complicity between the army and the paramilitaries. Until now, they have captured or uncovered links to just a few individuals and focused on the material authors. According to the statements of soldiers there were a minimum of 50 soldiers there and only 15 have been issued with arrest warrants».

The Community also questions the Government's attitude, as it has yet to make a statement on the latest revelations, nor has it retracted the accusations made three years ago.

«What is surprising is the silence of the national government, the army and the media, who, in spite of the evidence and legal decisions, have not yet answered for their serious and false smears against the Peace Community, when they linked its inhabitants to the FARC guerrilla».

While the Colombian justice system slowly advances, the case of the massacre in Mulatos and Resbalosa, and around one hundred other cases concerning members of the Peace Community, are awaiting decision by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

<sup>1</sup> "La Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó. Alrededor de los hechos de Febrero de 2005", MEDEL: European Magistrates for Democracy and Freedom, February-May 2006.

<sup>2</sup> "Delación, única pista de masacre", El Colombiano, 4 March 2005 – Published at <http://www.ejercito.mil.co/index.php?idcategoria=75179>

<sup>3</sup> "Verdad en masacre de San José de Apartadó se impone a mentira estatal", Press agency of the Popular Training Institute (IPC), 16 April 2008, and the programme "San José de Apartadó: Tres años después", Contravía, [www.contravia.tv](http://www.contravia.tv)

<sup>4</sup> "San José de Apartadó: ¿Comunidad de paz?", Foundation for Truth in Colombia, published at <http://www.ejercito.mil.co/index.php?idcategoria=79445>

<sup>5</sup> "La Comunidad tenía razón", Semana, 24 November 2007.

<sup>6</sup> "A indagatoria 15 militares por presunta responsabilidad en masacre en San José de Apartadó", Semana, 27 March 2008; "Verdad en masacre de San José de Apartadó se impone a mentira estatal", Press agency of the Popular Training Institute (IPC), 16 April 2008.



A total of 150 people accompanied the Peace Community in February to honour the memory of its victims.

## «The Community does not walk alone»

This year the San José de Apartadó Peace Community commemorated the third anniversary of the 2005 massacre, which took place in the settlements of Mulatos and Resbalosa.

On 21 February, the Community lost one of its most charismatic leaders, Luis Eduardo Guerra, and seven others, including five children. More than 100 families once lived in these two settlements, but they were displaced in the 1990s after several killings occurred in the area. This latest massacre caused the displacement of the remaining 10 families, leaving both settlements totally deserted.

As part of the commemoration the Community organised

a walk to the sites of the massacre. «The Community does not walk alone», commented Eduar Lancheros during one of the ceremonies, referring to the various demonstrations of solidarity the Community continues to receive from many different parts of the world. The event was organised by members of the Community and by the Luis Eduardo Guerra Committee, which includes father Javier Giraldo and

Eduar Lancheros. Among the participants were several councilors from Spain, the Italian Solidarity Network, Witness for Peace, the Tamera Community, the Campesino Farmers' Association from Antioquia, Fellowship of Reconciliation, PBI, journalists and students, making a total of some 150 people.

The walk lasted three days. On 20 February, the participants walked to Mulatos and camped at the site of the massacre of Luis Eduardo Guerra, his son Deiner and his wife Bellarina Areiza. The following day, after a commemorative mass, the group continued its pilgrimage to Resbalosa to honour the memory of the other victims of this tragic event. In this settlement lie the remains of the other five people

who were assassinated and dismembered: Alfonso Bolívar, his wife Sandra Muñoz, their children Natalia (5 years old) and Santiago (18 months old), and Alejandro Pérez, a campesino farmer who was working with Bolívar. At the end of the event, father Javier Giraldo blessed the houses of families who have decided to return to Mulatos, and who chose this symbolic day to recover their lands. ●

**The massacre caused the displacement of the remaining 10 families, leaving both settlements totally deserted**

INTERVIEW with Deidi Olaya and Osana Medina – The Women’s House

# Justice in Colombia: for men only

The Women’s House (Casa de la Mujer) is a feminist and non-governmental organisation. Founded on 8 March 1982, the organisation advocates the rights of women in Colombia. The Women’s House works towards a democratic and inclusive society where women are recognised as rights bearers and fundamental actors in any dialogue to further peace, development and justice.

Deidi Olaya and Osana Medina, members of the Women’s House, talk to Peace Brigades International about the difficulties faced by women in Colombia to access justice.

**PBI: Why does the Women’s House concentrate its work on defending the human rights of women?**

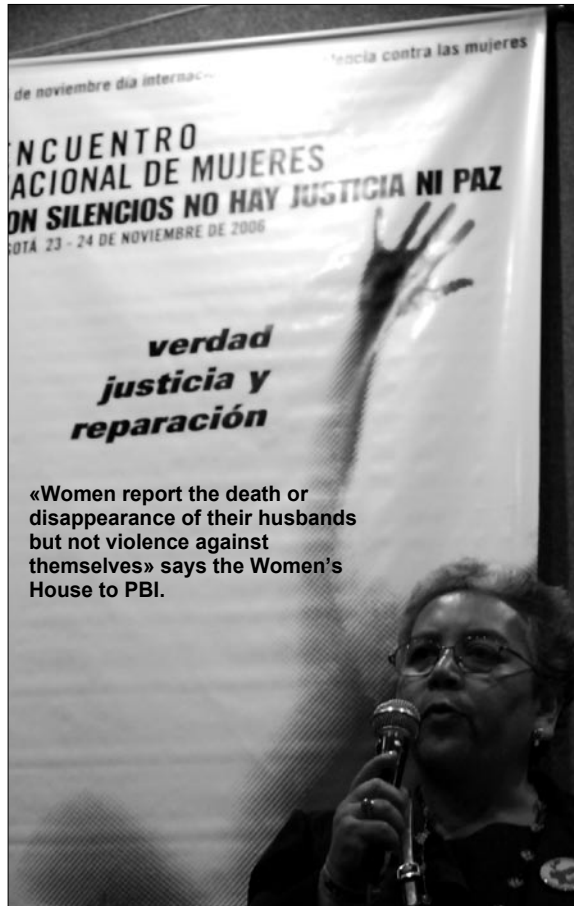
**The Women’s House:** By working towards the respect of the human rights of Colombian women, we contribute to the construction of a country in peace, where democracy and plurality are real and effective, and where women are recognised as political actors. Without women, neither peace nor democracy are possible and we believe that the concept of plurality is fundamental in order to build political and social policies.

**Why are there so few reports of violations of the human rights of women in Colombia?**

In our view there has been a *continuum* of violence against women, that is to say there is a relationship between the different forms of violence that women suffer in both the private and public spheres. Violence as a result of the armed conflict

**«If a woman reports a sexual crime, the first person to reject her is her partner»**

is one specific aspect of this violence, with sexual violence being the most frequent kind, since women’s bodies are seen as property in the war: «by raping this woman I am telling the enemy that his property has been invaded». In armed conflict, sexual violence is perpetrated against women more frequently than



against men, as women are seen as trophies of war. In regions where armed actors are present, women are forbidden to use certain kinds of clothing, or sometimes rules are made about how they should behave, and this is just another expression of machista and patriarchal cultural ideas, that seek to subjugate and subordinate women and their bodies.

**In that case, why don’t women report these violations?**

Because of stigmatisation, fear, poor education, not knowing about the laws that protect them, and because of the general situation of subordination and discrimination in which they live. If a woman reports a sexual crime, the first person to reject her is her partner, with the idea that she allowed it to happen. This is a patriarchal society, where women are punished and men exonerated. A society that does not generate pressure or stigma against the aggressor, but instead does so against

the victim. Moreover, the failure to report these crimes responds to a cultural construct that society has placed upon women, which says that they exist for others, but not for themselves. Women have not been constructed to recognise themselves as subjects of rights, and while they often report that their husbands have been killed or disappeared, they do not report attacks against themselves. Often they have to go through a whole process before they realise that what has happened to them is also a crime and must be reported.

**What role do government institutions play in the lack of access to justice for women?**

Those who control the justice system do not educate their staff on how to attend to women who have been victims of any kind of violence, especially sexual violence. Because of this, women seeking protection of their rights suffer stigmatisation, censure and maltreatment from these officials.

**In the face of all this violence, what does the Women’s House hope to achieve in terms of women’s rights?**

The Women’s House works towards the construction of a democratic society in which women are subjects in the political dialogue. In order to build peace and development, society must take women into account as part of humanity, with equal access to and enjoyment of their rights as human beings. While the patriarchal culture continues to view justice, democracy and development as concepts relating only to one part of society, democracy will never be built inclusively. The Women’s House will continue to demand that the State, society and history guarantee the rights to truth, justice, reparation and the recuperation of history for women who suffer any kind of violence. ●



## HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS FOR ECONOMIC INTERESTS

CALCP works in the Northern Santander region

# Resistance in Catatumbo against oil and coal mining

The Luis Carlos Pérez Lawyers' Collective (CALCP), an organisation of human rights defenders accompanied by PBI, offer assistance to victims of human rights violations in the Santander and Norte de Santander regions. In these areas, they accompany victims of forced displacement, the Indigenous Bari People, and the Association of Peasant Farmers from Catatumbo (ASCAMCAT). Their work is focused on grassroots education, ending impunity and the defence of human rights against the exploitation of natural resources. Their main objective is to strengthen organisational capacity in these three sectors.

PBI accompanies CALCP in the Catatumbo region during verification commissions, assemblies of the Bari People, and training workshops for farmers and indigenous people. Catatumbo is a geostrategic area on the border with Venezuela, known for its richness in minerals, fossil fuels and water reserves. Potential economic gains related to this biodiversity awoke the interest of several companies for oil and coal open-cast mining. Permission was given to these companies to explore and mine ancestral lands belonging to the Bari, without taking into account the national and international laws and treaties that protect indigenous lands.

The Bari People inhabit their ancestral lands, as recognised by the State, in 23 communities in the areas of Tibú, Teorama, El Carmen, Convención and el Tarra, in the Catatumbo region. In these areas, they live alongside more than 200 thousand campesino farmers. According to CALCP reports based on information gathered during vari-

ous verification commissions, both communities feel threatened by the possibly devastating impacts of indiscriminate oil and coal exploration.

In terms of the environment, the communities are facing possible changes in the landscape, local ecosystems and the quality of water, as well as the disappearance of affluents of the River Catatumbo. The quality of air and the land would also be affected if mining begins, destroying the strata of vegetation and making food cultivation impossible.

The social and cultural impact is reflected in the continual violations of human rights caused by the expropriation and control of lands which could lead to the forced displacement of thousands of people. The farmers would lose the possibility of carrying out their traditional agricultural and animal rearing activities. These consequences would be even more serious for the Bari People, given their strong ties to their lands, to nature and to the sacred places where they carry out cultural activities and ancestral ceremonies.

Reports have already highlighted the damage caused by economic interests in the region that have resulted in serious human rights violations in Catatumbo. In this region, paramilitary violence displaced the population in 1999 and there are still mass graves containing the remains of non-identified victims from massacres carried out by these illegal armed groups. Fumigations have affected the farmers' crops, areas of forest reserve, natural parklands and indigenous territories. CALCP presented a legal claim after shots were



PBI accompanying CALCP in the Catatumbo region.

fired at the population during fumigations. These reports complement testimonies by the Bari People and the displaced population submitted to the relevant authorities during the last few years.

CALCP supports the firm position taken by indigenous communities and campesino farmers in response to the exploration of natural resources in the area, for the serious consequences it will have on their lives and environment. The communities have begun a process for the defence of their lands and culture as a reaction to the violence they were subjected to when their lands were appropriated to enable the development of these economic projects. Moreover, the Bari People remain keenly aware of the misery, poverty and abandonment caused by the aggression and ethnocide of their people during the last 70 years of oil exploration and exploitation in Catatumbo. ●

<sup>1</sup> Verdict of the Constitutional Court of Colombia, Sentence T-880 in favour of the Bari People, 26 October 2006

<sup>2</sup> Comisión de Verificación sobre la situación de derechos humanos en el Catatumbo, CALCP, 16 August 2007



A CALCP workshop in an indigenous Bari community

■ Bogotá / INTERVIEW with Fabian Laverde, director of COS-PACC

## «We are followed and harassed constantly»

Since the end of 2007, Peace Brigades International has been accompanying the Social Corporation for Advice and Community Training (COS-PACC), during their work documenting and reporting cases of extrajudicial executions in the regions of Casanare and Boyacá.

### PBI: What is COS-PACC?

**Fabian Laverde:** It is the result of grassroots organisational processes, above all those of campesino farmers who identified the need to found a legally recognised organisation. Over the last five years we have been developing our work in different regions, especially in the regions of Casanare, Boyacá, Cundinamarca and Bogotá, where there have been systematic violations and infractions of human rights and international humanitarian law.

### What are the main problems you face?

COS-PACC has taken on the challenge of reporting those responsible for creating situations that are harmful to communities, at the national and international level, as well as reconstructing historical memory hand in hand with survivors of this deadly conflict, and accompanying and facilitating the organisation of

**«The violations are systematic and directed at silencing»**

victims and civil society in the regions where we work. The conditions of the conflict have turned us into human rights defenders, which means that we are constantly stigmatised by the Army and the Police, especially by the Army's XVI Brigade, who are responsible for countless cases of human rights violations throughout the region. We are also followed and harassed constantly. This happens for the simple reason that COS-PACC, as a legitimate grassroots organisation, presents legal and disciplinary actions and frequently releases reports on the humanitarian situation, keeping the national and international community informed.



The work of COS-PACC

«Our work in Casanare and Boyacá mainly consists of strengthening communities' organisational processes, respecting their ways of working, and interacting directly with the authorities, in order to look for definitive solutions to certain problems. To achieve these aims, COS-PACC has seven organisational programs: human rights; training, education and communications; agricultural; environmental; health; family; and projects and investigations, whereby the organisation advises communities on the construction of their community plans, and educates the national and international community on the social crisis in Colombia, caused in particular by the exploitation of oil resources.»

### How do you view the accompaniment of Peace Brigades International in the areas where you work?

It is an extremely timely support, to such an extent that we have noticed that our risks have decreased on our field visits. Unfortunately, in Colombia in order to be able to carry out work like ours in conflict areas, we need to count on people who offer protection through their profile, as in the case of international companions. It clearly works, since the Colombian State in a certain way respects these companions, and our sin is to constantly

report what is really happening in these regions, regardless of who is involved. Also, the way the communities have accepted our companions is extremely positive. Many say they no longer feel alone, which motivates them to continue with their organisational processes and strengthens them.

### What are the main human rights violations you come across?

The violations are systematic and directed at silencing organisational expressions, that show on a daily basis that the State is not living up to its responsibility. These violations get worse as the conflict, which is social in nature, worsens. In this context there are constant violations and infractions of human rights and international humanitarian law, which include selective killings, extrajudicial executions, forced disappearance, confinement, forced displacement, violations of freedom of expression and movement, involving the civilian population in the armed conflict, and physical and psychological torture.

### How has COS-PACC contributed to the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal?

The Social Observatory on Transnational Companies, Large-Scale Infrastructure Projects and Human Rights was founded by social organisations and human rights defenders. The Observatory organises the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal (PPT) Colombia Chapter, which carries out comprehensive research on these subjects. The idea is to show the world the responsibility of transnational companies, who act with the permission of the Colombian State, in the systematic violation of human rights, the exploitation of natural resources and the sponsorship of the dirty war in our country. COS-PACC, as active members of the Observatory and through our work in an important oil-bearing region of Colombia, made a concerted effort to monitor the impacts of exploration and exploitation carried out by British Petroleum in the foothills of the eastern plains of Colombia, the results of which were presented in the Oil Industry Hearing, held in Bogotá in August 2007. ●



### The Verdict of the International Opinion Tribunal

In its latest session, held in Bogotá, the Tribunal found the Colombian State and its representatives guilty of "using forced disappearance as a political weapon to eliminate the opposition, thus participating in acts of State terrorism". The Tribunal gives symbolic verdicts which have no legal implications for states. Previously, the Tribunal has also found the Colombian State guilty in the following cases:

**1999** Impunity in the case of the massacre of 16 May 1998 in Barrancabermeja, Santander region.

## ■ Medellín

# Survivors seek international justice

In March, the Association of Family Members of the Detained-Disappeared (ASFADDES) convened a hearing in Medellín to present nine cases of forced disappearances. This was the first of three preparatory hearings for the International Opinion Tribunal, which took place in Bogotá between 24 and 26 April, organised by ASFADDES and others.

All the crimes presented at the Tribunal remain in total or partial impunity, thereby prolonging the suffering of survivors. The pain of family members, in their majority women, was palpable

during the hearing, with several unable to contain tears as they remembered the facts. ASFADDES lawyers continue to struggle for the cases to be resolved, and presenting them before this tribunal is one part of their search for justice.

During the hearing, it became clear that organisations in Antioquia continue to suffer intimidation. The organisers of the Tribunal circulated a list which had recently been given out in the 8th District of Medellín, threatening some 19 young people from this humble neighbourhood.

Although representatives of the United Nations attended the event, a number of the State institutions that were invited did not participate. Rosa Serna, coordinator of the regional ASFADDES office in Medellín, lamented the «lack of commitment on the part of governmental institutions». Despite the lack of State recognition for the event, Serna was nevertheless satisfied with the results. «There should be more events like this, because cases of forced disappearance are never talked about; everyone has forgotten about them». ●

**2000** Bombardment of the town of Santo Domingo, in the Tame area, Arauca region.

**2003** Critical situation in the Sur de Bolívar region.

**2007** Forced displacement in Colombia.

Read the complete verdict at [www.pbi-colombia.org](http://www.pbi-colombia.org)

<sup>1</sup> International Opinion Tribunal, 26 April 2008.

<sup>2</sup> El Espectador, "Desaparición forzada, al banquillo", 18 April 2008.

## ■ Urabá

# Palm oil businessmen under investigation in Chocó

It is not pleasant to walk through miles of oil palm plantations. There is not a single millimetre of shade. There is no birdsong. There are no animals. The systematic cultivation of these plants is the very reason for these ghostly surroundings.

This uncomfortable feeling creeps over me on each visit to Curbaradó, during accompaniments with the Inter-church Commission for Justice and Peace. It is not difficult to imagine what the legitimate owners of these lands feel, evicted by military operations with the presumed help of the paramilitaries during the 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Colombian governmental institution for rural development (INCODER) has recognised that oil palm has been illegally planted in Afro-Colombian collective lands, and have ordered that these lands be returned, this

has yet to happen.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, the palm companies continue to exploit lands that do not belong to them.

Nevertheless, history changed its course last December, when the Attorney General's Office opened formal investigations of 23 palm oil businessmen, accused of illegally appropriating land and causing forced displacement.<sup>3</sup> A number of national and international organisations have for some time now been reporting the relationship between palm oil businesses and paramilitary groups, who claim they were contracted by these businessmen to "clear out" the area.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, threats and attacks against farming and community leaders are also on the rise. In February this year Ligia María Chaverra, former legal representative of communities in the

Curbaradó river basin and leader of the legal process against land expropriation in the area, became aware of a plan to kill her.<sup>5</sup> It is also worth remembering other cases from the area, such as Orlando Valencia who was murdered in 2005 by paramilitaries, and the attempted murder of the Hoyos brothers in 2007. ●

<sup>1</sup> "Sin Olvido: 20 asesinados y 11 desaparecidos forzadamente en Jiguamiandó y Curvaradó (Bajo Atrato entre el 5 y 31 de diciembre de 1997)", Inter-church Commission for Justice and Peace, 30 September 2006.

<sup>2</sup> "Empresario busca sicario ordenando asesinar a Ligia María Chaverra y Manuel Denis Blandon", Informe 85 de la Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz, 13 Febrero 2008.

<sup>3</sup> "El 'dossier' de los palmeros", El Espectador, 26 Enero 2008.

<sup>4</sup> "La Tramoya. Derechos Humanos y Palma Aceitera", Intereclesial Commission for Justice and Peace and Cinep Data Bank, October 2005.

<sup>5</sup> "Empresario busca sicario ordenando asesinar a Ligia María Chaverra y Manuel Denis Blandon", Report no 85 from the Inter-church Commission for Justice and Peace, 13 February 2008.

## PEACE BRIGADES INTERNATIONAL

### ■ Barrancabermeja

# Armed groups displace human rights defenders

After the official demobilisation of the 'Bloque Central Bolívar' command of the United Self Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) paramilitary group, the situation in Barrancabermeja in the Santander region entered a period of relative calm. This had been one of the most violent cities in Colombia during the paramilitary takeover of the city, between 1998 and 2000. Nevertheless, throughout the last year, a number of reports and news bulletins indicate that paramilitary structures are once again terrorizing the civilian population, while the police insist that the perpetrators are common delinquents or gangs of young people. Despite announcements by the Colombian State that they will introduce measures to confront the situation, events in the region continue to be a cause for serious concern:

**Plans revealed to assassinate David Ravelo.** An international organisation contacted Ravelo, secretary general of the Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS), on 18 February this year, and informed him that they had information suggesting that the paramilitaries were going to try and assassinate him that very day. Previously, the same organisation had informed him that the paramilitary boss alias 'Gomelo', had ordered him dead and that he was already being pursued by hired killers.<sup>1</sup> Ravelo was forced to leave the city.

**Attack against Yolanda Becerra.** At 7:30am on 4 November 2007, two armed men, hooded and dressed in

civilian clothing, entered the apartment of Yolanda Becerra, director of the Grassroots Women's Organisation (OFP), and threatened her, while overturning her possessions and causing damage in her home. They put a weapon to her head, warning her: «it's over, you have 48 hours to leave, if not we'll kill your family, you won't get away from us».<sup>2</sup> After this incident, Yolanda Becerra was forced to move to the city of Bucaramanga.

**Email threat.** On 31 July 2007, CREDHOS and the OFP received by email a declaration signed by the Central Bloc of the Black Eagles of Colombia. In this message most of the social organisations and human rights defenders in the city were declared to be military targets, among them the OFP and David Ravelo.<sup>3</sup>

**Death lists.** Four death lists appeared in the city during July and August 2007. They name some 50 inhabitants of the city as military targets, mainly young people from marginalised neighbourhoods. The authors of this harassment and intimidation were different blocks of the 'Black Eagles'. Subsequently, one of the people mentioned in these lists was found dead, and the vast majority of the young people who were threatened fled the city.<sup>4</sup>

**Social cleansing.** In February this year, five young people, several of whom apparently were homosexual, were forcibly displaced after receiving threats from unknown armed groups. CREDHOS reported that «this sad fact shows the inability of the authorities to guarantee the life and safety of its citizens».<sup>5</sup>



Yolanda Becerra, director of the Grassroots Women's Organisation, is one of the people who has been forced to leave the city.

**Wave of killings.** Throughout January and the beginning of February more than 20 violent killings were reported in Barrancabermeja.<sup>6</sup> Rumours circulated that "social cleansing" was being carried out, after two recyclers were murdered in less than 24 hours by unknown gunmen.<sup>7</sup> A number of alleged drug sellers also figured among the dead.<sup>8</sup>

At the time of writing, police in the Magdalena Medio region have not confirmed the existence of the Black Eagles, nor of other illegal armed groups operations in Barrancabermeja: «There are no armed groups operating, there are only delinquent gangs which we are bringing under control», the police commander said at the end of January.<sup>9</sup> When asked about the rise in violence in the city, he justified his work claiming that people do not report crimes or speak to the police.<sup>10</sup>

Faced with this ever more serious situation, PBI, in its dialogue with the Colombian State and the diplomatic corps, has highlighted the need for state institutions to meet with human rights defenders and carry out a joint analysis to develop commitments based on concrete measures. Originally planned for January this year, a meeting was finally held in Barrancabermeja on 1 April, with the participation of Vice President Francisco Santos. Among other measures, Santos announced that the Attorney General's Office would be strengthened and that 46 new public officials would be hired. ●

### Three members of the ACVC released from prison

On 23 April 2008, three of the six members of the Association of Campesino Farmers from the Valley of the Cimitarra River (ACVC) being held in prison, were released. The ACVC has offices in Barrancabermeja and is accompanied by PBI. The three other members of the organisation have been held in

prison since September 2007 and January 2008 respectively. According to the Humanidad Vigente Legal Corporation, one of the NGOs defending the detainees, "the investigation was closed because of the lack of evidence, which had clearly never existed in the first place". PBI is focusing on the

protection of these leaders, since although they are now free, they continue to be stigmatised and are thus still at risk.

<sup>1</sup> "Celebramos liberación de tres dirigentes. Rechazamos acusaciones contra Andrés Gil", Humanidad Vigente Corporación Jurídica, 24 April 2008

<sup>1</sup> Urgent Action, CREDHOS, 14 February 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Urgent Action, OFP, 4 November 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Urgent Action, Coordinating Group for Human Rights Workers from the Magdalena Medio Region, 2 August 2007.

<sup>4</sup> "Nuevas amenazas en Barrancabermeja", OFP, 14 August 2007.

<sup>5</sup> "Pistoleros desconocidos conminaron al destierro a cinco jóvenes del nororiente", Vanguardia Liberal, 13 February 2008.

<sup>6</sup> "Defensor del Pueblo anuncia audiencia en Barranca", La Vanguardia Liberal, 9 February 2008.

<sup>7</sup> "Temor en Barrancabermeja por ola de asesinatos", El Tiempo, 16 February 2008.

<sup>8</sup> "No hay claridad sobre los móviles de los crímenes de enero" La Vanguardia Liberal, 9 January 2008.

<sup>9</sup> "Julián Bolívar" confesó que en Barranca hay grupos", Vanguardia Liberal, 25 January 2008.

<sup>10</sup> "Asesinato de cobradores 'gota a gota' Vanguardia Liberal, ¿sería un error?", 7 February 2008.

## ■ PBI International

# Annual meeting of PBI International

Once a year, the members of PBI's International Council have the opportunity to meet face to face in their annual meeting. In February 2008, representatives of the five PBI Projects in Colombia, Guatemala, Indonesia, México and Nepal, and representatives of PBI's Country Groups met in Mas Franch, Cataluña (Spain).

The International Council is the PBI body which is responsible for running the International Secretariat and for taking care of all the legal aspects of the projects.

One of the main topics up for discussion this year was the PBI General Assembly, which is held once every three years. In November 2008, the Assembly will take place in the city of Hamburg,

thanks to substantial support from the PBI Germany country group.

The Assembly is made up of representatives from the five PBI Projects and members of the National Groups. PBI staff, members of the International Council, and other invited guests, sit in on the Assembly as observers.

As the highest decision-making body in PBI, and an important forum for the exchange of information and ideas, the Assembly decides on the strategic direction of PBI for the following three years. It approves the renewal of Project mandates, or the changing of principles, mandates and organisational rules and revises PBI's financial reports.

Throughout this year, PBI will continue to develop its working areas which were

prioritised in 2007, namely promoting organisational strengthening, including initiatives to strengthen PBI's public image.

PBI will also be looking at the development of its Country Groups, another established priority for this year. In addition, the International Secretariat will supervise an external evaluation of the five Projects and of itself, and will organise the General Assembly mentioned above.

The main focus for 2008 will be financial management and control, reinforcing inter-project fundraising, refining centralised mechanisms for reaction in emergencies, strengthening support mechanisms for field volunteers, and strengthening our international advocacy profile. ●

## ■ Country Groups

### Volunteer returns after more than 10 years

During one month at the end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008, Heike Kammer, from the PBI country group in Germany, visited the Colombia Project. For the first time in over ten years, after volunteering in Barrancabermeja between 1995 and 1997, Heike returned to Colombia.

During her visit, she travelled to the four teams to interview the volunteers and visited accompanied organisations. She discovered a bigger, more professional Project. «I have been working with PBI for over 20 years now, and I am overwhelmed by how the organisation's work has developed», she said. The political situation has also changed to a certain extent: «We have more freedom in the streets now, we travel by bicycle here. Not so many campesinos are being displaced, there are not so many massacres, but selective killings are still going on».

On her return to Germany, Heike shared the results of her visit in workshops she carried out with young people about PBI, the Urabá region of Colombia and oil palm. She also gave a presentation to the country group, and published an article in a German magazine. ●

### PBI, new member of SUIPPCOL

PBI Switzerland has just become the latest member of the management committee of SUIPPCOL III (the Swiss Peace Program for Colombia). The program runs over a four-year period, with funding to the sum of 650,000 Swiss francs.

PBI's presence in this group gives the organisation the chance to strengthen exchanges between the program's participants in Switzerland and Colombia. ●

### Tales from Urabá in Belgium

PBI Belgium organised a public event on 5 April in the city of Gent. The volunteer Ina Vandenberghe gave a presentation to some 40 people on the work of PBI Colombia, and in particular on the work of the team in Urabá, the organisations accompanied by PBI in the region and the situation related to oil palm plantations.

The combination of a multimedia presentation and Ina's personal com-

### The volunteer Ina Vandenberghe gave a presentation on the work of PBI Colombia

ments about her experience in the region made for a lively representation of her work, which she will continue to carry out in the region with PBI until September 2008.

This event was jointly organised with Broederlijk Delen. According to the Project Officer for Colombia, they will continue to support PBI Colombia in the future through funding and volunteer recruitment. ●



Ina Vandenberghe.

■ Europe



«Trade Union leaders, or human rights lawyers like us, everyone who criticizes the government, is labelled a guerrilla supporter», says Lilibian Uribe, Corporation for Judicial Freedom.

## In Europe, attention focuses on extrajudicial executions

In a tour of Europe, Lilibian Uribe, lawyer with the Corporation for Judicial Freedom in Medellín, visited the UK, France, Germany, Spain and Belgium, and she met with politicians, the media, as well as a number of organisations in the different countries.

In public events, she told of her experiences as a human rights defender, working with families of the victims of extrajudicial executions committed by members of the Army and the Police, and the threats her organisation and she herself have received for carrying out this work.

In line with Lilibian's declarations, the Office in Colombia of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in its 2007 annual report highlights the fact that extrajudicial executions continue and recommends that all necessary measures be adopted to fight the impunity in which these crimes remain.

A mission in 2007 of independent experts from the United States and several countries in Europe found that, between 2002 and 2007, the Army and the Police have committed 955 extrajudicial executions. The mission also confirmed that up to July 2007 the Army and the Police were responsible for 235 forced disappearances.

Lilibian Uribe also participated, together with Claudia Erazo of the Yira Castro Legal Corporation and Isabelle Heyer of the Colombian Commission of Jurists, in a roundtable discussion organised by the European Parliament, hosted by Hélène Flautre, President of the Sub-Commission for Human Rights, and Alain Lipietz, President of the Delegation for Relations with Countries from the Andean Community.

In addition to emphasizing the persistence of cases of extrajudicial executions, the participants discussed other subjects related to the human rights situation in Colombia.

Two Belgian journalists published various articles and interviews on Lilibian's visit, and on the public conference organised by Amnesty International Belgium, the International Human Rights Office – Action Colombia (OIDHACO) and PBI. Lilibian stated that the logic of the current military strategy «is extremely polarised. Trade Union leaders, or human rights lawyers, everyone who criticises the government is labelled a guerrilla supporter. President Uribe [...] is constantly pressurizing the Colombian military to 'show results', whatever the methods, and whatever the results». ●

■ United States

## The “Comuna 13”, and the Inter-American Commission

The hearings of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) were held in Washington D.C. in March this year, and one of the cases heard were testimonies from “Comuna 13” (13th District) in Medellín. A number of witnesses told of events which occurred in 2002, describing how the counter-insurgency military operations known as ‘Orión’ and ‘Mariscal’, transformed this humble neighbourhood into a war zone. According to witness statements, the civilian population, members of community organisations (Juntas de Acción Comunal) and women's groups all became military targets for the paramilitaries, the police and the army, who purportedly aimed end the control the guerrilla exerted in the area.

The organisation of displaced afro-descendants, AFRODES, presented its report to the IACHR on the situation of afro-descendants, revealing the effects of institutional marginalisation and discrimination of a group disproportionately affected by displacement and the armed conflict in Colombia. The report offers statistics and other quantitative information, which serves as a basis for in-depth analysis of the living conditions affecting the Afro-Colombians.

### The organisation of displaced afro-descendants, AFRODES, presented its report revealing the effects of marginalisation

The Colombian Commission of Jurists, the Interdisciplinary Group on Human Rights, and Reiniciar gave a presentation on the general human rights situation in Colombia, focusing on threats against human rights defenders, generalised impunity, deficiencies in the paramilitary demobilisation process, and the scandals caused by links between members of the Colombian Congress, politicians on the Atlantic Coast and paramilitarism. ●

## Three farewells from PBI Colombia

**PBI Colombia has just said good-bye to three colleagues from the PBI support team: Christine Oram, Alain Mullenex and Tomasz Krzyzowski. PBI would like to thank them for the positive impact they had on the organisation during their time with us, and gives them the opportunity to talk about their experiences working with an international accompaniment organisation in Colombia.**



Alain Mullenex, former Team Coordinator.

«During the four years I worked for PBI, I saw the human, political and social impacts of the conflict in Colombia. If I had to choose the “strongest”, it would have to be the human impact that PBI’s work has upon human rights defenders and displaced communities. I think that what will stay with me as I leave PBI is a sense of solidarity, because what we say to the people we accompany is «we care about what is happening to you» and we raise our voices to say «no to impunity». I think that the best result is what each person gives during their time in PBI, to build a fairer world based on solidarity, respecting the forgotten voices of the victims of this armed conflict.

When I was a PBI volunteer, I felt close to the everyday struggle of defenders and victims for their human rights. This experience has changed my life, and I have to say that it has been an honour for me to get to know Colombian culture in this way, by being close to people in several areas of the country. I will never forget peoples’ fear when we travelled to unprotected communities, the anguish of family members during exhumations or the smiles of campesinos thanking us for our presence. I have the feeling that I have been a witness to a moment in Colombian history and that I have been able to share

experience in a profound way with human beings who will always remind me that another world is possible».

**Alain Mullenex worked for four years in PBI, as a volunteer in the Bogotá team and then as team coordinator in Colombia.**

«I sincerely believe that some of the human rights defenders accompanied by the organization would either have been assassinated or be living in exile if it were not for PBI’s physical presence and its political weight among the international community. It is astounding that so many human rights violations remain in impunity and in a so-called democratic country, the fact that human rights defenders are able to continue their work fighting to give victims hope that one day the perpetrators of these violations will be brought to justice and that they will receive reparation for their loss, and, furthermore, that communities strive to stay together against all odds, has been truly inspirational.

Working with PBI has provided me with a much clearer vision of the human rights situation in Colombia. Whilst a large part of my time with PBI was office based, focusing on turning the organisation around after a funding crisis, I feel honored to have met such courageous women and men, human rights defenders and communities, with such commitment, inner strength, tenacity and love for their country in spite of the difficulties they face. I could not help but be moved by the comment of a small boy in a community: ‘Is there war in your country?’ He has known no other reality».

**Christine Oram joined PBI at the beginning of 2006 and worked for two years as project fundraiser in Bogotá.**



Tomasz Krzyzowski.

«What I most like about PBI is its principle of non-interference, which means that its volunteers do not try to change the political agendas of accompanied organisations. PBI’s work responds to the protection needs of human rights NGOs and displaced communities without trying to change or influence their proposals and ideals. PBI is an international solidarity organisation founded on values such as human rights, yet it never is so pretentious as to think it knows the absolute truth. PBI contributes to a process whereby Colombian social movements can organise to guarantee their democratic voice within a context where this space is under constant threat.

In its 14 years working in Colombia, through a combination of presence on the ground and intense political work at the national and international level, PBI has helped human rights defenders to continue demanding their rights in Colombia. The two most important moments for me in PBI’s work have to be on the one hand during the paramilitary takeover in Barrancabermeja, during which PBI contributed so that local NGOs could keep working within a context of total control in the city, a fact which all the organisations in the city have recognised. Secondly, PBI’s accompaniment of the creation of the humanitarian zone in Curbaradó in the Chocó region, where PBI also had a significant impact on the protection of accompanied human rights defenders and peasants».

**Tomasz Krzyzowski worked as a volunteer in Barrancabermeja and Medellín for two years. Between the year 2005 and April 2008 he worked as the inter-team security officer. ●**



[www.pbi-colombia.org](http://www.pbi-colombia.org)

Protecting human rights defenders in Colombia since 1994



The demonstration against paramilitarism, 6 March 2008.

Peace Brigades International (PBI) is a Non Governmental Organisation 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 recognised 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 organisations 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 organisations, 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 organisation

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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