On June 23rd, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian government announced a bilateral ceasefire. This action brings both parties one step closer to ending the country’s decades-long civil war.

As active supporters of human rights, we celebrate this agreement and we express our support for a negotiated solution to Colombia’s armed conflict. While there is still much to be finalized, it is an important moment to review what both parties have accomplished so far, and what still needs to be done.

**Peace Talks Progress**

Before peace talks formally began on September 4, 2012, both parties signed a general framework outlining six areas for discussion, which includes: holistic rural development, political participation, ending the conflict, illicit drugs, victims, and implementation/verification. The Colombian military and FARC have agreed to a bilateral ceasefire, which becomes official when the accords are signed in their entirety.

As the talks have progressed, the parties agreed to address victims’ issues through a truth commission whose purpose will be “clarifying and making the truth known about what happened in the conflict.” They also created agreements for rural development, victims’ reparation, and disarmament.

The two parties are expected to sign the peace accords as soon as they finalize discussions around the dismantling of paramilitary structures and implementation of the agreement, and then there will be a popular plebiscite to approve the accords.

Although this is an important moment for Colombia, some remain skeptical about conditions on the ground. As human rights defender Enrique Chimonja said in an interview with WFP, “It’s very important to clarify that in Havana, they are not resolving peace.”

**GUARDED OPTIMISM:**

Elsi, a leader from Cauca associated with the organization CIMA, which is made up of Indigenous and campesino organizations, said, “The talks are an achievement, but if our children don’t have anything to eat, if they don’t have a good education, if our territory is being attacked, there won’t be peace. [The talks are] one aspect of this conflict that we have been living for too many years. We also talk about how to generate spaces that will end violence against women because there have been many assassinations of leaders…and also the issue of lands, that women can have access to land to be able to work for food sovereignty, food security.”
Message from the Board Chair

As the accounts in this newsletter demonstrate, lasting peace depends less on who has weapons than on who has food, water, housing, education, and healthcare. That’s why US policy is so misguided, whether in the case of Plan Colombia, the Mérida Initiative, the Alliance for Prosperity, or the embargo against Cuba. Funds flow freely for the equipment and techniques of using force, but stingingly for social justice.

Please engage in changing those mistaken priorities. Hear what the people of Latin America have learned from their hardwon experience. Hold your elected officials accountable to the values of human rights and democracy. Insist on policies that support a better and shared future in the Americas.

Thank you,

John Walsh
Board Chair, Witness for Peace

Building Community Throughout the Hemisphere

In mid August, Witness for Peace regional and national staff will be gathering for an extended annual organizational planning meeting (OPM) in Washington, DC. Last year, there were 12 of us at the OPM, and we spent the meeting deciding on our collective priorities for 2016, including the major goals to create a permanent presence in Honduras and to rebuild two-person teams in both Mexico and Cuba. This year, we are thrilled to be a staff of 20 gathering! We are currently hiring for our Cuba program, which will complete two-person teams in each country site, and we have also been able to create an international team support position.

For the Witness for Peace staff, the OPM is an incredibly important time to build community (since we’re spread throughout the hemisphere!), to plan our work for the year, to discuss new ideas and proposals, and to debrief and evaluate our ongoing work.

This year, we also hope to connect to the broader Witness for Peace community in the area, so please consider joining us for a Witness for Peace fundraiser on

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In June, Witness for Peace Southeast hosted Tomás Gómez Membréño for an event and a press interview in North Carolina, as part of his US tour (more below). We continue to be active in broad-based coalition efforts opposing TPP and supporting in-state tuition for immigrant youth. On August 28th, we’ll have our Annual Solidarity Dinner (formerly Rice & Beans Fundraiser), with a report-back from teen delegates, video shorts of WFPSE leaders taken by our interns, food and music. We’ll be hosting our annual fall speaker’s tour October 1-21, 2016 with Marcia Mejia, an indigenous Nonan leader from southwestern Colombia. Marcia is a spokeswoman for the network CONPAZ (Communities Building Peace in the Territories), and is also a representative for ACIVA, the larger indigenous network of Valle del Cauca department. Contact Ron at ron@witnessforpeace.org to host our fall speaker or for other inquiries.

Witness for Peace Southwest is preparing our October 2016 Latin American speaker’s tour, with Venezuelan LGBTI organizer and writer María Gabriela Pilar del Blanco (Gaby), member of the Revolutionary Sex and Gender Diversity Alliance (ASGDRe). Following our speaker’s tour, we’ll be co-hosting, with Bay Area based sister organization Altruvistas, two delegations: Boricua: The Hidden Colony Delegation, Nov. 4-12 and New Years in Havana: Cuban Socialism and Cultural Resilience, Dec. 27, 2016 - Jan. 4, 2017. Please contact Jeanette or Heather Dupliersir at voyage@altruvistas.com for more information. We’re recruiting new additions to our regional board! Please email regional organizer Jeanette Charles, jcharles.wfpsw@gmail.com to get involved!

Check out our website and Facebook page for further updates. To get in touch with your regional organizer or to learn more about upcoming events and delegations, please visit witnessforpeace.org/grassroots.

Tomás Gómez Membréño

TOMÁS GÓMEZ MEMBREÑO, current General Coordinator of COPINH (The Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras) since the assassination of beloved leader Berta Cáceres, recently visited the Midwest and Washington, DC on a tour organized by Witness for Peace and Witness for Peace Midwest. Throughout his tour, Tomás called for justice for Berta and an immediate end to US military aid to Honduras.

In Chicago, Tomás addressed Senator Durbin, ranking member of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, at a press conference, and demanded immediate suspension of all security funding to Honduras. Tomás advocated via media throughout his trip, including radio interviews with WBEZ Worldview in Chicago, WORT in Madison, and KFAI in Minneapolis. While in Washington, DC, Tomás was featured on Democracy Now!, he met with the Congressional Progressive Caucus and foreign policy staffers in the House and Senate. Delivering a clear message to the Congressional Progressive Caucus, Tomás said, “This US money is going to kill people who are defending their land and territory.”

The Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act (H.R. 5474) was introduced in the US House of Representatives by Rep. Hank Johnson (GA) on June 15th, during Tomás’ visit to Washington. The bill demands a suspension of all US military and police funding until human rights violations committed by Honduran security forces cease and their perpetrators are brought to justice. At the time of print, there were 29 members of Congress co-sponsoring the bill, with more confirmed each day. Tomás calls US citizens, “...to pressure different senators to cut the economic funding of the Honduran police and the Honduran military.” Call your representative today to ensure they co-sponsor the bill, go to witnessforpeace.org to sign our open letter to President Obama, and call for others to support the bill by using #HR5474, #BertaCaceres, and #JusticiaParaBerta on social media.

For full program updates and travel schedule details, visit www.witnessforpeace.org.
Havana, what they’ve been working on is an accord to end the armed conflict between the FARC guerrillas and the national government . . . Peace especially requires new conditions and guarantees to resolve the social inequality which has reigned in Colombia for over 50 years.”

The Witness for Peace Colombia Team

WFP continues to be concerned about the threats facing human rights defenders, especially those working in remote regions, as assassinations have been on the rise, according to the United Nations.

On June 27, 2016, the WFP Colombia Team, along with other international accompaniment NGOs, published a statement regarding the situation of human rights defenders during the Colombian peace process.

We call on the international community to demand that the Colombian state guarantee non-repetition of past abuses. We request that the Colombian Attorney General’s Office speed up investigations regarding violence against human rights defenders. We encourage the international community to continue financially supporting peacebuilding efforts and support peace talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla group. And, we demand that foreign companies operating in Colombia develop practices that do no harm.

US Initiative: Plan Peace Colombia

In February 2016, President Obama welcomed Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos to the White House to commemorate “15 years of bilateral cooperation through Plan Colombia.”

During this meeting, President Obama announced Plan Peace Colombia, a new initiative for US aid to Colombia which appropriates $450 million for fiscal year 2017, pending congressional approval.

According to the White House, Peace Colombia will focus US assistance on:

1. consolidating and expanding security and counter-narcotics while reintegrating the FARC into society

2. expanding state presence and institutions to strengthen the rule of law and rural economies, especially in former conflict areas

3. promoting justice and other essential services for conflict victims.

As Chimonja and many other WFP partners say, this is a critical moment for monitoring the enactment of new conditions that will hopefully deconstruct longstanding social inequality and build true peace for communities throughout Colombia. As the Colombian and US governments transition into this new stage of post-accords support, we at Witness for Peace will continue to monitor the effects of US-funded projects and to amplify the voices of victims and human rights defenders who are struggling to ensure a true, sustainable peace. Join us in Colombia this September or December for delegations focused on building solidarity in post-accords Colombia and accompanying human rights defenders in building peaceful communities and accountable, just institutions.

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August 24th from 7:00-9:00 pm at Busboys and Poets in Brookland in DC!

Finally, we’ve extended this year’s OPM to include a day of direct advocacy to policymakers in Washington. On August 25th, four Witness for Peace advocacy teams will be making the rounds on the Hill, meeting with Congressional offices about US policies in Cuba, Honduras, Mexico, and Colombia. We’re excited to add this day of advocacy to our OPM, for our international teams to speak directly to Congressional offices about the reality of US policies throughout Latin America.

Witness for Peace staff at the 2015 OPM. This year’s gathering will include 20 people and an extended advocacy day in Washington, DC.