

## Colombian and U.S. Activists Stand Together

by Margaret Knapke  
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It's a great joy to be in Colombia speaking with Colombians, with one voice, against U.S. domination and militarization. Our delegation has been deeply moved by the strength and spirit of so many Colombians struggling for a just peace in Colombia.

—Father Roy Bourgeois,

SOA Watch Action Delegation in Bogota and Melgar, Colombia, 1–7 August 2010

“A warm greeting from the heart that crosses borders,” Carolina said in welcome. Representing the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes, she was the first of 20 Colombian human-rights defenders to share testimony with ten U.S. activists from SOA Watch when they arrived in Colombia. Following Carolina, Colombian journalist Hollman Morris declared, “You have to know, very clearly, that your work in solidarity with Colombia has saved hundreds of lives.”



Father Roy Bourgeois, Maryknoll Ministry, founder of SOA Watch, brings Uncle Sam to life and welcomes visitors to "his house," the U.S. Embassy, on August 6, 2010, with the sign: “Colombia is my country.”

Photo by Tom Bottolene

For the past 20 years, SOA Watch has worked to close the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) – formerly called the U.S. Army School of the Americas (SOA) – where Latin American soldiers and police train in counterinsurgency tactics. Originally located in Panama, the SOA relocated to Ft. Benning, Georgia, in 1984. SOA Watch began in an office just outside of Ft. Benning in 1990, and now has its national office in Washington, D.C.

Of the 65,000 Latin Americans trained by SOA/WHINSEC since 1946, approximately 12,000 have been Colombian, including nearly all the current army commanders.

The SOA Watch delegation was in Colombia the first week of August to hear from human-rights defenders like Carolina and Hollman Morris – and to join with some of them in demonstrating against the U.S.-Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement. Of particular concern to both Colombian and U.S. activists: the leasing of seven Colombian military bases to the United States for 10 years.

Surnames of the human-rights defenders named in this piece have been withheld, unless they gave express permission to use them. Former Colombian president Álvaro Uribe broadly accused critics of his administration of being sympathetic to the guerrillas and thus “accomplices of terrorism.” Such cynical accusations have made defending human rights extra dangerous. Carolina has changed her residence three times due to threats and surveillance.

Similarly, when acclaimed journalist Hollman Morris was invited to study as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, Uribe’s accusations moved the U.S. State Department to deny Morris a student visa under the “terrorist activities” clause of the Patriot Act. An outcry from many human-rights and media organizations persuaded the State Department to reverse their decision in July.

Regarding the invective directed toward some Colombian journalists, Morris asked and answered this question: “What was our sin? To perform a kind of journalism that gives a voice to the victims; a kind of journalism that tells Colombia there are other Colombians, for example, the indigenous; a kind of journalism that says there are Colombians who want peace.”

#### Plan de Muerte

There is, of course, considerable back-story. The current Colombian conflict reaches back to the 1960s and has three sets of armed actors: the regular army, the paramilitaries, and the guerrillas. The Colombian Army is charged with protecting civilians and with fighting paramilitaries on the ideological right and so-called “narco-guerrillas” on the left. But in the more complicated reality: army brigades have provided logistical support for paramilitary massacres; the paramilitaries have inflicted at least 70% of civilian deaths, but all three sets of armed actors have targeted civilians; and all three sets of armed actors have been implicated in the drug trade.\*

In July of 2000, the Colombian Army had the worst human-rights record in the Western Hemisphere. Yet President Clinton enlisted them in implementing Plan Colombia, ostensibly to fight drug-trafficking. Heavy on indiscriminate fumigation and militarism, Plan Colombia became known to many as Plan de Muerte (Plan of Death). The policy intensified political violence, poisoned land and people, forcibly displaced millions, and failed to reduce drug production and trafficking significantly. Indeed, many Colombians see Plan de Muerte as a calculated war against the poor, against indigenous people and Afro-Colombians, and against organized labor and human-rights defenders.

During the Clinton and Bush administrations, the Colombian government received \$6 billion in U.S. aid, most of it military. While the congressional certification process for approving U.S. aid to Colombia has stalled military funding at times – acknowledging that arming human-rights offenders is indeed problematical – Congress has never effectively stopped the flow of dollars or the violence they purchase.

And now President Obama – who famously promised Latin American leaders at the Fifth Summit of the Americas that “The United States will be willing to acknowledge past errors where those errors have been made” – appears to have turned a blind eye to Plan de Muerte. And the U.S.-Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA), which was signed in October of 2009, could become his own human-rights fiasco.

But not just yet. On August 17, the Colombian Constitutional Court placed a hold on the DCA. The Court determined that then-President Uribe had sidestepped the Colombian Senate’s prerogative to allow or forbid the transit of foreign troops. Therefore the agreement must go to the Colombian legislature for approval or rejection.

Although in legal limbo, the DCA remains a great concern to Colombian human-rights defenders. Alarms should be sounding, too, for anyone expecting a more enlightened, rights-oriented foreign policy from the Obama Administration.



Luz Marina, one of the Mothers of Soacha, wants justice for her son, Fair Leonardo, who was murdered as a “false positive” in 2008. She said that U.S. military aid “comes with the pretext of fighting drugs and terrorists, but it really is being used to hurt our families.”

Photo by Tom Bottolene

What Would Leasing the Bases Mean?

The U.S. State Department claims that the DCA would not increase the U.S. military presence in the country over the next ten years, but simply “facilitate effective bilateral cooperation on security matters in Colombia....” But an earlier U.S. Air Force document explains that the Pentagon’s plan to upgrade Colombia’s Palanquero base (one of the seven military bases included in the DCA) “provides an opportunity for conducting full spectrum operations throughout South America...” And an improved Palanquero would help the United States “expand expeditionary warfare capability.”

Colombian activists recognize the destabilizing potential of the DCA. More than 150 organizations and individuals have joined a No Bases Coalition. One member, Álvaro Morales Sánchez of the Colombian Federation of Educators, stated that the leasing of the seven bases would constitute “a permanent gift to the United States. With these bases, the U.S. government seeks to strengthen its economic domination of Colombia and other countries in the region.”

Furthermore, human-rights defenders are adamant that an increased U.S. military presence would translate into increased abuses, especially near the military bases. Colombian activists familiar with the mass grave near the La Macarena military base see connections between U.S. military presence, human-rights abuses, and the extraction of gold, oil, and uranium by multinationals.

Irrespective of the DCA, the Obama Administration is continuing military aid to the Colombian Army. On September 15, the State Department certified that Colombia has made sufficient human-rights progress to warrant receiving that aid – despite ongoing impunity for the perpetrators of so many massacres. This latest certification is made all the more remarkable by a recent, harrowing report from the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the U.S. Office on Colombia, titled “Military Assistance and Human Rights: Colombia, U.S. Accountability, and Global Implications.” In that document, lead author John Lindsay-Poland and colleagues disclose that “many Colombian military units committed even more extrajudicial killings during and after the highest levels of U.S. assistance to those units.”

Colombian activists claim that “false positives” help explain how the receipt of military aid can stimulate increased extrajudicial killings. Under the efficiency-based Democratic Security model, the Colombian Army must be able to quantify successful kills of guerrillas, known as “positives.” When positives are faked – that is, civilians are killed and made to look like guerrillas, in order to justify U.S. aid or to earn promotions or extra leave – they are “false positives.” Human-rights defenders believe the mass grave at La Macarena could hold as many as 2000 false positives. (The Colombian government and United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights estimate about 450 bodies are buried there.)

The Mothers of Soacha are looking for justice for 17 sons who were killed as false positives in 2008. Some had been promised employment outside their poor urban community and were murdered when they left to work. Luz Marina is grieving her 26-year-old special-needs son. She said of U.S. military aid: “The money comes with

the pretext of fighting drugs and terrorists, but it really is being used to hurt our families.”

### Solidarity in Action

On August 3, the SOA Watch delegation surprised sentries at the Tolemaida military base, one of the seven the United States hopes to lease. Quickly positioning themselves in front of the main gate, the activists held a 12-foot banner demanding: “Fuera los Militares Norteamericanos de Colombia / U.S. Military Out of Colombia.” They refused orders to leave and remained visible to heavy traffic for hours.

The following day the activists returned to Tolemaida, this time accompanied by 75 Colombians representing the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes, the Commission for Peace and Justice, the Mothers of Soacha, and the National Union of Food Industry Workers (SINALTRAINAL). Together they raised a North-South cry for peace and justice in Colombia, and it reverberated throughout the Latin American media.

On August 6, a more theatrical action took place at the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá. Note that this action took place prior to the ruling of the Colombian Constitutional Court that placed a hold on the U.S.-Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement. As noted above, the Court asserted that the Colombian legislature (not the president) decides whether a foreign government is able to bring in their military. So at the Embassy, as at Tolemaida, the demonstrators were responding to the DCA as if it were a “done deal.”

SOA Watch founder Fr. Roy Bourgeois portrayed “Tio (Uncle) Sam.” Wearing a sign saying “Colombia es mi país / Colombia is my country,” he played the role of a counter-protester to the “banneristas,” who were once again denouncing the U.S.-Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement. Uncle Sam delighted in explaining to police, embassy personnel, and passersby that he likes the DCA because it makes Colombia, for all practical purposes, “the 51st state in the Union. Your gold is my gold; your oil is my oil.”

Whatever the outcome of the U.S.-Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement, Colombian human-rights defenders will continue working toward a just peace for all Colombians. As journalist Hollman Morris observed, “A commitment to the poor is a commitment to a better country.” These activists are asking for ongoing international solidarity and creative collaborations for peace, “from the heart that crosses borders.”

\* Editor's note: For more information, see "Colombia and Latin America Resources". Not all resources have been reviewed by the author and they do not necessarily reflect her opinion.

Margaret Knapke participated in this SOA Watch delegation to Colombia. She became involved in Latin America solidarity work in the early 1980s and has served time in federal prison for protesting the SOA/WHINSEC at Ft. Benning, GA -- as have most members of this delegation. Margaret practices integrative bodywork and has done trauma-reduction work in El Salvador and Colombia.

Tom Bottolene, another SOA Watch Prisoner of Conscience, took photos throughout the week. They are available, with text, online.

Wayne Wittman from St. Paul, Minnesota, Veterans for Peace-Chapter 27, was a member of the eight-person SOA Watch delegation to Colombia and serves on the SOA Watch Board.

Information about SOA Watch's yearly November vigil at Fort Benning online.