

SOLIDARIDAD

 **Witness for Peace**
Transforming People — Transforming Policy

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The Power of Nonviolent Resistance and Protective Accompaniment in Colombia

As day broke in the small town of Toribio, a voice on the loudspeaker warned the civilian population to flee. The FARC was preparing to attack the Colombian security forces' headquarters in the town center.

As people fled, homemade mortars began to rain down on the humble buildings and homes. Colombian troops returned fire. Civilians, as always, were caught in the crossfire of Colombia's

brutal war. One ten-year-old boy was killed.

More civilians would certainly have died during the ten hours of fighting if not for the heroic efforts of a group of nonviolent Indigenous Guards that marched into town and led civilians to safety.

But the Indigenous Guard itself has also come under attack. Members of the guard have been taken hostage, threatened and murdered. The Guard knows it needs international support and has looked to Witness for Peace for physical accompaniment and human rights advocacy.

Since 2000, Witness for Peace's Colombia-based International Team has provided solidarity and support from Urabá to Cali. The work follows in a proud tradition of nonviolence stemming from Witness for Peace's original accompaniment work in Nicaragua during the Contra War of the 1980s. And when it's paired with mobilizing our U.S.-based grassroots network, Witness for Peace holds Washington

accountable for foreign policies towards Colombia.

The Nasa people of southwestern Colombia took the world by surprise when they developed a pacifist army of 5,000 guards to protect their communities and other civilians in the midst of the western hemisphere's longest-fought internal war, subsidized since 2000 by U.S. military aid. Thanks to their work nonviolently protecting 305 communities and 93,000 hectares of territorial reserve, they were awarded Colombia's National Peace Prize.

Given Witness for Peace's mission of nonviolent opposition to the U.S. military influence in Colombia, the Indigenous Guard was a natural ally.

The Guard stands up to the guns of all armed groups with their unity and their *bastons*—their symbolic staffs of authority.

"Weapons represent death. The *baston* represents strength," said German Valencia, coordinator of the Indigenous Guard of the Nasa people's Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca (ACIN). "The difference between us and the armed actors is our level of organization. The strength we have in unity. We don't need the supposed 'protection' of the armed forces, not their arms, not even the

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German Valencia, coordinator of the Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca (ACIN).

PHOTO CREDIT: JEANINE LEGATO

Message From Sharon

I visited with Bob Bonthius, one of Witness for Peace's founders, a few weeks before he "became a shooting star," as his wife Fran Truitt refers to his passing. It was a brief but lively conversation. I thanked Bob for his vision, clearness of mission, and founders' wisdom in laying the groundwork for this organization, and for daring to be prophetic. With a huge smile, he responded, "Yes, we were bold in our actions against a U.S. policy of war, death and destruction in Nicaragua. And you must carry on that boldness against a system that continues to oppress." What a legacy and challenge Bob left us.

Legacy has been on my mind a lot lately. What will be the legacy of my actions? Of my government's actions? A few days ago, I attended a presentation of the book *Nicaragua: Surviving the Legacy of U.S. Policy*. The photographs in the book were taken by Paul Dix, who documented the devastating impact of U.S. foreign policy on the citizens of Nicaragua as a Witness for Peace staffer from 1985 to 1990. In 2002, he and Pam Fitzpatrick, Witness for Peace Northwest Regional Organizer during the 1980s, began returning to Nicaragua in search of the people that Paul had photographed. Their bilingual book focuses on 30 of those individuals. It includes photographs of each subject from both the 80s and the present, short

background information on each person, segments of their testimonies, and in five cases, color drawings made by these individuals as children, depicting their memories of the attacks they survived. For more information on the book please visit NicaraguaPhotoTestimony.org.

How will the legacy of our actions measure up to the legacy of our country's policies, that too often damage and destroy people's lives? Thanks to your continuing support, Witness for Peace takes bold actions to pressure for policies that will result in peace, justice and sustainable economies. By making peace work a part of your legacy, you bring us all closer to a just world.

In solidarity,



Sharon Hostetler
Executive Director



DELEGATIONS

Colombia

January 17-27, 2012

Waging Peace Instead of War

February 4-14, 2012

Women Leading the Way to Peace and Justice

Cuba

Feb 17-26, 2012

People to People Delegation-All Welcome!

June 3-13, 2012

People to People Delegation-All Welcome!

June 17-27, 2012

People to People Delegation-All Welcome!

Mexico

February 25-March 4, 2012

Migration Roots, Realities and Resistance: a Joint Delegation with the American Friends Service Committee- New Hampshire

Nicaragua

January 11-21, 2012

College Student Delegation: Free Trade and the Roots of Migration

For more information or inquiries regarding custom delegations please contact Ken Crowley at ken@witnessforpeace.org or (202) 423-3402.

Bob Bonthius: Presente, Presente, Presente!

Robert Harold Bonthius, peace activist, teacher, pastor, writer, community organizer and tree farmer, died Aug. 14, 2011, at home in Worthington, Ohio. One of the founders of Witness for Peace, Bob's journey began as a professor of religion at the College of Wooster in Ohio, where his faith led to activism. In 1959 he moved to a parish ministry which emphasized involving the church in the world around it. In 1964 he joined the black community of Hattiesburg, Missouri in its voter registration campaign. In 1966, Case Western Reserve University asked Bob to teach clergy of all faiths how to organize for social changes in their communities. The success of this pilot program encouraged him to form the Action Training Network of Ohio, which trained local, state and national groups to make systemic changes regarding racism, sexism, hunger, poverty, public education, domestic violence and the environment. In 1983, Bob and his wife Fran, along with others, founded Witness for Peace. For the next 13 years, Bob and Fran took leadership roles on the WFP Board of Directors as well as at the international level. Meanwhile Bob's tree farm became a place of rest and renewal for peace activists, friends, and family.

At the request of Bob's family, memorial gifts may be sent to Witness for Peace, 3628 12th St. NE Washington, DC 20017.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Grassroots Action

Witness for Peace New England just finished a whirlwind tour of colleges, universities and faith groups. The tour featured internationally-recognized biodiversity specialist Julio Sanchez from the Humbolt Center in Nicaragua.

Witness for Peace Northwest is hosting farmer and sustainable agriculture expert Eleazar Garcia for a speaking tour titled "Food Sovereignty and the Roots of Migration: Defending Corn and Culture in Oaxaca." From November 7-17 we will cover over ten cities in four states. Join us!

Witness for Peace Southwest is organizing a speaker's tour with Colombian campesina leader Jani Silva of Putumayo, facilitating a workshop on Honduras at the School of Americas Watch vigil in Ft Benning, Georgia and hosting a New Year's celebration in Los Angeles.

Witness for Peace Upper Midwest just finished a successful speaker's tour with over 40 events in Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota. The region is coordinating a college student delegation to Nicaragua on "Free Trade and the Roots of Migration" in January, and a delegation to Colombia in February to learn from women leaders and activists.

To get in touch with your regional organizer or to learn more about upcoming events and delegations, please visit witnessforpeace.org/grassroots.

Girl Scouts to Join WFP in Colombia

When Madison Vorva and Rhiannon Tomtishen set out to earn their bronze awards as members of the Girl Scouts by protecting the orangutan, they learned that the ape's Asian habitat was endangered by palm oil production.

Madison explained, "The orangutans are endangered for three main reasons: the illegal pet trade, deforestation, and interestingly enough—palm oil. The rainforest land is cleared so palm oil plantations can be planted."

And when they learned that palm oil was a key ingredient in the Girl Scout cookies they were selling, they decided to take a stand.

Now they lead a campaign to get palm oil out of Girl Scout cookies. They've met with the head of the Girl Scouts and have been featured on CBS, NPR, and in the Wall Street Journal.



Girl Scouts Madison Vorva and Rhiannon Tomtishen are traveling to Colombia with Witness for Peace to document human rights abuses in palm oil production.

PHOTO CREDIT: SYLVIA SANKARAN

And when they learned that Colombia is the fourth largest producer of palm oil in the world and that palm oil production in Colombia not only destroys the environment, but has also led to devastating human rights abuses, they asked Witness for Peace to take them to Colombia to see the destruction first hand.

This month, Madison and Rhiannon will visit Colombia with Witness for Peace. They will meet with farmers, human rights activists and environmentalists. They will visit war-torn Urabá, where paramilitaries killed Afro-Colombians and farmers to clear land for palm oil

production. And if past WFP delegations are any test, they'll return to the U.S. with more information to work for change.

You can learn more about Madison and Rhiannon's visit to Colombia by following Witness for Peace on Facebook at www.facebook.com/WFPeace.

FTA Passes Despite Grassroots Opposition

We are deeply disappointed with the passage of the new, NAFTA-style free trade agreement with Colombia.

Last year more labor leaders were killed in Colombia than in the rest of the world combined. The country recently surpassed the Sudan as home to the most internally displaced people in the world. Not only is there no binding language in the FTA to adequately prevent labor assassinations and other human rights violations, but the agricultural dumping anticipated would also increase mass displacement in many of Colombia's most conflict-ridden regions. Unfortunately, there is evidence that death threats against labor leaders have elevated since Congress passed the FTA. The largest labor federation in Colombia claims that a paramilitary group announced that Colombian union leaders are now "their next military objective."

Despite overwhelming evidence that free trade is not fair and that the agreement will hurt both workers at home and especially small-scale farmers and the poor in Colombia, big business and lobbyist pressure won out.

Throughout this process, Witness for Peace supporters sent nearly 6,000 messages to members of Congress in opposition to the Colombia FTA. You submitted hundreds of letters to the editor. Many of you attended rallies or even traveled to Colombia to speak directly to who stood to gain and lose with a free trade agreement with the United States.

We were successful in delaying the Colombia FTA for nearly five years, but in the end most legislators sided with powerful corporate interests. You stood up for justice *y la lucha sigue*.

For full program updates and travel schedule details, visit www.witnessforpeace.org.

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Guards patrol the entrance of Universidad de Valle in Cali, Colombia during the National Congress for Territory, Land, and Sovereignty.

PHOTO CREDIT: JEANINE LEGATO

great quantity of resources they spend on their tactics.”

How, you may ask, does this pacifist army stand up to soldiers and guerrillas wielding machine guns?

“We walk the word,” explained German. “If dialogue doesn’t dissuade them, the sheer number of us does. Normally it’s them who retreat.”

To further support the Indigenous Guard and the communities they protect, Witness for Peace staff in Colombia has accompanied Nasa communities under threat, the Indigenous Guard during protests, and ACIN leadership at high-profile summit events. According to the Indigenous Guard itself, this international accompaniment is becoming increasingly important.

“We hope that the countries and communities of the world continue to accompany us,” said German. “Because we know that the decisions we’ve made involve risks, and we expect those risks to come in the form of attacks against the Nasa.”

Tragically, Nasa civilians have been murdered by the weapons of every armed body active in the area. The Colombian security forces have killed indigenous people standing up against free trade agreements. Paramilitaries send them death threats almost daily. Guerrillas have kidnapped Nasa

leaders and brutally attacked their communities. With that reality in mind, the ACIN’s work protecting their communities starts by making sure that no armed groups set up outposts on their land.

“They must remove the army battalion camps that... have been established in our territories,” said German. “Why? Because neither the national security forces nor the guerrillas have ever guaranteed our safety. We’ve been victimized equally by both groups.”

Armed groups even target children. In recent years, the Bogota-based human rights organization Minga Association has reported an increase in the forced recruitment of indigenous boys and girls, not only to the ranks of the guerillas, but also to the military.

“Sometimes the military recruits child informants, promising prestige and money,” explained Minga representative Maria Victoria Alvarado. “This puts the children directly at risk with the insurgency, who will say the children and their



A group of guards lines up with their staffs of authority before a recorrido, or walk-through of their territory. The Guard is comprised of men, women, children, and elders, all of whom undergo a special training in Nasa culture.

PHOTO CREDIT: JEANINE LEGATO

families sympathize with the military.” Indigenous leadership believes the group’s autonomy can help the ACIN mediate between insurgents and the Colombian Government to bring peace to the region.

And however numerous the Indigenous Guard, the number of armed actors in Nasa territory is far greater. In July, the ACIN reported an estimated 15,000 soldiers in their territory of 93,000 hectares. The true influence of the Nasa Guard, then, is less a function of its numbers than of the political and social legitimacy of a group formed by unity and just cause, rather than coercion and scare tactics.

“We must open the debate between all armed actors,” said German. “You have to ask the guerrilla why he/she victimizes the communities while pretending to act on their behalf, and the government and the military as well, for failing to watch over the public good by fighting among us and victimizing us.”

A month after the attack on Toribio, a few thousand ACIN Indigenous Guard gathered in a meeting space overlooking the valley. Members of the Guard wore matching red and green scarves and carried their brightly decorated staffs of authority. Children played on the fringes of the crowd. The discussion, however, was of the utmost seriousness. The ACIN was strategizing how best to fulfill their mandate: end the war, defend autonomy, and plant peace.

“Those are bold goals to make publicly when you live up in these mountains, away from the watch of the world,” says Colombia-based Witness for Peace International Team member Jeanine Legato. “That’s why solidarity with the ACIN is so important. They are a living example that peace can be a powerful and active response to war, and more effective than the fight to out-arm the enemy.”