Snow and ice crunched under Marino Cordoba’s feet as he walked home last week. He pulled his collar tight to his neck to keep out the frigid air.

He is a long way from his native tropical jungles of Colombia. Marino’s journey from the rainforest of Chocó to the mountains of Bogotá and finally to the snow-covered streets of Washington, D.C. is one of pain, loss and ultimately renewal.

On a December morning over a decade ago, Marino’s hometown of Rio Sucio was ravaged in a joint attack by the U.S.-backed Colombian military and right-wing paramilitary death squads.

Even today no one truly knows how many innocent civilians were kidnapped, tortured and killed in the assault. Analysts believe the attack came in response to Marino’s and others’ efforts to access constitutional land rights for marginalized Afro-Colombian communities.

Escaping Death in Colombia

Marino and his family escaped with their lives, but only by hiding in the jungle for days before fleeing their would-be killers, making their way first to the provincial capital of Quibdó before finally settling in Colombia’s capital, Bogotá.

“I thought, ‘What am I going to do?’” Marino says as he recalls those first days after fleeing. “Will I make it? Will they catch me and kill me?”

Gunmen soon tracked Marino down and he was forced to escape to the United States to save his life.

“I really didn’t want to leave Colombia,” Marino says. “My family was in Colombia. But my life was at risk and I had no other option but to leave.”

Colombia’s Crisis and a U.S. Military Response

Sadly, Marino’s horrific story of loss due to Colombia’s war is not unique. Colombia’s humanitarian crisis is second only to Sudan’s worldwide. Since 1985, over 4.3 million people have been internally displaced in Colombia. Hundreds of thousands more have fled as refugees to neighboring countries.

Soon after Marino and his family fled their native Rio Sucio, policymakers in Washington and Bogotá began to argue that, with Colombia’s drug trade and armed conflict spiraling out of control, only billions in U.S. military assistance and U.S. troops on the ground could save the country.
Message From Sharon
A Renewed Commitment to Change

A new year is always a time of reflection and renewal. Enjoying the cool breezes in Managua I sat with my family the night of December 31 to welcome in a new decade. We discussed personal accomplishments, changes and challenges in our lives but as usual the conversation turned to a spirited debate about politics and U.S. policy. As I looked back on 2009, I was struck by all that has happened in one short year. And how little has changed.

The inauguration of a new administration just one year ago brought hope for real change in destructive U.S. policies toward Latin America. Unfortunately, today those dreams remain largely unrealized. While there has been some positive movement on some issues, this is not what we had hoped to see.

From the provocative placement of seven new U.S. military bases in Colombia to an irresponsible response to the military coup in Honduras, the Obama administration so far has given us more of the same disastrous policies. We see a retrenchment in failed trade agreements like NAFTA and CAFTA, and an expansion of ineffective drug wars with the Merida Initiative in Mexico. The devastating earthquake in Haiti underscores the truly disastrous effects of economic violence and poverty.

As I reflected with my family about hope and change my son reminded me that real and lasting change is almost always led by grassroots organizing by the ground up, not by U.S. administrations. President Obama’s team may be off to a rough start, but there is still time for us to help them create a new playbook. Please join us again this year to hold U.S. leaders accountable for their campaign promises.

We invite you to participate in Days of Prayer and Action to support Colombians promoting a new path to peace in their country. Call on your representatives in Congress to end the travel ban to Cuba. See the resilience and strength of our partners in Latin America on one of our transformative delegations.

Most importantly, please renew your commitment to end U.S. policies that lead to poverty and oppression. Help us fulfill the promises we make to stand with those seeking peace and justice in the Americas.

In solidarity,

Sharon Hostetler

DELEGATIONS

Colombia
June 20-30, 2010
Human Rights & Indigenous Movements
Jenice Martin 415-525-3625
jenice.martin@gmail.com
July 5-15, 2010
Meet Colombian Communities Resisting Repression
Patrick Bonner 323-563-7940
pkbonner@earthlink.net
July 16-26, 2010
Appalachia & Colombia
Avi Chomsky 978-542-6389
achomsky@salemstate.edu
Steve Striffler 479-283-4795
striffler@hotmail.com
August 7-17, 2010
Human Rights Violence, Corporate Abuse, Military Repression, And Internally Displaced Persons
Erin Cox 312-641-5151
erin@8thdaycenter.org

Honduras
April 3-11, 2010
Resisting The Coup
Robyn Skrebes 612-558-6019
wfpumw@witnessforpeace.org

Mexico
June 8-18, 2010
Looking at the Roots of Migration
Gail Phares 919-624-0646
gailphares@earthlink.net
July 15-25, 2010
The Root Causes of Migration
Colette Cosner 206-250-2680
wfpnw@witnessforpeace.org
July 23-30, 2010
Following The Migration Trail from Oaxaca to The U.S. Border
Tanya Cole 805-421-9708
wfpsw@witnessforpeace.org

Nicaragua
March 20-29, 2010
Free Trade Agreements: Migration, Food Security, & Development
Tanya Cole 805-421-9708
wfpsw@witnessforpeace.org
July 13-27, 2010
Inter-Cultural Teen Delegation
Gail Phares 919-856-9468
gailphares@earthlink.net
Grassroots Action

Witness for Peace Mid-Atlantic invites you this winter to upstate New York for the latest update on Honduras and opportunities to strategize with other activists about direct actions we can take in solidarity with the social movement there. Details at witnessforpeace.org/midatlantic.


Witness for Peace Northwest is co-sponsoring A Community Dialogue on Labor and Immigration Reform with Portland Jobs with Justice on March 4, 2010. We are also mobilizing with Oregon and Washington Fair Trade Coalitions to get more representatives to sign-on to the TRADE ACT! Go to www.witnessforpeace.org/northwest for more information.

Witness for Peace Southeast will lead the Pilgrimage for Justice and Peace March 28-April 2nd focused on immigration reform and the need to change our trade laws. Beginning on Palm Sunday we will walk from Charlotte, NC, to Hickory, Winston-Salem, Greensboro, Durham and end in Raleigh on Good Friday. Join us at www.witnessforpeace.org/southeast!

Witness for Peace Southwest is pushing Congress to support freedom to travel to Cuba and stop a military aid package to Mexico and Central America called the Merida Initiative. Visit www.witnessforpeace.org/southwest for more information or to get involved.

Witness for Peace Upper Midwest invites you to join the Community Action Team, a local working group that engages at the policy level to transform the negative impact of U.S. policy on Latin America, such as migration, free trade agreements, Plan Colombia, and militarization. Learn more at www.witnessforpeace.org/uppermidwest.

Honduras Update

New Video on Honduras Human Rights Crisis

See the newest Witness for Peace Productions video, Shot in the Back at www.witnessforpeace.org/HondurasVideo. Over a month after national elections that the U.S. administration claimed would restore democracy, community activists and local leaders continue to receive death threats and intimidation. We must continue to stand with human rights leaders seeking justice.

Our partners are asking us to help them amplify their voices. Please take a few minutes to send this video out to anyone you know who cares about protecting human rights and democracy.

School of the Americas

Calling for Justice
by Paul Magno

I had the honor of traveling to this year’s vigil to close the School of the Americas with Martha Giraldo and Gerardo Cajamarca Alarcón, both committed Colombian activists. It was a profound experience of learning as they shared their deep commitment to pursuing justice in Colombia, despite the risks they face.

Our protests began at Chiquita Banana in Cincinnati OH, Drummond Coal in Birmingham AL and Coca Cola in Atlanta, GA. In each instance friends, including Colombian activists, joined us to name the corporate wrongdoing of each company and demand accountability for those offenses.

Shortly after arriving in Columbus for the School of the Americas vigil, they fearlessly shared their stories with hundreds at the annual Colombia Teach-In, sponsored by Witness for Peace.

From the stage at Sunday’s memorial procession, Martha offered a poignant recollection of the murder of her father at the hands of paramilitary forces in Colombia. Those who have died in Colombia were offered special attention in this year’s procession remembering the many folks killed across Latin America as a result of the continuing militarization supported by the U.S. Army School of the Americas program at Ft. Benning, GA.

Martha was moved and gratified as she heard her father’s name announced and thousands of protesters responded, “Presente!” Just a few hours later, Witness for Peace Mid-Atlantic board member Nancy Gwin along with three other activists entered the base. She has been sentenced to 6 months in federal prison. To learn how you can support justice for Martha and her family, please visit www.witnessforpeace.org/militaryaid.

Mexico Update

In the wake of over 13,000 drug-related murders in Mexico since President Felipe Calderon came into office in 2007, the U.S. continues to send aid to the Mexican military through the Merida Initiative, a counternarcotics, counterterrorism, and border security measure. Congress authorized 1.4 billion dollars for the three year initiative and President Obama has requested $450 million for Mexico in the budget for FY 2010, the final year of the initiative.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has named two sources of Mexico’s drug violence, neither of which the Merida Initiative addresses: the insatiable demand for drugs in the U.S. and the illegal trading of guns. Nor does the initiative address the root of poverty in Mexico that leads to police and military corruption and individual involvement in the drug trade. Instead, the initiative continues to raise all-too-real human rights concerns about the use of the Mexican military for domestic law enforcement, where complaints are addressed in secret military tribunals instead of civil courts, and the use of torture for obtaining confessions. We must oppose the use of military solutions to social problems and instead address issues of human rights and poverty. Find out more at www.witnessforpeace.org/mexico.

For full program updates and travel schedule details, visit www.witnessforpeace.org.
Nearly $6 billion in military aid since 2000 have secured oil pipelines, government buildings and even improved security in some cities and towns. Yet millions of Colombia’s community organizers, farmers and Afro-Colombians dispute claims that military gains against the guerrillas have translated into improved lives for them.

In fact, the U.S.-backed Colombian military has reportedly killed an estimated 2,000 innocent civilians just during President Alvaro Uribe’s time in office. Meanwhile in 2008, over 380,000 people were forced to flee their homes due to Colombia’s war, more than double the number displaced when Marino and his family fled Rio Sucio.

Expanded U.S. Military Presence in Colombia

Yet despite this alarming situation, rather than heed the calls of people like Marino to de-escalate military aid to the brutal Colombian military, the Obama Administration recently signed a 10-year deal with Colombia allowing U.S. troops to operate out of seven Colombian military bases to fight what the U.S. Air Force called “narcotics funded terrorist insurgencies” and “anti-U.S. governments” in the region.

In part, the U.S. bases in Colombia will replace the U.S.’s Forward Operating Location in Manta, Ecuador. When a 10-year lease expired on the Manta base last year, Ecuador asked the U.S. military to leave the country.

While some were hopeful President Obama would reverse the U.S. disastrous course in Colombia, this deal is a strong indication otherwise. Major aspects of Plan Colombia that were once subject to annual congressional approval are now seemingly locked in for another decade. The U.S. military can now carry out joint operations with the hemisphere’s worst human rights violators; engage in lethal counterinsurgency training; and provide real-time intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities with little to no congressional oversight.

Military Bases Lead to Regional Tensions

Yet this deal is not only controversial within Colombia. As the U.S. Air Force itself stated in a May 2009 statement to Congress, these bases in Colombia will be a jumping off point for U.S. military escapades across Latin America to combat “anti-U.S. governments”.

Such revelations have led Venezuela’s President Hugo Chavez to put his troops on war alert. The demands of major South American powers, including Brazil and Argentina, for explicit guarantees that the U.S. bases will not be used to attack neighboring countries have fallen on deaf ears in Washington.

Back in bone-chilling Washington, Marino continues his work for peace, justice and Afro-Colombians’ rights. He is working tirelessly to block the U.S. military bases deal. “These U.S. bases in Colombia will worsen the conflict,” reports Marino. “They will not resolve the problems that we have in Colombia. What we need is respect for life in Colombia.”

Time for Change in Colombia: Days of Prayer and Action
April 16-19, 2010

Join tens of thousands to call for peace and justice in Colombia!

In 2009, approximately 25,000 people commemorated the Days of Prayer and Action for Colombia, sending over 21,000 postcards to President Obama calling for real change in U.S.-Colombia relations. Congregations and university groups made more than 18,000 paper dolls displayed in 8 cities to represent the over four million internally displaced people in Colombia.

With your support, the fifth annual Days of Prayer and Action will be even bigger and our voice will be even louder in calling for peace, justice and humanitarian aid for Colombia. Whether you are part of a faith community, a college or university, a union or just a concerned individual, please join us April 16-19, 2010 to be part of the largest nation-wide call for peace in Colombia.

Visit www.witnessforpeace.org for more information or email the WFP National Grassroots Organizer, Ben Beachy (ben@witnessforpeace.org), to get involved.