

Why the Rush for Peace in Colombia?

The case of Guatemala teaches us that in Colombia, international monitoring organizations' "search for peace" is closely tied to economic interests.

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The announcement from a smiling Juan Pablo Corlazzoli, director of the Colombian Office of the United Nations' High Commission for Human Rights, that Colombia "passes the test [in regards to human rights] y passes it with flying colors"¹ is worrisome. Normally a headache for Colombia – who in years past has been criticized by the international body for human rights violations – the announcement leads one to believe that the government, with the complicity of international observation organizations, is trying to impose on the Colombian people an illusion of tranquility and peace. Everything indicates that Uribe's government and its allies are creating the situation necessary to rush through a peace agreement with the insurgency. A forced peace accord would only represent economic interests and not the people's desire to correct the political, economic and social conditions that give rise to inconformity.

The Colombian case has certain similarities with the history of Guatemala and deserves an analysis, in order to understand where Colombia is headed. The peace accords, signed in December 1996 between the Guatemalan government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity –URNG, was seen as the end of more than 40 years of bloody war that caused thousands of deaths and disappearances. The URNG was far from taking power and the Guatemalan army was renowned as the most brutal in Latin America. Due to the criticisms and "neutral" intervention of the UN Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA, for whom the very same Juan Pablo Corlazzoli was the peace accord advisor), the civilian government had to portray itself as serious in the "search for peace". Accordingly, under the government of Arzo Irigoyen (who signed the peace accords), 13 out of 23 army generals accused of **serious** human rights violations (what violation *isn't* serious?) were dismissed²; the government ceased offensive actions against an already decimated insurgency at the beginning of 1996; in September of the same year, the Civilian Self-defense Patrols – PAC, representing some 500,000 material and intellectual authors of massacres across the country, were "dismantled" (and would later be renamed "Emergency, Development and Peace Committees")³; and the United Nations announced

¹ <http://www.cmi.com.co/Contenido/Noticia.asp?nota=6414>.

² http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/latin_america/december96/guatemala_12-30.html

³ During the government of Ríos Montt, the PAC – formally known as "Voluntary Civil Defense Committees" were formed by governmental decree 19-86, under the "Doctrine of National Security":

that reports of human rights violations had diminished⁴, although massacres were not a thing of the past⁵. The international “referees” gave their blessing and the peace accords were signed in 1996.

Ten year after the “end” of the conflict, there is a great amount of information collected about the continuation of violence; and not just arbitrary violence, but one with clear objectives – the suppression of civil society:

*“Although political violence went down as the guerrilla and government talked, the criminal violence continued. These human rights violations have been perpetrated mostly by members or ex-members of the state security forces. Journalists, human rights activists, political activists, and union and campesino organization representatives were kidnapped, threatened with death, and tortured, on many occasions by members of the security forces or their civilian allies who acted with total impunity.”*⁶

The PAC (Voluntary Civil Defense Committees) – presently some 350,000 people – apart from being a political and military controlling force used against the left⁷ comprise an electoral force that the government depends on⁸. Contrary to what was stipulated in the Peace Accords, the number of army troops has increased, as well as military spending⁹. Poverty, hunger, racism and the lack of basic services continues affecting the populace; according to the UN Development Program –UNDP, which Corlazzoli headed after the accords, Guatemala was among the four most unequal countries in the world in 2005¹⁰. The majority of cultivatable land continues in the hands of 5% of the populace¹¹, since the government’s agricultural policy favors large estates that produce export crops. At the close of the accords, it was estimated that Guatemala needed around U\$3 billion to bring about economic

<http://www.peacebrigades.org/guatemala/cap97-14e.html>.

4 <http://www.cidh.oas.org/annualrep/97span/cap.5b.htm>

5 In 1995, “the Guatemalan army murders 11 campesinos in the <<Aurora 8 de octubre>> community in order to frustrate the return of refugees exiled in Mexico. The UN representative accused the army of premeditated murder. The defense minister steps down and the commander of the Coban military zone is fired.”

<http://www.servicioskoinonia.org/martiologio/ficha.php?codigo=517> . “In 1997... 134 extrajudicial assassinations, 209 abuses of authority, 77 death threats and 11 violations of free speech were reported.”

<http://www.bordercrossing.at/file/GuatemalanPostl.pdf>.

6 <http://www.fuhem.es/portal/areas/paz/observatorio/indicadores/paises/guatemala.htm>

7 In a report by the international accompaniment organization, Peace Brigades International (PBI), it was observed that the paramilitary character of the PAC continued despite the demobilization: “...the Mayan Peoples of Guatemala Union (UPMAG) denounced the reorganization of the Civilian Self-Defense Patrols and the army’s presence in several communities of the interior of the country... In the same month [sep 1997], local and regional human rights committees of different communities in Chichicastenango, Quiché, accused ex-members of the PAC, together with army soldiers, of harassing the population. The same groups reported that the militarization of their communities still continues with the PAC, who now have changed their name, identifying themselves as “Emergency, Development and Peace Committees”, are armed and intimidate the populace with unexplained gunshots.” <http://www.peacebrigades.org/guatemala/cap97-14e.html>.

8 “Today the PAC have converted in a device that according to conservative estimates comprises some 350,000 people and has been used for electoral purposes in several opportunities: in a plebiscite to reject the reforms that were expressed in the Constitution – the essence of the peace accords – and in the previous presidential elections. Today the government has legitimized their action by converting them [the PAC] into the vehicle used to negotiate indemnity for the effects caused to them of internal conflict. In other words, with the help of the army, the government has institutionalized pork-barrel politics and lucrative mediation for electoral ends.” *Militarización, crimen y poder invisible en Guatemala: el retorno del centauro*, Carlos Figueroa Ibarra. http://www.monografias.com/trabajos901/guatemala-militares-poder-democracia-dictadura/guatemala-militares-poder-democracia-dictadura.shtml#_Toc134441745. See also the UNwire from Nov 12, 2002 entitled “UNDP supports plans for reparations to war victims”:

<http://www.preventgenocide.org/americas/guatemala/>.

9 Ibid.

10 http://albedrio.blogspot.com/2005_09_01_archive.html.

11 “Guatemala: Autoritarismo e interculturalidad (VI)”, Mario Roberto Morales.

http://www.lainsignia.org/2004/junio/dial_004.htm.

restructuring and carry out big economic projects¹². The management of the economy and the conditions for its growth (or decline) passed cleanly from the State to the multinationals, “cooperation” agencies and other financial entities, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Currently, the World Bank has been denounced for a US\$45 million loan to the Canadian gold-mining company, Glamis Gold, Ltd., where the bank is accused of having contributed to the human rights violations of the surrounding population¹³.

“While civil society struggles to rebuild itself and foster the ability of the people to exercise self-governance, international financing institutions (World Bank, Inter American Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund) have pushed through programs and legislation that weaken Guatemalan citizens’ ability to exercise control over their own nation, its resources, and basic social services such as education, healthcare and energy. These institutions have promoted the privatization of basic services to transnational corporations, the concession of natural resources to multinationals with little or no benefit to the population or control of environmental damages, free trade policies that undermine small producers and destroy local economies and the dedication of State resources to creation of infrastructure needed by corporations rather than investing in promoting local markets, social services, better conditions for small producers, and guaranteeing fundamental human rights.”¹⁴

In the Guatemalan “post-war” era, European cooperation agencies continue to profit from the juicy business of “conflict resolution” projects¹⁵, focusing heavily on the *Mara* gangs, groups of youths who use violence to express their discontent with a society that doesn’t guarantee their basic necessities. Guatemala has passed from open war to neo-liberal war – much more subtle than but just as deadly as the first. As the causes of the conflict were not integrally dealt with, one can deduce that Guatemala will continue in a violent cycle, while the country and its people are exploited in the name of capitalism, and naturally, with the complicity of the international organizations that rushed the “peace” accords.

Colombia seems to be headed in the same direction. We are already seeing the machine in action. The war in the countryside and the cities continues the same – if it hasn’t intensified – during the first four years of the Uribe government. Although the mass media repeats the central government’s information that the homicide rate has fallen (17,206 violent deaths in 2006, merely a sad reduction of 500 from the previous year¹⁶), the reality is very different. Could it be that Juan Pablo Corlazzoli has forgotten that Colombia continues to be the most dangerous country for unionists, according to the UN High Commission on Refugees¹⁷? Or did he forget about Jamundí, when the army, at the service of drug traffickers, killed 10 anti-narcotics police? And Arauca: what does he think about the arbitrary and massive detentions that occur so often? Did he forget about the ESMAD (Colombia’s riot police) killing indigenous people protesting the Free Trade Agreement, or students asking for better levels of education? It’s possible that he forgot that there is an investigation underway against members of the army who killed campesinos in Antioquia and presented them as guerrilla fighters. In the Nordeste Antioqueño, soldiers of the 14th Brigade killed the campesino Luís Sigifredo Castaño Patiño on August 7th, 2005, and to date, there has been no justice. This year, and in the same area, the same Brigade killed the campesinos Pablo Emilio Agudelo Sánchez (on September 4th) and

12 http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/latin_america/december96/guatemala_12-30.html

13 <http://www.minesandcommunities.org/Action/press718.htm>. For information about Canadian gold mining companies in Colombia, see <http://www.colombiajournal.org/colombia247.htm>.

14 <http://www.preventgenocide.org/americas/guatemala/>.

15 “Latin America policies of the European NGOs: Recent trends and perspectives,” Kees Biekart. Institute of Social Studies, The Hague. April 2005. p.11 http://www.icco.nl/documents/pdf/Eur_NGOs_in_LA_final_doc_2_juni.pdf.

16 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_6226000/6226647.stm.

17 <http://www.acnur.org/pais/index.php?accion=pag&id=5170&iso2=CO>.

Guillermo León Benítez (on November 25th)¹⁸. And the “para-politics” (name given to the scandals caused by revelations of links between the political class and the paramilitaries), which is not a thing of the past, but still continues to exercise its power in the state structure, guaranteeing impunity. The UN has forgotten all of this in its rush to create “peace”. It is a dangerous institutional amnesia, given that forgetting¹⁹ opens the path to the continuation of injustice, and thus, the continuation of violence. The UN and other monitoring organizations who take this path are short sighted if they try to take advantage of government figures of a generalized reduction in violence. The fact that there are fewer denunciations – although it could represent a true drop in human rights violations – should be looked at with a critical eye. In Colombia, even though the paramilitary apparatus has been “dismantled”, human rights defenders live in a repressive atmosphere. Organizations that do observation on the ground and see the reality are subject to searches, set-ups, judicial processes and other methods designed to wear out opponents. According to Amnesty International:

"The official strategy against human rights campaigners seems to be three folded: government authorities publicly question their legitimacy, mount unfounded legal processes and fail to bring to justice those who commit the attacks, even when evidence is widely available."²⁰

The November 19th detention of Telesur journalist, Fredy Muñoz²¹, and the fact that Colombia stands out among the three most dangerous countries in Latin America for the practice of journalism²² shows that saying the truth is not permitted. In Colombia, a peace is being forged that runs parallel and against the reality lived by the people.



Corlazzoli (izq.) se reúne con Santos y Uribe (der.). www.hchr.org.co

It is **legitimate** and **necessary** to question the supposed “neutrality” of international observation organizations such as the UN. While they forget some things, they don’t forget others: the High Commissioner’s Office was quick to call the deaths of four campesinos at the hands of the FARC in Yarumal (Antioquia) on January 1st, 2007, a “war crime”²³. It is obvious that sectors of the international community, servile to the predominant theory of the struggle against terrorism, perversely

¹⁸ <http://www.peaceobservatory.org/index.php?id=4052>.

¹⁹ For more reflections about historical memory, read Father Javier Giraldo’s notes, that propose to use the people’s memory as an instrument for struggle. www.javiergiraldo.org.

²⁰ <http://news.amnesty.org/index/ENGAMR230382006>. See also Mary Turck’s article in Znet: <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=10973>.

²¹ http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=19803.

²² <http://www.ifj.org/default.asp?Index=4537&Language=ES>.

²³ http://www.eltiempo.com/conflicto/noticias/ARTICULO-WEB-NOTA_INTERIOR-3387389.html.

seek to accumulate political capital for the state. Furthermore, in September of 2006, when Corlazzoli had just been named to the current post, the daily *El Tiempo* published an article entitled “Will Colombia Beat the UN at Arm-Wrestling?” where it was reported that Colombia made the High Commission’s mandate be limited to lending “consultancy work” and less “observation”²⁴. Due to the current international context of the strengthening of states against terrorism (*before* the infamous September 11th, in a document written by the Colombian government in 2000, it was asked that the international community act “as observers”²⁵), Colombia has taken advantage and put its own conditions on the most important international monitoring organization. The international “neutral” observation has turned into an advisor on how to win the war, and it crosses the line.

And, like in Guatemala, rushed peace accords will create a political climate favorable to foreign capital investment in Colombia. Since Plan Colombia’s birth in 1999, the United States and the European Union have looked for the most effective way to take control of Colombia’s raw materials: one through a military way, and the other through a more “social” way. Although the budget approved for Plan Colombia by the US Congress in the middle of 2006 included a small increase in non-military support (in areas like “private sector development”, “trade capacity strengthening” and “economic policy reform”), the large majority of aid continue to be military²⁶ (analysis by the US-based Center for International Policy suggests that in 2008, there will be an increase in non-military aid to Colombia²⁷). While it has always been evident the connections between the military component of Plan Colombia and US economic interests (clear example: in 2003, US\$98 million were approved to protect the oil pipeline of the US company Occidental Petroleum²⁸), the European Union’s (EU) intentions are more hidden (but not ambiguous). Investigator Gearóid Ó Loingsigh has carried out extensive work about the silent intervention of the European Union (with its famed “Laboratory of Peace” experiments) in Colombia.

“Chris Patten announced the first Laboratory of Peace as a plan to construct peace from below, strengthen Colombia’s justice system and help the victims of the conflict, especially the internally displaced. Nevertheless, in the same communiqué by Patten, he says that the EU has economic interests in Colombia, since, according to him, Direct Foreign Investment accounted for some 880 million euros in 1999. But he also announced the big capital would only enter the country if there was stability. This comment is not trivial if we take into account that in the past few years, several state companies were sold off to multinational companies (privatized under Plan Colombia).”²⁹

He adds another more explicit comment made by Patten, the EU spokesman:

*“ ‘The EU institutions aren’t the only ones who believe in Colombia. European companies also believe in Colombia. The EU is the main source of foreign investment in this country, **which shows and increases our participation in the search for a settled agreement to the conflict** [bold face of author]. We want to do everything we can to foment these economic ties...’³⁰”*

24 http://www.eltiempo.com/tempoimpreso/edicionimpresa/politica/2006-09-09/ARTICULO-WEB-NOTA_INTERIOR-3236684.html. The function of “consultancy” and “technical cooperation” was confirmed by the UN in December: <http://www.un.org/spanish/News/fullstorynews.asp?NewsID=8470>.

25 “Plan Colombia: plan para la paz, la prosperidad y el fortalecimiento del Estado”, Gobierno Colombiano. 2000. http://www.analitica.com/va/hispanica/colombia_paz/4527677.asp.

26 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/60656.pdf>. pag. 543-545.

27 <http://www.cipcol.org/archives/000388.htm#more>.

28 “Colombia: La Otra Guerra de EEUU”, Hendrik Vaneeckhaute. Rebelión <http://www.rebelion.org/plancolombia/030428hendrik.pdf>.

29 “Laboratorios de Paz de la Unión Europea: El Plan Colombia de Europa?” <http://www.revistapueblos.org/IMG/pdf/laboratorios.pdf>.

30 Ibid.

Lastly, Loingsigh explains that the politics of these Laboratories of Peace is not strictly European, but rather forms part of “an integral policy of “development and peace” put together and shared by the Colombian government, the UN Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank (WB) and the EU, among other actors.”³¹ Let’s remember the Juan Pablo Corlazzoli’s ties to the UNDP in Guatemala. It isn’t surprising, then, that the United States as well as the European Union (who directly or indirectly have voice and vote in the UN) have supported the badly named “peace process” with the paramilitaries (although the EU has been more cautious in giving support). Even more interesting is the fact that the Jesuit priest Francisco de Roux, director of the EU’s Magdalena Medio Laboratory of Peace, participated in the September 2006 meeting when the UN’s mandate was revised. It seems as though Colombia is destined to repeat Guatemala’s history, thanks to international “cooperation”.



Francisco de Roux (right), Corlazzoli (second from left) and others discuss the UN mandate on September 7th, 2006, in the city of Barrancabermeja. Photo by Ricardo Perez/El Tiempo.

The danger of the rush for peace is that the problems that gave birth to the Colombian internal conflict will not disappear, and the war will return – perhaps in other forms – later. For now, it will be difficult for the state – at least in terms of the FARC – to come to negotiation as long as the insurgency continues proving that it is capable of delivering hard military hits. If the state continues to cut off political options to the insurgency, it will only continue to attack, and there will be more useless draining of blood. As long as real and lasting solutions to the conflict are not looked for, there will never be a real peace. Unfortunately, the facts prove that we can’t count on monitoring institutions who proclaim to be “neutral”; they are already drawing out the course for Colombia that will lead to the suppression of true voices of peace and the exploitation of the Colombian people and its natural resources. We must continue creating a grassroots movement, informing the populace and creating alternatives from below.

31 Ibid.