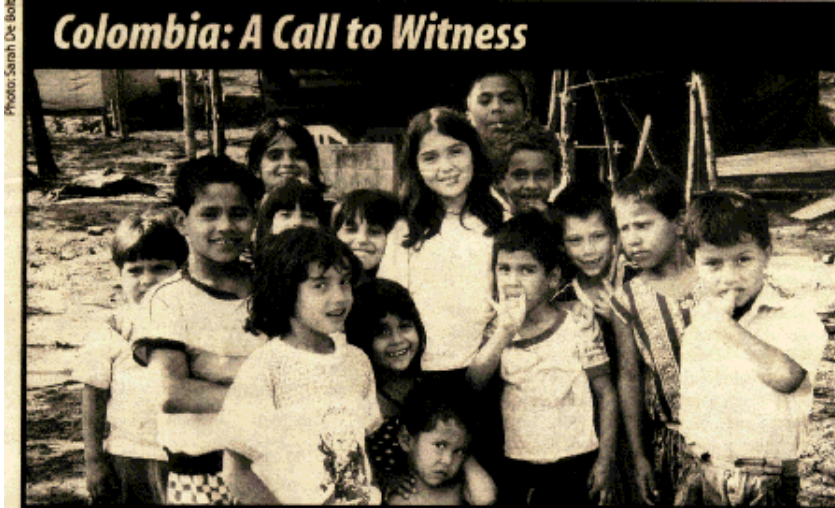


Columbia: A Call to Witness



These children are among the estimated 1.5 million people displaced by Colombia's war.

In April 2000, Witness for Peace sent a fact-finding delegation to Colombia to assess the impact of past and future US aid and to begin to evaluate the feasibility of sending International Team volunteers and short-term delegations to the embattled country. This article is a product of that delegation. Based on its meetings and interviews, the fact-finding delegation recommended to the Board of Directors that WFP send International Team Volunteers and, eventually, a delegation to the country. In June, the board accepted these recommendations. WFP will send two International Team volunteers to Colombia in October and a first delegation of US citizens in January 2001. We are proud to be answering the call for solidarity that our fact-finding group heard in April. Please see the urgent call to witness from our Colombian partners on p.10

Editor's note:

Witness for Peace will launch this new program in October 2000. But we cannot engage in a project of this significance without the support of our membership. Given the risks inherent in a Colombia program, we will need your help to build a support network that will allow us to manage the risks, and operate in Colombia in a way that is safe and constructive. An additional contribution to Witness for Peace at this time would be very helpful. If you are able, please use the web form at <http://www.giveforchange.com/>.

"This is my life. This is what I've chosen ... They can kill me, but it will be on the day that God decides I've accomplished what I was meant to do."

Manuel^[1], an economist and advocate of indigenous rights, spoke these words quietly to us, the members of the Witness for Peace fact-finding delegation to Colombia. Manuel told us that his name had been circulated a few months earlier on a list along with other names of people the paramilitaries were going to kill. Manuel's crime was working with one of the Colombian indigenous groups that was trying to defend the right to their land. He told us that he has spent every night in a different bed since last August, and he has not been able to see his wife and daughter at home. He used to be a leader in his church. But he told us that "now I can't go to church very often. To create a routine would be to commit suicide."

In the context of the current situation in Colombia, the most important thing to understand about the US aid package is this: every single Colombian organization with which we met was certain that the aid would only escalate the conflict in the country.

But it wasn't even his words that touched us the most; it was the fear and exhaustion in his eyes, the constant nervous rubbing of his hands. Getting to know Manuel and others like him made the violence in

Colombia seem very real. Yet he does not consider exile an option, "I know that people would miss my work. It's not the same to be someplace else as to be here."

Manuel's was but one of the voices we heard during our ten days in Colombia. We talked with displaced coca growers as well as with campesinos who did not grow the waxy green plants. We met with government officials. We walked through metal detectors and bulletproof glass in order to meet with human rights workers. We ate lunch under watchful eyes and ears in the guerrilla-controlled town of Villavicencio, talking with a local pastor. We heard the testimonies of countless displaced people who are now organizing themselves through a Mennonite development organization. We had a cordial if strained meeting with an envoy of our own government. And now, we are reporting back to you, the Witness for Peace community. We are taking the advice WFP has given to delegates for the last 17 years. We have returned to tell you what we have seen and heard.

What we heard about the need for WFP in Colombia

Over the course of our fact-finding mission, we kept the Witness for Peace mission statement at the forefront of our thoughts. And we were not the only people who took our mission statement seriously. Ricardo Vargas of the drug policy group Acción Andina said of WFP's mission statement: "If you want a scenario that fits your mission statement to a 'T' exactly at this moment, it is Colombia." Fr. Alfredo Ferro of Programa. por la Paz considered both our methodology and our mission when he told us: "A group like yours is fundamental for linking [U.S.] aid with peace. It's *fundamental*. It's necessary to bring [Americans] here to show them reality. Your presence is very important because of your own mission."

... about the current situation from Colombians

Colombia is mired in a 40 year-old civil war with three factions. One faction is that of leftist guerrilla groups, the largest being the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Paramilitary forces make up a second side in the conflict, and the dominant group is the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC). Third, there is the Colombian military. The paramilitaries and the Colombian armed forces are two distinguishable organizations, but often work in collusion. We heard many testimonies of military-paramilitary complicity. The main victims of the war are the campesinos who are forced from their homes and their land by the armed actors. Most estimates place the number of internally displaced people in Colombia at over one million.

Add to this entrenched conflict the production and marketing of drugs, the trade which funds both guerrilla and paramilitary activities. The scope of the problem is enormous: Colombia currently produces 80% of the cocaine that is consumed in the US. But for many campesinos, coca and/or opium poppy production is the only means of subsistence since infrastructure necessary to market legal crops is essentially non-existent. Violence and common crime tied to the drug trade are rampant and on the rise.

Against this backdrop, the US Congress voted in late June to provide over \$ 1 billion in aid to Colombian President Andres Pastrana's national development plan, "Plan Colombia". (See the next section "US Policy" for details about what the package includes.) In the context of the current situation in Colombia, the most important thing to understand about the US aid package is this: every single Colombian organization with which we met was certain that the aid would only escalate the conflict in the country.

The outcome of this so-called "push into southern Colombia" is almost certain, and the winners and losers have already been decided. The counternarcotics battalions will forcibly displace innumerable people in their counterinsurgency sweeps. Subsequent aerial spraying of the region will contaminate the land and water to the point of making present or future agricultural production impossible.

Combined, these tactics will force thousands from their land and their homes. NGO estimates of displacement run as high as 300,000. The US government expects (and has budgeted for) the displacement of 15,000 people from the south. With southern Colombia thus deserted and desertified, the region will be ripe for "investment" by multinational corporations (MNCs).

But even with this grim outlook, we saw hopeful and determined commitment to finding and supporting a peaceful solution to the conflict. For example, Mennonite pastor Ricardo Esquivia -- a prominent leader of the National Peace Council and Coordinator of the Permanent Council of Civil Society -- emphasized that North American churches have a crucial role to play in changing US policy. As a first step, he challenged churches here to take a closer look at the real problem: "The churches in the US believe that the problem in Colombia is drugs and that prevents them from really dealing with the situation. The US government...has decided to go to the core of the issue -- economics -- and to deal with the situation here."

... about US policy and its implications

Just as the Reagan administration used the arms trade as an excuse to wage war in Nicaragua in the 1980s, the US government is using the "War on Drugs" as an excuse to assist Colombia in a counterinsurgency war today. Indeed, Colombian government officials with whom we met did not even mention counternarcotics in the context of Plan Colombia. In a meeting with national-level officials, we were told that, "the aid will facilitate the modernization of the armed forces, giving them the capacity to deploy forces more rapidly in order to combat the guerrillas and paramilitaries." In a conversation with a representative of a provincial government we were informed that "a positive thing of Plan Colombia is that it will help the government defeat the guerrillas." And certainly, this is the intent of the policy.

U.S.involvement in this war is about defeating left-wing guerrillas in southern Colombia. It is not about combating the production or consumption of illegal drugs. In fact, there is the widespread impression among Colombians and among Americans working in Colombia that the US is not serious about solving its drug consumption problem.

The "push into southern Colombia," a cornerstone of the US aid package, ignores the fact that an estimated 40% of the country's coca cultivation takes place under paramilitary control in northern Colombia. It cannot be an accident that the US aid package trains its sights on the south, a major coca-producing area to be sure, but one under the control of the FARC. Support for the "push" includes combat helicopters and resources for the creation of three counternarcotics battalions in the Colombian army. The helicopters will accompany the planes doing aerial spraying of drug crops should the planes come under attack from the ground. But if the push goes according to plans, the battalions will reduce the risk of ground fire. They have been created to sweep through coca growing areas prior to spraying,

in order to neutralize the guerrilla forces that would shoot at the spraying planes.

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In just what will MNCs invest? One needs only to look at a Colombian geography textbook for the answer. Southern Colombia is home to a sizable percentage of the country's undeveloped oil fields. If this were not evidence enough, consider this: one US company that we know of -- Occidental Petroleum -- has been playing a major role in shaping current US policy towards Colombia. In February the House Government Reform Committee convened a hearing on the Colombia aid package. The title of the hearing was "Colombia: Are we Sitting on our Assets?" and listed as a witness, along with government officials such as Drug Czar Barry McCaffrey, Commander Charles Wilhelm of the Southern Command, and Undersecretary of State Peter Romero, was Mr. Lawrence Meriage, Vice President of Occidental Oil and Gas Corporation.

Our trip to Colombia confirmed our worst fears about this US aid package. The effects of the aid will be devastating to the environment, to indigenous Colombians, to Afro-Colombians, to campesinos throughout the country, to children, to human rights workers, to union leaders, to the internally displaced, and to the country's economic future. A banner at a rally in Bogotá captured many Colombians' analysis: USA = FMI = Plan Colombia = guerra y hambre! (USA = IMF = Plan Colombia = war and hunger!)

What about the risks?

There is no question that travel to Colombia is dangerous. It is dangerous for Colombians every day, and it would be dangerous for us as North Americans. None of our Colombian counterparts denied any of that. But what is most important is that almost every conversation about security was couched in terms of the great need for a US presence like ours in Colombia.

Here, our partners deserve the last word. Antonio, who briefed us on issues facing Afro-Colombians, had this to say. "We want people in the United States to have first hand knowledge of the Colombian reality. It is very important that Witness for Peace come to this country."

And Manuel, whose story we shared with you earlier, told us: "It is important that you be here, even though the risks are high. The people need you to be witnesses to what is happening, to make sure that people in the US know what is really going on here."

1. *Some names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect those who were courageous enough to share their stories with us.*

-- article by Sarah DeBolt & Michael Joseph