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Colombia: The U.S.'s other war

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Last Christmas in an interview broadcast on PBS, President Bush was asked about the future of Iraq. "The future of Iraq is Colombia," he answered with a wily grin. Much of the world recoils as the United States occupies and destroys Iraq. But not so Colombia. There the United States shoves aside the indigenous people, seizes their land, grants it to multinational corporations, and maintains a façade of democracy. And the world is none the wiser. Most think a noble cause lies behind the war -- a fight for freedom. Thus the president finds his war on Columbia much more to his preference.

Knowing this, I traveled to Colombia last March for a three-week pilgrimage. There I came upon heaps of dismal facts. Colombia is overflowing with natural resources and has a population of more than 45 million people. And yet in Colombia, 3.5 million people -- the highest number in the Western Hemisphere -- are internally displaced. Political assassinations are rampant. Thirty die every day -- more than 10,000 every year -- the highest homicide rate in the world. In 25 years, some 200,000 have violently died. The place is a stew of rank violence.

It bubbles up from the repressive Colombian government under the democratically elected but dictatorial President Alvaro Uribe, a drug benefactor and close friend of George W. Bush. Add to the tyranny the brutal Colombian military; the tens of thousands of paramilitary troops who roam the country doing the army's dirty work; the violent rebel groups, FARC and ELN; the ever-present U.S. soldiers and advisors; and the multinational corporations grabbing the land of the poor -- the whole fetid jumble fed by massive U.S. military aid.

The United States, like a looming mountain, overshadows it all. Whatever the slogan -- "Plan Colombia," "the war on drugs" or "the war on terrorism" -- the U.S. funds, organizes and orchestrates mass murder. It enforces the eviction of the poor, and grants vacated land, under the so-called Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, to its corporations, particularly its oil companies. "Colombia," one indigenous person told me, "is ground zero for globalization."

But you would never suspect any of this in Bogota, the historic colonial capital. As I arrived, I braced myself for streets brimming with soldiers, their weapons at the ready. But not here. This is a new kind of war, a hidden war, a war as sly as Bush's smirk. The poor flee and die, and the corporations reap their fortunes -- all out of sight of Bogota's hustle and bustle.

I made it my purpose to see. And so with a few others I toured the state of Cauca in a lurching red, orange and blue bus. Along the way, around every bend, a desolate scene met our eyes. From one side of the vista to the other, the once-forested mountainside had been stripped to the dirt. All that remained were the stumps -- and they blackened from fire. Here was a charred-earth campaign out of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

The land is now controlled by a North American paper company. Along the road lay thousands of pine seedlings, grist for the paper mills, ready for planting. The spindly pines not only supplanted the lush forest. They supplanted the indigenous people.

Said one indigenous leader: "Daily life for the struggling people means being harassed, questioned, displaced, disappeared, perhaps kidnapped or killed by the army, paramilitaries or the guerillas." I quickly understood. This war has nothing to do with drugs. It's about land.

Farther along, a new hydroelectric plant and dam came into view. Two mountaintops bracket the plant, and atop each sit army barracks -- Colombian soldiers keeping watch and poised to kill, all at the service of the U.S.-backed multinationals, all at the price of the blood of the indigenous poor.

One of our destinations was Alto Naya, a remote mountain community that suffered a massacre during Holy Week in 2001. Some 6,000 were forced out and 140 killed. The survivors settled in outlying makeshift communities and together formed a farm. They showed us the places where the people died as they tried to flee up the mountain. Escape proved impossible and the paramilitaries closed in. And not content with guns, they entered new depths of inhumanity: they gathered the community and put the leaders to death with chainsaws.

We went on under a cloud of grief and soon stopped at the bridge over Rio Cauca. Here over the years some 600 have died, often in groups of 20 or 30. Soldiers rounded them up, beheaded them, and dropped them into the river below. The stream of headless bodies served to convey an implicit message of terror.

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And thus the tour continued, in all its wrenching contrasts. Spectacular valleys, green as Ireland, and the distant Andes, softly out of focus -- yet every 15 minutes or so we disembarked to hear of another atrocity. Two or three died here; five or six were dismembered there; here is where they threw 17 at one time into the river. It was a species of the Stations of the Cross -- Christ killed over and over again, but now by Colombian death squads supervised by the United States, so that their land could have reclaimed for the giant corporations.

Later in Cali, we met with the commander of the region, Colonel Bonilla. Colombia, he assured us, is altogether committed to human rights. Then he introduced us to his staff, including two U.S. military advisors (both former marines) who eagerly spoke of their work to "oversee the war" and "destroy the enemy."

Institutional church leaders by and large support the war against the poor. But two Jesuits have become outspoken advocates for human rights. They're prophets, to my mind, and heroes of peace. They carry on despite persecution, harassment, and regular death threats.

Fr. Francisco de Roux has been working to promote peace here for years. "The only way we can rebuild our broken country," he said, "is through its people. I work in Magdalena Medio with our program, Development and Peace. We've started peace conversations, negotiations and agricultural programs. We speak with the guerillas, the paramilitaries, the soldiers and the multinationals, anyone and everyone, in the hope for peace."

"None of us in Colombia," he said, "myself included, have the freedom to live independently of war. We all suffer from it. So we work with everyone -- poor people, guerrillas, soldiers, paramilitaries, government officials. It's an enormous project and very complicated. But we have to act and try to stop the violence."

Fr. Javier Giraldo, in contrast to Fr. Francisco, is shy and gentle. He bears no resemblance to a towering giant of human rights. But according to friends, he's the single greatest threat to the Colombian army. For more than 20 years, he has documented every individual political killing in the country. And every four months, he comes out with his journal, big as the New York City phone book, reporting in great detail the latest assassinations. Little wonder this peaceful Jesuit lives under a cloud of threat.

"These people identify with the persecuted Jesus," Giraldo told me. "They identify with Jesus who was arrested, tortured and killed by soldiers, just like them. And the people who were killed live on in their memory as martyrs. They have a sense that as they carry on their community work for peace, the martyrs come alive among them."

I asked him about hope. How does he maintain it? For hope to be authentic, he said, it must approach the hope of Jesus on the cross, the hope which refuses to give up the values of justice and peace, even as everything collapses, as we seemingly fail.

Such a hope is on the lips of the suffering people. Lisinia, a brave widow of the Alto Naya massacre, said: "We forgive the people who did this to us, but we want justice, truth and reparations. While I live, I will keep on talking."

Such a courageous woman, the best of Colombia, a model of what it means to be human in an inhuman time. And I draw from her new inspiration. I too want to forgive everyone and seek justice, truth and reparations. While I live, I too intend to keep talking. About war and hunger and nukes and global warming. And Colombia as well.

John Dear's latest book, *You Will Be My Witnesses* is available from Orbis Books. For information, see: www.fatherjohndear.org.

To learn more about Colombia, contact the "Colombia Support Network," at www.colombiasupport.net or call 1-608-257-8753, and sign up for their newsletter, form a sister city community, and join a delegation. Also, ask your congressional representatives to cut all U.S. military aid to Colombia.

Editor's Note: Fr. Dear will speak Friday, Nov. 17, at 7 p.m. at the Pax Christi gathering during the SOA weekend. His topic will be "Colombia."

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