Meanwhile, trade policies like NAFTA exacerbate the poverty, displacement, and social inequalities that give cartels nearly endless opportunities for recruitment and influence.

It's a perfect storm for human suffering. But is military aid the solution?

“Our politicians see Mexico in flames, and their knee-jerk response is to throw water on the fire by increasing military aid,” says Witness for Peace board member and drug policy expert Sanho Tree.

But to more and more public figures, civil society organizations and international bodies, it’s become clear that the U.S. must rethink its drug war strategy to end the violence and corruption associated with drug trafficking.

Even President Obama recently admitted that drug legalization was a valid subject for debate—the most daring admission made so far by a sitting U.S. president.

Last month a United Nations working group urged the Mexican government to stop using the Army in anti-drug operations. And on April 6, massive demonstrations erupted throughout Mexico. From coast to coast, the unified call was for the Army to leave the streets and return to their barracks.

Keeping the Faith

Despite all that’s happened to them, the Reyes Salazar family remains dedicated to speaking out against military abuse and impunity.

“We will continue fighting so that other families won’t suffer and live what we are going through now,” says Marisela.

To support their work, Witness for Peace supporters call on the U.S. government to reduce demand for drugs stateside, work with Mexico to develop a strategy that prioritizes human rights, eliminate aid to Mexican security forces, and redirect Mérida funding to programs that address social and economic inequalities in Mexico.

Josefina Reyes was assassinated with a gunshot to the head outside her barbeque stand last January. Her crime? Protesting the U.S.-backed war on drugs that has killed almost 35,000 Mexicans since 2006.

A long-time women’s rights advocate, Josefina never imagined that she would lose five family members and her own life for her activism. Then thousands of military troops were sent to Chihuahua. It was 2008, and U.S. funding was unleashing the Mexican Army on drug traffickers throughout the country.

The consequences of the heightened military presence prohibited Josefina from staying silent. When the military placed thirteen of her neighbors under pre-charge detention, Josefina petitioned for their release. Then she spoke at a conference titled “Forum Against Militarization and Repression.” That was about all it took: her son was disappeared several days later.

“There are powerful interests that want to silence the Reyes family,” says Josefina’s sister Marisela.

After Josefina’s murder, the family continued speaking out. And as a result, they’ve buried six murdered loved ones, despite the fact that they were granted protection by the Interamerican Commission on Human Rights.

It’s “because we don’t shut up,” says Olga Reyes Salazar.

With the help of U.S. aid through the Mérida Initiative, Mexican President Calderón has sent 50,000 soldiers and federal police to the streets of Mexican cities and towns. The deployment has corresponded to an increase in human rights violations: the military has been named in over 4,200 formal human rights accusations since 2007.

However, U.S. military aid to Mexico has failed to reduce illicit drug flows, assure public safety or significantly weaken cartels. Now people on both sides of the border are clamoring for a change in direction.

Failures of the U.S. Drug War Model

Until now, the U.S. strategy for combating drug trafficking throughout the continent has centered on military tactics. The Mérida Initiative, modeled after Plan Colombia, designated $1.5 billion for military and police aid to Mexico.

This money puts Mexican soldiers on the frontlines of the war on drugs. With 50,000 troops deployed throughout the country, the Mexican Army has been implicated in murders, rapes and other abuses—the vast majority of which have never been prosecuted.

Almost 35,000 people have died and over 5,397 people have been reported missing since 2006. According to UNICEF, more people have died in the Mexican drug war than in the entire 10-year Afghan war. Yet only 5% of all murders in 2010 were investigated by Mexican authorities.

And even though the U.S. withheld $26 million in 2010 Mérida funding because of human rights concerns, the State Department still plans to fund Mérida past 2012.

Two decades of counter-narcotics assistance in Latin America have shown that military aid does little to reduce drug production and trafficking. At best, it shifts production centers and trafficking corridors, spurring drug-related violence with deadly consequences.

But as the drug war moves south to Central America, it’s met with the same one-size-fits-all military strategies—at the insistence of the U.S. government.

Realistic Solutions for the Drug Crisis

The Mérida Initiative is a military strategy focused on Mexico, the gateway for drugs produced mostly in South America. But with over 20 million drug users, the U.S. drives the drug trade in the first place—an issue that current policies don’t adequately address. In fact, the Obama administration provides even less funding to prevention programs than the Bush administration did.

In April, nonviolent marches erupted throughout Mexico. Thousands called for the Mexican Army to step out of the war on drugs.

Tension between soldiers and communities is growing at a rate equal to the death toll.

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PHOTO CREDIT: CAROLYN CHRISTY

PHOTO CREDIT: AGENDA REFORMA

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DELEGATIONS

Colombia
May 31-June 10, 2011
Appaloosa & Columbia: the People Behind the Cool
June 19-29, 2011
Human Rights & Indigenous Movements
July 11-21, 2011
Meet Colombian Communities
Resisting Repression
August 13-23, 2011
Military in Colombia: the Economic and Humanitarian Consequences

Cuba
June 5-15, 2011
Research Delegation for Professional HealthCare Workers
June 16-26, 2011
Research Delegation for Professional Educators
Nov. 20-29, 2011 (dates tentative)
Research Delegation for Professional Lawyers

Mexico
June 11-19, 2011
Migration in Mexico: Roots, Rights and Resistance
Living in Oaxaca, Mexico
September 21-Oct. 1, 2011
Food, Farms & the Roots of Migration: Communities Cultivating Change

Nicaragua
July 15-27, 2011
Inter-Cultural Town Delegation
For more information or inquiries regarding custom delegations please contact Ken Crowley at ken@witnessforpeace.org or (202) 423-3402.

Message From Sharon

We have had it up to here with the Drug War

U.S. Government, "we have had it up to here" with billions and billions of our tax dollars going to fight the war on drugs in Colombia, Mexico, and Central America. This war has no exit strategy because there is no end in sight. And there can be no end in sight for this war because the demand for drugs in our country is insatiable. As long as there is a demand for drugs, drugs will be produced and there will be cartels and gangs to traffic those drugs.

U.S. Government, "we have had it up to here" with the violence that accompanies the drug war you are financing in our name. Almost 35,000 Mexicans have been killed in this war that the U.S.-supported Mexican military is carrying out against cartels and gangs on the streets of cities, small towns, and rural communities. The U.S. is backing a military known for committing human rights abuses against its own citizens. And despite increased military presence in Mexican communities, the violence carried out by merciless drug cartels and gangs continues to rise and drugs continue to flow north. As this newsletter goes to print, for example, 183 bodies have been pulled from pits in northern Mexico, near where drug gangs murdered 72 migrants last summer.

On March 28, Juan Francisco Sicilia and six friends were brutally tortured and assassinated in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Juan was the 24-year-old son of Mexican poet Javier Sicilia, who wrote an open letter to Mexican politicians and criminals. Javier says "...the death of a child is always unnatural and that's why it has no name. I don't know if it is orphan or widow, but it is simply and painfully nothing—these three mutilated lives, from this suffering, from the indignation that these deaths have provoked, it is simply that we have had it up to here." In the letter Javier says that the sentiment "we've had it up to here" must be accompanied by citizen action that obligates the government to unite and to create an agenda for justice and peace. On Wednesday, April 6, thousands of Mexicans answered the call with marches all over Mexico.

As the Mexican military and police pressure the cartels and gangs in Mexico, you can guess where the criminal groups are heading—Central America, a region which according to a report prepared by the Congressional Research Service has "fewer resources and weaker institutions [than Mexico] with which to combat drug trafficking and related criminality." The U.S. is responding to this expansion to Central America—with you guessed it—more military aid through CARSI, the Central America Regional Security Initiative.

If the violence in Mexico is proportionate to the resources and strength of institutions in that country, I can't imagine what Guatemala, Hondurans, El Salvadorans, Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans will face if the drug war continues heading south. And here it gets very personal for me; I live in Nicaragua. My 24 and 22-year-old sons were born and raised here. From the depths of my soul, U.S. Government, please hear us. We have had it up to here with this militarized drug war policy. We need another solution.

In solidarity,
Sharon Hochstetler
Executive Director

Grassroots Action

Witness for Peace Northeast is developing the Board of Directors and building local networks. We welcome partnerships with diverse organizations in the region working for peace, social justice, and sustainable development.

Witness for Peace Northwest is recruiting delegates for the Food, Farms, and the Roots of Migration: Communities Cultivating Change delegation to Oaxaca, Mexico (September 21st – October 1st). This summer’s region is excited to host Remember Me: Voices of the Silenced, an art exhibit exploring the conflict in Colombia.

Witness for Peace Southeast organized the annual Walk with Immigrants and Farm Workers during Holy Week, from April 17-22nd. Participants held vigils at immigrant detention centers throughout North Carolina. Four spaces are still available in the July 14-28th Reem Delegation to Nicaragua.

Witness for Peace Southwest is lobbying congressional representatives against the proposed free trade agreements with Korea, Panama, and Colombia, preparing for a July delegation to Colombia, planning region-wide summer retreats and organizing a fall tour featuring a Colombian speaker.

Witness for Peace Upper Midwest recently hired Elise Roberts as Regional Organizer. She accompanied the region’s last delegation to Colombia. The region is preparing for an October speaking tour through Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota called Railroaded by NAFTA/CACA: The Perilous Journey from Central America to the States.

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

Victory for the Victims of Extrajudicial Killings in Colombia

Five years after the extrajudicial execution of innocent farmer José Orlando Giralo Barrañas, a Colombian military intelligence officer was finally convicted of the brutal murder.

The U.S.-backed Colombian military had dressed up José Giralo’s body and falsely reported him as a FARC insurgent killed in combat. The statistics didn’t scare José’s oldest daughter, Martha, from seeking justice. Martha received dozens of death threats for acting as a witness in the case. But Martha pushed on, traveling to the United States as a featured Witness for Peace speaker in 2009.

Thousands of Witness for Peace supporters joined Martha in her work by petitioning Congress and the U.S. Ambassador in Colombia as well as sending Marta direct letters of support. Witness for Peace also produced and distributed a documentary about Martha’s case.

And thanks to Martha’s tireless work, in March Sergeant Luis Mahcheza was convicted for José’s murder. The judge declared that José was “not part of the FARC and that he was only a humble small-scale farmer taking care of a farm.”

Martha hopes the ruling will set a precedent for the thousands of extrajudicial cases that remain in impunity, including the seven military officials that have yet to be tried for their participation in her father’s murder.

Grassroots Pressure Mounts Against the Proposed Free Trade Agreement with Colombia

As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama indicated that he would oppose a free trade agreement with Colombia unless there was a marked improvement with respect to labor rights in that country. But now the President is pushing for a deal that would expand the NAFTA model to a country already failing to meet minimum labor requirements.

In the coming days or weeks, the Obama Administration will send the Colombia FTA to Congress for an up or down vote. Now is the time to stop the U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement before it starts.

The trade deal would be detrimental both to U.S. workers and the majority of Colombians. In the U.S. it would lead to lower wages. In Colombia, the deal would threaten workers in the world’s most dangerous country for trade unionists, devastate poor farmers by flooding Colombia’s market with subsidized U.S. grain and jeopardize bio-diversity and traditional medicine. The agreement would be disastrous for working people and the environment.

Witness for Peace supports the efforts of the labor movement to oppose the free trade agreement. The U.S. corporatization of foreign policy and free trade agreements have led to an end of environmental protections as we know them today. It’s time to put people and the environment ahead of corporate profits. Tell your congressional representatives that the FTA is a bad deal for us and for Colombia. For more information, visit Witness for Peace online.

WFP Provides Protective Accompaniment in Honduras

While the U.S. government pledges more support for the Honduran government and security forces in the name of the war on drugs, the human rights situation in the country remains grave—particularly for human rights activists.

In the midst of widespread protests and civil society strikes, WFP sent Nicaragua staff member Brookie Denmark to provide protective accompaniment to representatives of the Truth Commission as they collected testimonies regarding post-coup human rights abuses.

Throughout her weeks in Honduras, Brookie worked closely with one of the Commission’s mobile investigative teams.

The True Commission challenges the widespread impunity in Honduras by revealing the extent of human rights violations and seeking justice in international courts. It was formed after the creation of the U.S.-supported Truth Commission, a project that raised concerns with a broad cross-section of Honduran civil society.

Witness for Peace’s International Team has led delegations to Honduras since the June 2009 coup.

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

Nora Verdecia, an ashlante teacher, was arrested while trying to avoid tear gas at a March demonstration. She was detained for six days.

PHOTO CREDIT: NELDA MURILLO