

## Peace in Colombia: Is it Near?

By Meredith Aby-Keirstead



*Former Colombian Senator Ms. Piedad Cordoba leads an April 2012 march for Marcha Patriótica, a mass movement demanding Colombian society open up and democratize. Photo: Kevin Neish/kevinneish.wordpress.com*

The WAMM Newsletter presents this information in an effort to report on the furthering of sincere peace negotiations in Colombia.

For more than 50 years, Colombia has suffered a civil war between the right-wing government's military and its off-the-books paramilitary forces and rebel armies, of which Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) is the largest. Its civil war has given Colombia the dubious distinction of having "the world's second largest population of internally displaced persons(1) and of leading the world in anti-union violence.(2)

The U.S. has played a consistent role by providing military aid and advisors in supporting the Colombian government in their 50-plus-year war. This is consistent with the history of U.S. interventions frequently being sold to the American public as part of the "war on drugs" or the "war against terrorism." But, despite U.S. efforts to support the government of Colombia, there is actually a hopeful peace dialogue occurring right now. After years of civil war in Colombia, many activists are hoping that 2016 will start a new chapter and bring peace.

### The Peace Process in Motion

In October 2012, the Colombian government and the FARC met in Norway and began negotiations for an end to the war. The negotiations then moved to Cuba the following month. More recently, in September 2015, the two sides set March 23rd of

this year as the deadline for reaching a peace agreement. While no agreement had been reached as of that date, international media and social movement leaders seem confident an agreement could be reached before mid-year.

Two groups have been working in the U.S. to promote call-in days to pressure the Obama Administration to play a more positive role in the Colombian peace talks: the Alliance for Global Justice and the National Committee to Free Ricardo Palmera (who went by the name "Simón Trinidad").

James Jordan from the Alliance for Global Justice leads solidarity work in the U.S. in solidarity with Colombian unions and political prisoners. Jordan explains the importance of the 2012 peace accord talks in Cuba:

More than anything, it's because it's what the majority of people in Colombia want. Everyone from the FARC to the Catholic Church had been calling for a peace process for years before the Colombian government finally agreed to come to the table. That they are there is because of two things: One is that neither side of this war could achieve a clear military victory. The other factor has been the huge mobilizations of popular movements for negotiations. Some significant concessions have been achieved that, if implemented, could return many displaced people to their homes, or at least give them some recompense for their losses. Most important is that space is being opened up for safe participation of Colombia's left in the political process. Of course, all these gains are at this point just promises and aspirations. Will they be implemented? That's the burning question, and U.S. solidarity activists have a role to play in changing U.S. policies that promote war and repression.

Unfortunately, despite President Obama's statements of support for the peace process, he is holding up the process by not releasing the FARC's lead negotiator (Ricardo Palmera) from a U.S. supermax prison. Jordan continues:

Right now we should all be calling for the release of Ricardo Palmera aka Simón Trinidad from the maximum security prison in Florence, Colorado. He is being held in solitary confinement on trumped-up charges. He is one of the FARC's most knowledgeable negotiators and the Colombian government, itself, has said they support his release so that he can be at the negotiating table. The obstacle is the United States government and, particularly, the White House.

Tom Burke of the National Committee to Free Ricardo Palmera concurs with Jordan on the importance of these negotiations:

The Colombian peace accords are important because they guarantee land reform, so the nearly 6 million rural people displaced by the U.S.-sponsored war can return to their farms and lives. The accords matter because they guarantee with UN backing that trade unionists, community organizers, and Leftist political candidates will not be murdered by the Colombian military or their death squads. The armed struggle will end and peaceful forms of struggle will replace it. We are going to see marches

of hundreds of thousands of workers and farmers for higher wages, democracy, and progressive reforms. The peace accords require huge reforms to the government and society. There will still be struggles over defining the peace.

During these final months of negotiations the international community has been watching to see if Colombia's human rights record would improve. Jordan goes on to say:

There are less labor leaders being killed--but that's because the movement has been so severely decimated, and union membership so low, that there just aren't that many people left to kill. Many unionists are being imprisoned for political reasons. And while the peace process has been going forward, assaults against human rights defenders, the political opposition and environmentalists have been going up. Just between February 27 and March 11 of this year, the Unión Patriótica political party reported that 29 leftist leaders had been killed. Forced displacements have also continued to rise. All this is in the context of an April 2nd march against the peace accords being called for by ex-president Álvaro Uribe, the "paramilitary in chief." The situation is so bad because the extreme right is trying its best to derail the peace process.

Despite these difficulties, Jordan believes the peace accords will be signed:

Both the FARC and the Colombian government negotiating teams want this to happen. I got to visit Havana in April as part of a delegation that met with the negotiating teams, and the people we met with all seemed sincere. There are serious differences, of course, however, the progress being made had everyone hopeful. Certainly the same oligarchs that support the process want a peace that enshrines injustice, domination and inequality. But they have had to make some real concessions. But right now, what I'm most concerned about is not what's happening in Havana, but in Colombia.

How U.S. Citizens Can Help the Peace Process

Burke, too, has his eyes on Colombia. He feels now is an important time for U.S. solidarity to defend the Colombian peace process:

We can show solidarity with the Marcha Patriótica, the new mass movement demanding Colombian society open up and democratize. We can support all the unions, groups, and political parties whose members are targeted by assassins by calling and protesting to the White House and State Department. There should not be one more death of an activist or organizer once the peace accord is signed, but that unfortunately has not been the history of Colombia.



*Jennie Eisert.*

Jennie Eisert, a Colombian American activist with the Anti-War Committee in Minneapolis, is going to Colombia to participate in an Alliance for Global Justice delegation in May. She explains the significance of this crossroads for Colombians:

The time is now to be in Colombia during this momentous event—the signing of the peace accords. I’m excited to be among the people during this exciting time. I’m concerned that President Uribe (the previous Colombian president) is organizing a protest against the signing of the accords. More and more assassinations have been ramping up. If more Americans, like myself, go and bear witness to what is happening and come back and speak out we can end U.S. military aid. We, here in the U.S., can pressure in certain areas for change, but the hardest work is for and by the Colombians who live in Colombia.

Eisert will return in June and plans to organize for local report backs so that Minnesotans can hear from her about the potential for peace in Colombia.



*"Masacre en Colombia," Fernando Botero, 2000*

Both the Alliance for Global Justice and the National Committee to Free Ricardo Palmera are planning to continue organizing call-in days to pressure President Obama to increase support for the peace process and, if the accords are finalized, to pressure the U.S. to ensure that there are free and fair elections and that the right to organize is protected. The next year will be a critical one for Colombia and the peace movement in the U.S. will need to be ready to take action to defend human rights like the right to organize and to run for office in the post-peace accords period.

Meredith Aby-Keirstead has led human rights delegations to Colombia. She is a member of Women Against Military Madness and the Anti-War Committee.

#### Endnotes

1. Human Rights Watch: [Colombia](#)
2. WOLA: [Advocacy for Human Rights in the Americas](#)