

Voices of the Victims: Their Proposals for Peace with Justice in Colombia

By Alison P. Bond

On October 19, 2006, CERLAC and KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives hosted speakers from the *Movement of Victims of Human Rights Abuses in Colombia*. Along with a youth spokesperson, Lilia Solano Ramirez, a human rights defender and founder of the movement, discussed the controversial paramilitary “demobilization” process in Colombia. The movement’s goal is to give voice to the victims of human rights abuses in Colombia that have been marginalized from the current “peace” process.

The presenters described a highly questionable demobilization process that has placed the future of Colombia’s democracy in question. Ms. Solano suggested that Colombia should not be regarded as a democracy, but rather as a civilian dictatorship because of the rampant violence wrought by army-backed paramilitary groups.

Colombian human rights groups, she noted, have documented the extensive links between members of the State security forces (including the army and police) in “dirty war” operations that target sectors and individuals that are seen as a disturbance or threat to government control. Paramilitaries continue to exercise political, economic and social control in Colombia, and the current “demobilization” process fails to expose and dismantle the

extensive support network that has allowed paramilitarism to flourish.

Solano cited the so-called “Justice and Peace Law” of 2005 as an example of the flawed demobilization process in Colombia. She noted that this law falls far short of international standards. It gives paramilitaries lenient sentences in exchange for “demobilizing,” with no requirement that they confess their crimes or return their ill-gotten wealth. Solano argued that such initiatives perpetuate the culture of impunity that exists in the country while leaving millions of Colombians who have been forcibly displaced or who have been victims of other serious abuses without an adequate legal framework to defend their rights.

Ms. Solano also spoke of the government-created Reparation Commission. While the stated goals of the Reparation Commission are truth, justice and reparation, she argued that these objectives have no chance of being achieved in the current context. For truth to be discovered, Solano asserted that the paramilitaries must confess to the crimes that they have committed. Without truth, justice cannot be realized and in terms of reparation, the commission has already announced that due to budget constraints land taken by paramilitaries from three million displaced Colombian citizens cannot be returned.

The violence that threatens Colombia’s citizens was evident in the youth spokesperson’s (TYS) personal experiences with paramilitary groups and the police. TYS spoke about his family having been forcibly displaced on three occasions because of death threats from paramilitary groups while, as a Colombian youth, he has been particularly vulnerable to being recruited by paramilitaries. In many parts of the country, youth are coercively recruited by the paramilitaries and are often forced to choose between living a life characterized by fighting and violence or being a target of the paramilitaries themselves.

TYS addressed the difficulty of resisting the paramilitaries when he spoke of a letter that he and his peers wrote in response to an article in a Colombian national newspaper. The newspaper article referred to the constant robberies in his neighbourhood (“Cazuca,” a marginalized neighbourhood in the south side of Bogotá) and reinforced popular perceptions concerning the need to control criminally inclined youth.

Fearing that this article would provide justification for a new wave of “social cleansing” type killings in the neighbourhood, TYS and several friends wrote a letter to the office of the Defensor del Pueblo, the government Ombudsman. However, the letter was provided to

the police and to the military. As a result of writing a letter that challenged the paramilitaries, only two of the sixteen youth are alive today, TYS and his brother.

Of the fourteen Colombian youth that were ultimately murdered by paramilitaries, TYS witnessed four of his friends being shot, highlighting the impunity within which paramilitaries operate. The shootings occurred at the same time as a public hearing was being held to discuss the persistent violence in Cauca and Ciudad Bolívar – two marginalized communities in the south end of Bogotá. When TYS and his father brought the shootings to police attention, the police asked why the shootings were being reported if the victims were already dead, and later threatened his father and accused him of shooting the victims.

The personal experience of TYS with Colombian paramilitaries led to several questions about the stance of the Canadian government towards the demobilization process. Ms. Solano suggested that the Canadian government and the international community, more generally, have been relatively silent concerning the flaws in the demobilization process, tolerating the “democratic security” approach taken by the Colombian government.

Furthermore, Ms. Solano emphasized that the response of the Canadian government to Colombia’s weak demobilization process must be understood by examining changing discourses regarding its support of peace processes that are in line with international human rights rhetoric.

Solano asserted that more recently the Canadian government has shifted away from its earlier position- that it would only support

those processes or missions that upheld standards of international human rights. In the context of the Colombian peace process, the Canadian government complacently accepts the current peace process, responding that it is better than ignoring these issues entirely. Ms. Solano maintained that the Canadian government is able to use its reputation as a peacekeeping nation to conceal its indifference to the flaws of the Colombian peace process.

The inability of the Colombian government and the international community to represent the interests of the displaced means that the initiative to ensure a just peace process demands alternative avenues to ensure that victims’ voices are represented. During the question and answer period, Ms. Solano suggested that exploratory research into the paramilitary groups and the lack of accountability in the Colombian state could place pressure on media outlets to expose these issues to the public. She also emphasized the role of the academic community to researching a variety of policy options that could help to alleviate the current crisis in Colombia. A democratic demobilization process, she argued, requires that economic interests are subordinate to the broader social struggle and that this process does not marginalize the voices of the victims.



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