

Crisis In Colombia: Making Connections and Making a Difference

by Jasmin Hristov

"Crisis in Colombia: Making Connections and Making a Difference" was a one-day conference held at McMaster University, Hamilton on June 21, 2003, featuring presentations, four simultaneous workshop sessions, a panel discussion, a poetry reading, and opportunities for social activism.

Wilf Ruland of Amnesty International was the chief organizer of this event. Additional organizers included members of Amnesty International and of the Colombia Working Group of McMaster OPIRG (Ontario Public Interest Research Group). CERLAC co-sponsored.

OPENING PRESENTATIONS

Kathy Price from Amnesty International's Urgent Action Network spoke first on the abysmal current human rights situation in Colombia. She began with two disturbing examples of recent abuses that Amnesty International has sought to address through urgent action appeals. One concerns the safety of peasants in the Arauca region of Colombia where, on May 1st of this year, members of a paramilitary group, self-named the "United Self-defence Forces of Colombia," sexually abused and killed a pregnant 16-year old girl. The gunmen also sexually abused three other girls aged 15, 12, and 11, and shot and wounded three indigenous men. In the village of Saravena, in the same region, 847 people recently have been displaced and warned by the paramilitary not to return.

These examples are sadly representative of the pervasive violence and intimidation directed against indigenous groups, Afro-Colombians, peasants, trade unionists,

human rights defenders, women's organizations, and members of other peaceful social movements. Meanwhile, Price pointed out, the new security legislation introduced by Colombian President Alvaro Uribe promises to drag the civilian population further into the conflict and exacerbate the cycle of political violence through the creation of millions of civilian informers. Violations of human rights and international law, and widespread impunity of the violators, continue to be a permanent feature of the Colombian reality.

Price then stressed the importance of exposing, confronting, and eventually changing this reality. She pointed out that this is not an easy task, considering how media fascination with drugs obscures the reality of the current crisis and its causes, which have an international dimension grounded in economic and political interests. Most Canadians are unaware of the daily death toll and disappearances in areas with heavy military presence, and of the millions of dollars of U.S. military aid to Colombian authorities who fail to meet even the basic human rights conditions set out by United Nations. Nor are they aware that Canadian military helicopters sold to the US are often re-sold to the Colombian military.

She concluded with an encouraging affirmation that solidarity expressed through letter-writing, international monitoring, and other advocacy campaigns is crucial in the struggle to end the hidden war of repression. Such actions save lives and enable Colombians who risk their lives daily to remain active, to continue their struggle for human dignity, and to build a just society.

Dr. Manuel Rozenal elucidated the roots of the conflict in Colombia. He began by stating that Colombia's history has been shaped by a global system, and that the current crisis is merely a local expression of the processes entailed. The logic of

the system leads to the enactment of genocide for profit that, according to Rozenal, proceeds through four stages: exploration, exploitation, exclusion (as wealth is created only for some while the rest are exploited), and extermination (of those unnecessary to the system). This process has developed through three historical stages in Latin America. The first was colonization - the search for "El Dorado", by which the major European powers aimed to establish control over people and territories rich in natural resources so as "to make the production of wealth cheaper." This period was characterized by the extraction of raw materials, the exclusion and destruction of indigenous communities, and the enslavement of 4 to 6 million Africans. In the second stage, the independent nation-state emerged, with local elites replacing the colonial upper crust (while maintaining complicity with foreign interests to guarantee their on-going exploitation of local labour and resources). Land became further concentrated in the hands of the few, who employed those displaced from their lands (a reserve army of labour) mainly to sustain monoculture export crop production. Military repression served to suppress challenges to the resulting structural inequalities. The third stage is the current one, that of neoliberal capitalism.

Rozenal outlined three instruments used by contemporary elites, national and international, to achieve and maintain the exploitation of resources and labour in Colombia. The first is the US "military machine" which has cultivated and/or exacerbated the use of state terror in many Latin American countries in order to destroy popular organization aimed at changing the status quo. The second is the political-economic system characterized by the extreme policy measures articulated through free trade agreements imposed by US-dominated international financial institutions such as the World Trade Organiza-

tion (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Public acquiescence to these policies is often enforced through the application of state terror. (Rozenal noted that President Uribe represents the interests of only three sectors of Colombian society: the landlords and entrepreneurs who live as First World citizens at the expense of others; drug lords / drug dealers; and the military.) Lastly, there is the "propaganda machine," comprised by the media and the education system, which portrays Colombia as a country of drug trafficking and irrational murders.

Rozenal underlined that the current problem in Colombia should not be perceived as an isolated case of irrational violence that is unique to that part of the world. On the contrary, the atrocities that are being perpetrated there are rooted in processes that affect the rest of the world as well, including Canada. A system which concentrates wealth and power in the hands of the few can be maintained and perpetuated only through the denial of fundamental political and economic rights, usually with reinforcement through military repression. Rozenal cautioned that, although it is important to attend to the concrete and immediate, one must at the same time develop a critical consciousness and keep an eye on the larger picture. Only such a comprehensive vision can effectively guide our actions. Rozenal ended by citing sub-commander Marcos (of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Chiapas, Mexico): "There is one NO and many YES(es)." The NO refers to the rejection of a global system that seeks to sacrifice humanity for the sake of profit. The many YES(es) signify that there is not one monolithic answer to the challenges of development, but many alternatives.

Gloria Herney from ASFADDES, an organization of the families of the forcibly disappeared, addressed the effects of the conflict on Colombia's people. Herney began by drawing attention to the high rate of human rights violations in the country; the repression, persecution, and torture of those who investigate disappearances and other cases of abuse; and the apparent indifference of the Colombian government towards all this, as evidenced by the widespread impunity enjoyed by main perpetrators of abuse. Since the late 1970s the number of disappearances, murders, and massacres has increased dramatically. Three groups of people have been particularly targeted: leftists, students protesting human rights violations, and

peasant and other community activists. Herney emphasized that state policy does not adequately provide for the protection of human rights defenders. Consequently, many have been forced into exile or have been displaced internally, while others have disappeared or been murdered, most often by paramilitary forces.

Herney defined 'paramilitary' as a term describing an armed group not belonging to any government established army or police force, that commit massacres and tortures, and that have officially been condemned as illegal (though this condemnation appears largely rhetorical). However, between 1993-1996, as a governor of Antioquia, Uribe (now president) implicitly legitimized paramilitary groups by referring to them as "self-defence groups." It is no coincidence that the greatest increase in forced disappearances occurred during this period. This tacit legitimization of paramilitary groups in the 1990s as well as previous forms of indirect sanction that took place in the 1980s and 1970s, reflect the fact that paramilitary squads work with the knowledge and support of the official military and the political forces it serves.

Herney provided some background on the Colombian constitution to contextualize the current, weak legislation that permits impunity. In 1991, clauses that protect the defenders of human rights were introduced into the constitution; the right of people not to be tortured or "disappeared" was clearly recognized. However, other legislation that gives more autonomy to the armed forces and permits officers to justify violations by reference to their duty to obey orders, effectively undermining this limited 'protection'.

Bill Fairbairn from KAIROS spoke about current international influences on Colombia. According to this speaker, the Uribe government has intensified efforts to reframe the international perception of the Colombian crisis. It portrays itself as an innocent victim of illegal armed groups — principally the guerrillas, whom it refers to as "narcoterrorists," as well as so-called "self-defence" (paramilitary) forces. In the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, many Colombian government officials (one of the most vocal being Colombia's ambassador to Canada, Fanny Kertzman) have attempted to demonstrate a parallel between realities as different as those of Afghanistan and Colombia, reducing the complex situations in these countries to one of drugs and terrorists. These

images obscure the reality of state terrorism and the links between the Colombian state and the paramilitary death squads.

After September 11, 2001, the U.S. further expanded military aid to Colombia to \$600 million a year. Since 2000, a total of \$2.5 billion have been received and used not principally to fight drugs, but to combat insurgents. Fairbairn remarked that this largesse is not unrelated to the fact that the Colombian government is one of the few in Latin America to support the US-led invasion of Iraq.

Fairbairn concluded by encouraging Canadians to press their government to maintain pressure on Colombian authorities, demanding that they comply with their international human rights obligations and immediately implement the recommendations of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

WORKSHOP SESSION

The Plight of Colombia's Trade Unions

Following the opening presentations, four simultaneous workshop sessions were held. The central concern was to develop ideas for ways to involve the Canadian public in building solidarity with the people of Colombia. The workshop documented here took up *The Plight of Colombia's Trade Unions*.

Ken Luckhardt opened by observing that 84% of all trade unionists killed in the world are Colombian, "killed in their struggle against neoliberal policies."

Sandra Cordero, a labour activist in Colombia's telecommunication sector, began with a personal reflection on her exile in Toronto. The daily fear she felt for her children's lives pushed her to take the difficult decision to leave her home and people; however, she has not left behind her struggles. In Canada she has taken the opportunity to denounce the barbarities in her home country and to help build

solidarity between Canadians and Colombians. She exemplified the fact that the role of a mother need not be an impediment to being a social activist. She noted that women have the opportunity to educate, build, and organize a better world, and that one must educate one's children about the world's reality and encourage them to become politically literate. To Canadians more broadly, her opening message was: "Do not waste the opportunity to defend your social services such as water, health, education, recreation, etc., since the Dirty War has not yet arrived here."

Cordero turned to the topic of Colombia by reviewing President Uribe's policies that are part of a plan ironically named "Democratic Security." Uribe has begun to implement IMF-sponsored economic reforms that require reducing salaries and social programs, increasing deregulation, and selling off important resource sectors to multinational corporations. The national telephone utility, Telecom, has already been privatized. The telecommunication union in Bogotá is now struggling to prevent the company from being sold out to international capital. This struggle occurs in two ways—through the justice system and on the streets. So far, the unions have managed to halt 14 privatization projects over the last 15 years. However, union members are under the constant threat of being laid off, jailed, or "disappeared."

Cordero explained the reasoning behind the union's opposition to privatization by examining the effects of Telecom privatization on telephone workers and the public. Prior to privatization, Telecom offered services at very affordable prices. That changed once the utility was turned over to private ownership. A 300% increase in rates took place by 2002, depriving

the poorest people of access to service. Some 10,000 employees lost their jobs. Moreover, the company had previously provided services to remote communities and used to donate money to help marginalized children. The new foreign investors, however, are not interested in providing social services, nor are they interested in the well-being of the public. According to Cordero, it is likely that the company will call some workers back to work, but without benefits or collective bargaining protection.

Rangel Ramos from the public sector union in Medellín began with some disturbing statistics. Three million of Colombia's 44 million people are internally displaced. Every 20 minutes someone in Colombia is killed. Last year alone 172 unionists were killed in Colombia and 80 went into exile to save their lives. Every four days a trade unionist is killed. The Colombian government is silent about these atrocities.

Ramos outlined the connection between Colombia's experience with neoliberalism and the plight of trade unionists. The official neoliberal agenda was imposed on Colombia in 1991 when the World Bank and IMF began promoting the privatization of major state assets and other liberalization policies. Ramos shared his view that current violations of economic, political, cultural, and basic human rights are required to facilitate the advancement of neoliberalism. He expressed his concern for the future of the labour movement in his country, considering the massive assault against leaders and organizers. Upon closing, Ramos aimed a criticism at Colombia's ambassador to Canada, Fanny Kertzman, for her involvement in a major corruption scandal in her home country.

At this point the workshop was opened to questions from the audience.

To a question about raising awareness among the public, so that people other than unionists or members of organizations join the struggle against neoliberalism, one of the speakers responded with the example of teacher unionists who educate students and families about their activities. In terms of building ties between different working sectors within Colombia, Cordero shared her experience with union members from the telecommunication sector, who went on protests and fought in other ways to prove the innocence of 30 unjustly detained oil-sector workers.

A participant asked a question about the percentage of workers in Colombia who are unionized and the rights of unions. Ramos responded firstly by listing the three main workers' federations in Colombia: CTC (Confederación de Trabajadores Colombianos), which counts on 51,048 members; CGTD (Central General de Trabajadores Democrática), with 120,852 members; and CUT, with 545,989 members. Thirty to forty percent of Colombian workers have guarantees and security. To the surprise of many, Ramos stated that unionized workers in certain sectors of the Colombian economy receive benefits that compare favourably with those of their counterparts in Canada. However, unionized workers constitute the minority: Cordero reported that in 1993 10% of the Colombian population was unionized. By 2003 this number had declined to 6%. As well, the unemployment situation is bleak. Even counting people involved in the informal sector, such as street vendors and prostitutes, there are still 3.5 million unemployed Colombians. Moreover, although street vendors are counted as employed in official statistics, the authorities often

jail them and confiscate their merchandise.

One participant asked whether a countrywide general strike has been attempted. Cordero stated that workers are careful not to make themselves vulnerable to penalties. Ramos took up another interesting matter—the so-called government protection of unionists. The Ministry of Interior has provided some of them with cell phones, armed vehicles, and bullet-proof vests. When union leaders are killed despite the “protective measures,” the government is relieved of responsibility because it appears to have “done what it can” in the eyes of the international community.

Panel moderator Ken Luckhardt put the question on the table of how the general public can best support the Colombian labour movement. Ramos suggested that, firstly, unions in Canada can develop a better monitoring system which would demand: 1) stop the genocide against unionized workers in Colombia; 2) respect and protect the rights of workers; 3) put an end to impunity and bring justice to the victims of human rights violations. Secondly, information sessions can be held in all union locals to educate members. Thirdly, they can continue to provide refugee sponsorship to union leaders from Colombia whose lives are under threat. Lastly, unions can write to the International Labour Organization, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, and the Canadian government to express their concern about the rights and safety of their fellow workers in Colombia.

Cordero implored Canadians to learn from the Colombian experience, to respond to privatization initiatives and not miss their opportunity to protect the public interest.

The subject of Canadian businesses involved in Colombia, such as Telecom as well as oil and mining companies, was raised. As Luckhardt pointed out, large mining enterprises from Canada displace peasants and force small Colombian mining companies out of business; on the other hand, coal industries in Newfoundland have been eliminated because coal is now supplied from Colombia. Ramos noted that the server that hosts the website of the umbrella organization for Colombian paramilitaries is located in Quebec. American companies also are significantly involved in Colombia. For example, Colombian unionists openly accuse Coca-Cola of hiring paramilitary squads to kill their leaders, and have called for an international boycott of Coca-Cola products. In this context, Ramos stressed once again the importance of cooperation between the working majority in Canada and Colombia.

One workshop participant asked: “How effective is letter writing and how much weight does Canada’s position on Colombia have on an international level?” Ramos asserted that the Colombian government cares about its image before the international community. Price offered an example of the importance of international pressure to the protection of human rights: Not long ago, members of the Embera Katio indigenous group were kidnapped by paramilitaries. Letter writing from Canada pressured the Colombian government and it eventually helped to free those hostages. Price stated that, in her experience with the Amnesty International Urgent Action Network, urgent action letter campaigns have a positive impact in about a third of the cases.

CLOSING PLENARY

The conference concluded with a plenary panel discussion in which workshop participants shared with the larger group the main content of their respective workshop discussions.

Asad Ismi, whose workshop “Canadian Businesses with Investments in Colombia (Are their hands clean?)” had examined the processes by which companies benefit from human rights violations and war, pointed out the need to correct distorted and false representations of Colombia. His group concluded that it is crucial to build links between the North and the South, despite the attempts of corporations and many media to inhibit such efforts.

Gloria Herney, who played a role in the workshop titled “The Role of Unarmed Accompaniment in Protecting Colombia’s Civil Society Leaders,” noted that the situation in Colombia is deteriorating and highlighted the serious need to strengthen grassroots organizations in Colombia that are trying to find a non-military solution to the crisis. She pointed to the need to utilize the knowledge of Colombians who live here in exile to establish networks and links for support between organizations in Colombia and Canada.

Sandra Cordero, who led the workshop “The Plight of Colombia’s Trade Union Activists” reported on above, restated what she believed to be a commonality of experiences shared by Canadians and Colombians. The major socio-economic trends affecting Canada, Colombia, and the rest of the world stem from the same value system and set of power relations, although their expressions in each country may be unique. Hence, international solidarity is crucial. Canadians can learn from the Colombian experience with neoliberal policies, such as privatization, and unite in the

struggle against the reigning world order and its orthodoxies, as well as the violence and exclusion they entail.

Manuel Rozental, who had participated in the workshop "Plight of Colombian Trade Unions," emphasized that the only way to maintain united international solidarity is to show that each one of us is aware of the links between the issues in Colombia and the rest of the world. Rather than merely responding to a particular community's needs, our actions need to be guided by a vision that recognizes the global and structural nature of problems such as poverty and human rights violations. He noted further that the goal of the "propaganda machine" is to prevent us from developing this awareness. Contrary to the way Colombia is portrayed, "The majority of Colombians are not drug dealers, guerrillas, or pop celebrities like Shakira." These categories of people make up at most one million, while the experiences of the other 43 million are rendered invisible.

Following these initial presentations, the conference was opened to questions and comments from the floor. One participant posed the question: "If each panellist could suggest one thing that can be done by people who attended the conference, what would it be?" Ismi suggested that a campaign could be launched against the biggest Canadian investor in Colombia. Herney proposed that those who have already learned about the human rights situation in Colombia set about to educate others. Cordero added that the knowledge people acquire must lead to a commitment. Rozental responded that the foremost task is to recognize the existence of the system of profit, greed, and exploitation. Price spoke of the importance of accompanying those in the front lines, since

this is one way in which immediate action can be taken. She also said that everyone can undertake to inform the federal government of our awareness and concerns. Indeed, in the course of the discussion a declaration was produced regarding the human rights violations and the plight of union leaders; many signed on. Other recommendations were to join the international boycott of Coca-Cola and to air Price's film, "The Hidden Story," on national television.

Another example of a useful solidarity action was provided during an early break in the conference proceedings. A member of the Colombian Embera Katio indigenous group spoke about the infamous case of the highly respected indigenous leader Kimy Pernía Domicó, and a related letter writing campaign was promoted.

In November 1999, Kimy denounced the devastating impact of the Urrá I hydroelectric dam on his people - the Embera Katio. Canada's Export Development Corporation has contributed \$25 million to help finance this dam. Since its construction, the fish stocks in local waters have been radically depleted, leading to malnutrition among the Embera Katio. Moreover, the dam's reservoir has flooded their homes, land, crops, and sacred sites. The associated increase in the mosquito population has led to an epidemic of dengue and malaria. In April 2001, Kimy gave a keynote address on Indigenous Rights at the Alternative Peoples Summit, during the Free Trade Summit of the Americas in Quebec City. On June 2, 2001, three men (believed to be paramilitary members) abducted him at gunpoint in the northern Colombian town of Tierralta. Two years later, there has still been no progress in locating Kimy or in bringing the perpetrators of this crime to justice.

Copies of a draft letter addressed to the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, demanding that Canada make a statement to the Colombian government regarding Kimy's case, were distributed and those who agreed with its content were encouraged to sign and send it.

The conference concluded with the reading of a poem by Uruguayan writer Mario Benedetti on the topic of human rights (*Hombre preso que mira a su hijo - Man in Prison Looking at His Son*; it can be found in the original Spanish here: <http://www.libreriahispana.com/benedetti/trece.html>).



APPENDIX: Colombian union leaders killed each year from 1991 to June 2003

1991	109
1992	148
1993	216
1994	113
1995	181
1996	284
1997	186
1998	106
1999	79
2000	135
2001	N/A
2002	172
2003 (to June)	34
Total	1763

Data provided by Sandra Cordero and Rangel Ramos.



About the speakers:

Sandra Cordero was President of a telecommunications local union in Bogota, Colombia. She was leading a campaign against the privatization of the telephone company in which she worked when she was forced to flee the threat of death squads in June of 2001. She came to Toronto with her family as refugees, and has received support from the labour movement in Canada.

Bill Fairbairn has monitored human rights in Colombia for more than a decade. Bill was formerly Executive Direc-

tor and South America Programme Coordinator for the Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights, and now is a Researcher /Policy Advocate on human rights in Latin America with KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives.

Gloria Herney Galindez is a Colombian lawyer and human rights activist. She has been a member of ASFADDES (the Association of Relatives of the Detained

Disappeared, in Colombia) since 1989 and has served as the group's president since 1998. Her work has been inspired by the search for her own "disappeared" relative and is dedicated to assisting families throughout Colombia. In 1999 she was awarded the Lettelier-Moffit Human Rights Prize in Washington, D.C. She has presented cases to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and works closely with other human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and the Centre for Justice and International Law. Gloria fled Colombia to Canada in 2002, after receiving numerous death threats.

Asad Ismi is a writer on international politics specializing in U.S. policy towards the Third World and the role of Canadian corporations there. He is the author of 85 articles, five reports and a book. His book on U.S. policy towards Vietnam is used as a text in U.S. universities. He is winner of a 2003 Project Censored Award for his article "The Ravaging of Africa." Asad holds a Ph.D. in War Studies from the University of London and taught for two years in Vietnam. A regular guest on community radio stations across Canada and the U.S., he hosted "Rights Radio" at the University of Toronto station CIUT during 1998-99. He has appeared several times on CBC TV's "Counterspin".

Ken Luckhardt resides in Toronto and is a National Representative for the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW-Canada). He currently works in the CAW International Department, which in turn houses the CAW Social Justice Fund (SJF). The SJF is a registered labour NGO that supports human and labour rights, development, gender and humanitarian projects throughout the South with a special em-

phasis on Central and South America and Southern Africa. Ken has concentrated on such struggles as trade union rights in Colombia, Guatemala and El Salvador and national independence rights in East Timor in recent years. He also represents the CAW on the Ethical Trade Action Group (ETAG) which focuses on anti-sweatshop and labour rights campaigns in the global garment industry. Ken is a political anthropologist and has taught at the University of Alberta and Ryerson University.

Kathy Price currently coordinates the Urgent Action network of Amnesty International Canada. Her career began in journalism at CBC-TV current affairs; in 1993, she joined the Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America (ICCHRLA). Fluent in Spanish, Kathy has traveled extensively in Mexico, Central and South America, taking part in numerous human rights fact-finding delegations. Kathy has also produced critically-acclaimed videos about post-war Central America (*Peace, What Peace?*), Colombia's dirty war (*The Hidden Story*), the impact of a Canadian-financed hydroelectric dam on Embera Katio indigenous communities in northern Colombia (*Our River, Our Life*), and, most recently, crisis and resistance in Argentina (*Basta: Building a New Argentina*).

Rangel Ramos, vice-president of the agri-food workers' union (SINTRAINAGRO), was still the target of repeated threats when he returned from exile in 1999. He had had to flee the country as a result of constant persecution but had just returned to Colombia, partly in order to give evidence during the ILO direct contacts mission.

Dr. Manuel Rozental is a surgeon who now lives and practices medicine in Canada. He was forced to flee his native Colombia after receiving numerous death threats linked to his advocacy work on behalf of children and families

there. He is now a leading spokesperson for the Canada-Colombia Solidarity Campaign, a group that works on behalf of peasant farmers, human rights and environmental activists in Colombia.

Related CERLAC publications:

[Fuelling War: The Impact of Canadian Oil Investment on the Conflict in Colombia.](#)

Working paper by Scott Pearce. November 2002.

<http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/ABSTRACTS.htm#Pearce>

[Colombia: Internal Displacement & Humanitarian Crisis.](#)

Lecture by Amanda Romero-Medina. July 2002.

<http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/ABSTRACTS.htm#Romero-Medina>

Violence & Peace-building in Colombia. Conference report prepared by Sabine Neidhardt and Sheila Simpkins. January 2002.

<http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/ABSTRACTS.htm#Violence&Peacebuilding>

[Colombia in Conflict, Venezuela in Crisis.](#)

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