

WHY:

Background

Colombia: Colombia is a beautiful country rich in culture, beauty and resources. However, Colombia has been in a state of civil war for over four decades. Fought between various armed actors, Colombia's war has displaced over 3.8 million people making it home to the world's second largest population of internally displaced people, surpassed only by Sudan. Each year many are assassinated, kidnapped, threatened and displaced. A rural Colombian church member explains, "What you experience only in your nightmare is our daily reality."

Colombia is notorious for its human rights violations carried out by all the armed groups, including the government forces. The drug trade is a crucial part of Colombia's war; it finances the illegal armed groups—the guerillas and paramilitaries. The war is deeply rooted in an unequal economic system. The vast amount of wealth and resources are controlled by a few, thus excluding many Colombians from the formal and legal economy and leaving them in poverty. Government and AUC-paramilitary collusion includes suppressing local community (including church) organizing efforts, worker rights movements, labor union organizers and human rights defenders. The cycle of violence and economic injustice go hand-in-hand.¹

Churches are not exempt from the violence. According to a study on human rights violations against church leaders undertaken by MCC partner Justapaz, over 200 aggressions against church members occurred during 2006.

Colombia Facts:

- FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)—The largest and oldest guerilla group in Colombia with Marxist roots.
- ELN (National Liberation Army)—Second largest guerilla group in Colombia.
- AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia)—Paramilitary umbrella organization: the paramilitary commit illegal acts in the shadow of the State armed forces.
- Colombia is rich in oil, minerals and gems, however most of this wealth is controlled by an elite minority and large multinational companies from Canada, the United States and Europe.
- Colombia is the world's largest producer of cocaine. The Center for International Policy reported that a U.S. government survey showed that production level was higher in recent years compared to 2000, which is when the U.S. began Plan Colombia to curb drug trafficking.
- Colombia is home to the world's second largest population of internally displaced people with over 3.8 million, surpassed only by Sudan.
- More union and labor organizers are assassinated in Colombia than any other country worldwide.
- Some government and State security forces work in collusion and collaboration with the AUC-paramilitary.

US Policy and Victims:

Over the last six years, Congress has appropriated nearly five billion dollars for the Colombian government, largely in the form of a military aid package—Plan Colombia. This aid has done little to resolve Colombia's internal armed conflict and crisis of internal displacement. In fact, 80% of the currently displaced population has been displaced during the Plan Colombia era.² It has also failed to achieve the U.S. policy goal of decreasing Colombia's cultivation, processing and distribution of drugs by 50%. In fact, more coca is being grown now in Colombia than when Plan Colombia began, and cocaine remains readily available on U.S. streets.³ Moreover, Colombia's internal armed conflict still rages on, resulting in the second largest population of internally displaced persons in the world and countless human rights violations.

Despite media hype about increasing security in Colombia, during President Alvaro Uribe's first term in office, a total of 11,292 people were registered as disappeared or assassinated in non-combat situations—that is nearly 13 people per day.⁴ The Colombian Military's human rights record remains dismal: from 2002-2006 there was a 73% increase in extrajudicial executions with direct involvement of State security forces. Meanwhile, paramilitary groups – supposedly under a ceasefire agreement – assassinated or disappeared

an average of 1,060 persons each year (that is one person every 8 hours for four years) Until these abuses end and the government is willing to consider true and integral proposals for peace, we urge the U.S. Congress to stop pouring billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars into the Colombian military.

The Free trade agreement:

President Bush in a speech in December 2007 said, "This treaty will contribute to our fight against narco-traffic and global terrorism. This would be critical to reaffirm democracy, freedom, investment and prosperity for the Colombian people that I love very much." Colombia is seen as a strategic partner in the region in the fight against drug trafficking and terrorism.

However, Colombia's record on human rights and the rule of law is dismal. Colombia stands as the most dangerous country for union and labor organizers. According to the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), as of December 2007 thirty-eight union members were killed during the year with more than 2,500 unionists killed since 1991. Over 97 percent of these killings remain unsolved.

Furthermore, the conflict in Colombia is deeply rooted in an unequal economic system. The cycle of violence and economic injustice go hand-in-hand.

Canadian Policy and Victims:

Historically, Canada's foreign policy towards Colombia has been a relatively passive one. However, the current Canadian government is pushing a free trade agreement with Colombia that could potentially worsen conditions for poor Colombians and victims of the violence. As one partner clearly stated, "the free trade agreement is absolutely against the interests of the Colombian people".

Currently Colombia is home to the world's second largest population of internally displaced persons (IDPs), after Sudan. The United Nations has named Colombia the "worst humanitarian catastrophe in the Western Hemisphere" as over 3 million people have been made homeless refugees in their own country.

According to an MCC partner report on human rights violations of church leaders and members, "displaced persons testify that their lives become similar to that of a fugitive sought by the authorities. They are forced to flee constantly, moving from one place to another to avoid being found by those looking to kill them, and having members of the armed group that displaced them show up in the place they were displaced to. They speak of lists of names of persons sentenced to death, and of infiltration by armed groups of the government agencies where they have gone seeking help or protection...They live in fear, forced to remain virtually imprisoned in their homes, terrified by the sight of men on motorcycles or vehicles that pass by or stop near their residences."⁵

Approximately 30,000 – 40,000 Colombians apply for refugee status in Canada each year. Many of those are internally displaced persons seeking safety on foreign soil. Of those 30,000, fewer than 2,000 are accepted by the Canadian government on a yearly basis and many are sponsored by churches in Canada.

Although the Canadian government has demonstrated genuine concern for the humanitarian situation in Colombia, and has devoted significant amount money to organizations working with IDPs, there has been a conspicuous limitation in regards to analyzing the roots causes of displacement. In particular, there seems to be lack of political will to consider the causes of displacement from regions of the country where there are significant natural resource deposits and where Canadian business is or could potentially be, investing in the extraction of said resources.

The current Free Trade Agreement being negotiated between Colombia and Canada bases its legitimacy upon the premise that the current administration of President Alvaro Uribe has improved security in the country and has made significant headway in respect for human rights. Contrary to this affirmation, the Colombian Consulting organization for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES) found that the highest number in the last five years of internally displaced persons was recorded in 2007, at 305,996.

Since the inauguration of Alvaro Uribe as President in 2002 and the implementation of his “Democratic Security” policy, some 70% of the currently displaced population has been forced from its land, (CODHES, 2006). Not only do partners claim that a free trade agreement with Canada would worsen the situation of the IDP population, but they also question why Canada would negotiate an agreement with a government that has not taken responsibility for mass internal displacement and impunity for human rights violations.

Given that the majority of Canadian investment is in the extractive industry and the majority of human rights violations occur in areas of the country rich in natural resources, partners have expressed concern that Canadian corporations are not being held responsible for their complicity in displacement of communities and other human rights violations. As the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reports, since the 1980’s, Colombia’s vast natural resources have attracted multinational investment interests. Paramilitary, state and guerrilla armed forces have all capitalized on Colombia’s natural wealth in different ways, but always with the same result: victimizing the civilian population.

“While defending the interests of the state and the companies operating in these districts, the paramilitaries have committed the majority of the human rights violations reported in the past few years; they are notorious for extreme brutality, involving massacres, torture, kidnappings, extortion and massive displacements of civilians (CERAC, 3 November 2005). These violations have been committed mainly as part of an explicit strategy to separate the guerrillas from their perceived popular support base and gain control over land, natural resources and strategic roads. This largely explains the strong co-relation between internal displacement

and the presence of multinational companies in Colombia. The regions richest in natural resources are also the ones most prone to internal displacement.” (ADMC, 2007)

As a source within the foreign affairs department shared with The Star, (Allan Woods, July 12, 2007) in negotiations with Colombia, “Canada will insist on non-binding references to corporate social responsibility,” further adding, “It’s just basically to raise the visibility of it (corporate social responsibility).”

Currently, various foreign extractive companies are under investigation for employing paramilitary death squads in the protection of foreign business infrastructure, including the assassination of union leaders and death threats and forceful displacement of local communities to allow companies to freely explore resource deposits. Implementing references which are non-binding is not an adequate strategy to prevent serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, especially from a government which lauds itself as a world leader in respect for human rights and human security.

Many of the Colombian refugees in Canada are IDPs that have been forced from their lands because of foreign corporate interests, or because of fighting among the different armed groups vying for control of the natural resources the land might offer. The more emphasis that is placed on opening trade and the less that is placed on assuring humanitarian well being and human security, could create a humanitarian situation much worse than the current crisis, and many more thousands of displaced persons and refugees forced to seek asylum in countries like Canada.

Canada’s foreign policy towards Colombia has been a relatively passive one, historically. However, the current Canadian government is pushing a free trade agreement with Colombia that could potentially worsen conditions for poor Colombians and victims, given that the majority of Canadian investment is in the extractive industry and the majority of human rights violations occur in areas of the country rich in natural resources. In addition, the Colombian government has the worst human rights record in the hemisphere, and Colombian partners and churches are asking why Canada would prioritize economic interests of Canadian corporations above the well-being of the victims of the armed conflict.

1 Taken from Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office “Guide to U.S. Policy on Colombia”

2 Evaluation Report, #12, National Planning Department, Government of Colombia, www.dnp.gov.co/archivos/documentos/DEPP_Reportes_Evaluacion/Reportes_de_Evaluacion_N12.pdf

- 3 Centre for International Policy, "Plan Colombia 6 Years On";
<http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/0611jpr.pdf>
- 4 United States Office on Colombia, <http://www.usofficeoncolombia.com/Peace/>
- 5 "A Prophetic Call: Colombian churches document their Suffering and Hope" Vol. 2, August, 2007.