

SOLIDARIDAD

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

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The Mérida Initiative: New Phase, Same Violence



The funeral procession for Nava Bonfilio Rubio, who was killed senselessly by the Mexican army in the name of the war on drugs.

PHOTO CREDIT: HUMAN RIGHTS CENTER TLACHINOLLAN

On March 13 in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, gunmen killed a U.S. Consulate employee and her husband while driving in their car, leaving their crying five-month-old baby alive in the backseat. Later that day a Mexican citizen connected to the consulate was also killed.

“The costs of this...war against drug trafficking have been very high,” says Miguel Ángel Vásquez de la Rosa of the Mexican community organization EDUCA, “not only in the loss of human life, but also in human rights violations against civilians.”

And the violence isn't just in the big city. Last June, Mexican soldiers established a military checkpoint in Huamuxtitlan, a small town in Guerrero. Soon after, they called a northbound passenger bus to a halt, searched it for drugs and weapons,

and detained a passenger named Fausto Valera. Suspecting that Valera was an insurgent, the soldiers demanded to know where he got his military style boots. When his answers failed to satisfy them, they placed him under arrest.

Ciudad Juárez has become a tragic testimony to the failure of Mexico's U.S.-backed drug war. The violence is spiraling out of control.

Moments after the coach pulled away the bus driver heard the sharp sound of rounds being fired, but couldn't imagine that the soldiers were targeting the bus.

But shouting from the back confirmed that the soldiers were indeed shooting at the bus.

“Stop, driver!”

“Go faster, driver!”

Although the soldiers later claimed they were firing into the air, several rounds hit the bus. Nava Bonfilio Rubio, who was travelling north with the hope of migrating to the United States, was killed instantly.

The consulate killings, along with stories like Bonfilio's, are the predictable but tragic outcome of the Mérida Initiative, Mexico's U.S.-backed drug war strategy.

The War on Drugs in Mexico

There have been approximately 22,700 drug-related killings since Mexican President Felipe Calderón took office in December 2006, numbers comparable to the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In particular, Ciudad Juárez has become Mexico's Baghdad. In early 2008, the first year of the Mérida Initiative, Calderón sent thousands of troops to Ciudad Juárez in an attempt to beat back the city's cartels.

However, Ciudad Juárez has become a tragic testimony to the failure of Mexico's U.S.-backed drug war. The violence continues to spiral out of control. Homicides in the city have jumped from 300 in 2007 to 2,600 in 2009, in explicit correlation with the increased military presence. Now Ciudad Juárez is not only the murder capital of Mexico—there is no place in the world that has more homicides per capita.

(Continued on back page)

Message From Sharon

Several times this month I was struck by the devastating impact U.S. policies have on the lives of my friends in the countries where Witness for Peace works. It's easy to get caught up in analyzing the broad results of our government's actions, but I try to push myself to remember that real people bear the brunt of these policies.

My dear friend, Daisy Rojas, from Habana, Cuba recently told me that her daughter, Yisell, had been diagnosed with thyroid cancer.

"Yisell now depends on medication that isn't available in Cuba, thanks to the embargo that we've had to live with for over 40 years," Daisy wrote. "As a mother I'm so distressed."

In March, I traveled with a delegation to Regadio, near Estelí, Nicaragua. It was wonderful to reconnect with my friends Gloria Andino and Augusto Castillo. But I couldn't ignore the effects the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) has had on their rural community.

Although Regadio's small-scale farmers can't access credit for growing corn and beans, it's all too easy to find financial support for cultivating tobacco. Two years ago, when a tobacco factory first arrived in town, only 5 hectares of land produced the crop. Today more than 100 hectares of land are devoted to tobacco.

"And what will happen when the U.S. market for cigars disappears?" said Augusto. "We'll be left with depleted soil and contaminated water. We'll be the big losers."

Last week I traveled from Oaxaca to Mexico City. Soon after daylight my bus suddenly stopped and masked soldiers boarded to announce a

narcotics search. Anyone with checked luggage had to disembark for inspection. As I got off the bus with a few elderly citizens I realized that this disruptive and futile search was being financed by U.S. tax dollars handed to the Mexican military.

I remembered a conversation I'd had with Miguel Angel Vásquez de la Rosa, one of Witness for Peace's close partners in Oaxaca.

"We know that military solutions don't work for solving social problems," said Miguel Angel. "When there is military aid there will be war, and war means the death of more and more Mexicans."

Some of my friends have found temporary solutions to their dilemmas. For example, the medication Yisell needs is available in Nicaragua and I was able to send Daisy some assistance.

But without changing the policies behind these situations, they will continue to repeat themselves. And of course, these examples are just a few of the hundreds of stories of injustice and tragedy associated with the Cuba embargo, CAFTA and the Mérida Initiative.

With your support, Witness for Peace has challenged destructive policies for more than 25 years. As we advocate for peace, justice and sustainable economies throughout the Americas, I am grateful to know that you are walking with us.

Peace,



Sharon Hostetler,
Executive Director



DELEGATIONS

Colombia

June 20-30, 2010

Human Rights and Indigenous Movements

July 5-15, 2010

**Colombian Communities
Resisting Repression**

July 16-26, 2010

**Appalachia and Colombia:
the People Behind the Coal**

July 24-August 2, 2010

**Military Bases, Human Rights
and Free Trade**

August 7-17, 2010

**Magdalena Region:
Corporate Abuse, Military Repression
and Internally Displaced Persons**

Cuba

July 18-28, 2010

**Research Delegation for
Professional Educators**

Honduras

August 10-18, 2010

Continuing the Resistance

Mexico

June 8-18, 2010

**Roots of Migration:
from Oaxaca to North Carolina**

July 12-22, 2010

**Roots of Migration:
Trade, Privatization, and Resistance**

July 23-30, 2010

**Roots of Migration:
Oaxaca and the Arizona Border**

Nicaragua

June 14-24, 2010

**Another World is Possible: Sustainable
Development and Fair Trade**

July 13-27, 2010

Inter-cultural Teen Delegation

For more information please contact Ken
Crowley at ken@witnessforpeace.org or
773-564-9535.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Grassroots Action

Witness for Peace New England is scheduling their fall speakers tour, which will feature a community partner from Oaxaca, Mexico. Hosting opportunities are still available!

Witness for Peace Northwest is recruiting for their July 12-22nd delegation to Oaxaca, Mexico. The trip, *Roots of Migration: Trade, Privatization and Resistance*, correlates with continued organizing efforts for immigrant rights.

Witness for Peace Southeast completed a successful pilgrimage across North Carolina calling for immigration reform, fair trade and worker justice. Up next: summer delegations to both Mexico and Nicaragua.

Witness for Peace Southwest spent the early spring hosting "Face the Displaced" events and calling for change in U.S. foreign policy towards Colombia.

Witness for Peace Mid-Atlantic is holding their annual retreat from May 14-16 in Edgewater, MD. We'll learn about the post-coup struggle for democracy in Honduras, develop new solidarity strategies and prepare for this summer's urgent delegation.

Witness for Peace Upper Midwest is excitedly preparing for *Nicaragua: Another World is Possible* in June, through which delegates will explore fair trade and sustainable development.

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

Colombia Update:

National Days of Action for Colombia

This April, tens of thousands of Witness for Peace activists took part in the National Days of Action for Colombia, the annual campaign calling on Washington to alleviate our hemisphere's largest internal displacement crisis. Their actions came on the heels of the recent announcement that millions of dollars of military aid would be replaced with humanitarian assistance in the proposed 2011 budget.

To build on this victory, organizers encouraged their communities to "Face the Displaced." They crafted portraits from photographs and direct statements from 40 displaced Colombians, framed by calls for President Obama to end military aid completely.

Activists displayed these portraits at public vigils, galleries, churches and demonstrations. The campaign culminated with a massive display on the National Mall and meetings with government representatives.

"The swell in Colombia-focused advocacy has already begun to bear fruit," said National Grassroots Organizer Ben Beachy. "Now we need to maintain pressure on our representatives to stop exacerbating the displacement crisis in Colombia."



Cuba Update:

Support HR 4645

We've reached a watershed moment in the effort to dismantle the Cuban embargo. HR 4645, a bill that would reinstate the freedom of all U.S. citizens to travel to Cuba, is coming up for a vote and could be passed as soon as this month.

For years Witness for Peace has worked with our Cuban partners to dismantle the U.S. embargo that has restricted essential access to food and medicines on the island nation. The travel ban is widely seen as the lynchpin for the embargo; its removal would bring us much closer to unraveling the embargo itself.

When HR 4645 comes to a vote, we'll need your help to flood Congress with calls and emails. Please stay tuned for email alerts to know when your action is needed most.

Not yet receiving our emails? Stay up to date by registering at witnessforpeace.org.

Mexico/Nicaragua Update:

Clinton Regrets Promoting Free Trade

In a recent Senate hearing, Bill Clinton astounded his audience by admitting regret for the free trade policies he championed during his presidency.

"It may have been good for some of my farmers in Arkansas, but it has not worked. It was a mistake," Clinton said.

Clinton's comments referred to how free trade has exacerbated the food crisis in Haiti, but the problem is mirrored throughout Latin America.

In poor countries, dropping trade barriers often signals the destruction of domestic markets. For example, in Nicaragua under DR-CAFTA and Mexico under NAFTA, U.S. grain has flooded local markets, leaving small farmers unable to compete.

"The politicians who pushed for free trade in the Americas are now realizing the consequences and speaking out," said Sara Riegler of Witness for Peace's International Team in Nicaragua. "It's an opportunity to push other government representatives for trade alternatives that promote economic justice and stability throughout the Americas."

The Trade Reform, Accountability, Development and Employment (TRADE) Act is a bill that would renegotiate NAFTA and CAFTA in critical ways. Currently the TRADE Act has 140 co-sponsors, but still needs your support to ensure passage. Please visit witnessforpeace.org/trade for background information, talking points and tips for contacting your representative.

Honduras Update:

Ignoring Human Rights Violations, U.S. Reinstates Aid to Honduras

This March, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the U.S. would reinstate approximately \$30 million in non-humanitarian aid to Honduras. The aid package had been suspended in the wake of the June 28 coup. The move is the State Department's latest step to normalize relations with Porfirio 'Pepe' Lobo's government, which took power through disputed elections last November.

Human rights organizations continue to document violence in Honduras—in particular towards journalists whose coverage has been critical of the new regime. Five Honduran journalists were murdered in the month of March alone.

Honduras' recent budget proposal includes an increase in military and police spending. With the reintroduction of military aid, these Honduran security forces will now be directly funded by U.S. tax dollars.

This August, Witness for Peace will bring a delegation of U.S. citizens to Honduras to catalogue human rights violations and support local partners in their struggle for democracy.

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

(Continued from front page)

In a recent interview with *USA Today*, Victor Renault, the head of U.S. Northern Command, explained that the lessons from fighting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are being incorporated into the drug war in Mexico.

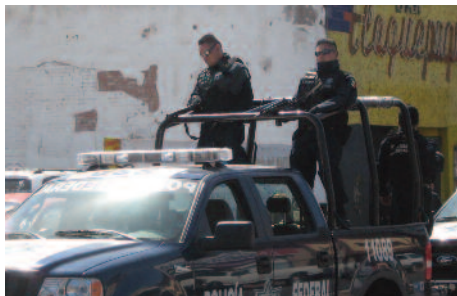
“We’ve learned and grown a great deal as we’ve conducted operations against networks of terrorists and insurgent fighters,” he told the paper. “Many of the skills that you use to go after a network like those apply...to drug-trafficking organizations.”

Every year approximately 20 teams of Afghanistan and Iraq war veterans travel to Mexico to provide combat training.

The New Face of Mérida

On March 24, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates met in Mexico to revise the Mérida Initiative, a \$1.4 billion U.S. aid program that began in 2008. The initiative has focused on targeting the elusive and powerful drug cartels with military force, but has done little to stop the flow of drugs into the United States, the most voracious market for illicit drugs in the world.

President Obama has allotted \$310 million for the Mérida Initiative in the 2011 budget, a 30% reduction in overall funding and direct military aid, specifically. However, the new phase is still based on the same military-based drug war strategy that many fear will bring the same violent results.



Police and military personnel have flooded Ciudad Juárez since the establishment of the Mérida Initiative.

PHOTO CREDIT: BILLIE GREENWOOD



A family is forced to leave their home in Guerrero because of military harassment.

PHOTO CREDIT: HUMAN RIGHTS CENTER TLACHINOLLAN

The meeting unveiled what some are calling Mérida Initiative Two, based on four fundamental “pillars”:

- disrupting organized criminal groups;
- institutionalizing reform to sustain the rule of law and respect human rights;
- the creation of a “21st-century border” between the United States and Mexico;
- building stronger and resilient communities.

At the meeting Clinton argued that security “is paramount” but that the initiative “is also about institution building. It’s about reaching out to...communities and civil society, and working together to spur social and economic development.”

She also pledged to curb demand for drugs in the United States.

But any policy that prioritizes military aid as the solution to drug cultivation and trafficking will be unable to quiet the violence in places like Guerrero and Ciudad Juárez. Many critics see Clinton’s remarks as a thinly veiled disguise for what is the continuation of a failed policy.

Where Does It End?

Washington originally envisioned the initiative, which represented a 10-fold

increase in “security cooperation” between the two countries, to last for three years and end in 2010. However, General Renault recently claimed that “this is an eight to ten year problem.”

In the meantime, human rights abuses committed by the U.S.-backed military have risen 600%. The people of Guerrero have suffered everything from rape and murder, to the destruction of land and crops and arbitrary detentions.

Cases of military abuse are almost exclusively tried in military courts. The resulting impunity creates a climate where soldiers don’t fear shooting directly at a bus of civilians, like the one in which Nava Bonfilio Rubio was traveling.

Bonfilio was simply seeking a solution to his economic despair. After his murder, the government offered Bonfilio’s family financial compensation for their loss. As his father sat in the office of Monitor Civil in Tlapa, his eyes watered. His tone was scathing as he leaned forward and said, “We don’t want money. We want justice.”

But as long as the Mérida Initiative feeds the war on drugs, the violence in Mexico will continue. Here in the United States, we have the responsibility to end that cycle.