



pb



Colombia

15 years



Accompanying human rights defenders



Summary

1994 - 1996

Colombia: a new challenge
The first steps
Looking for support
Father Giraldo: A story to tell
«Giving in is worse than death»
Out of pain, out of love



1997

Operation Genesis:
demanding justice

1998

A severe blow to organisations
The massacre that stained our
history
Massacre causes exodus of small
farmers

1999

A new team in Medellin
Sharing happiness and tears
«Iñigo and Jorge Luis have become
a symbol in this land»
Hope and bloodshed: my year in
Urabá
Three years building together

2000 - 2001

A meeting of embraces
Coming together in difficult times
The pain of exile
Remembering the paramilitary take-
over
A Christmas of «grief and blood» in
Barrancabermeja
Resisting for our lives
Recognised for an ideal

2001 - 2002

Resisting an agenda of death

2002

Apparent peace
Operations against the civilian
population

2003

4 We will continue the struggle
5 Our strength is believing in what we do

6

2004

8 Fighting with dignity
9 Both PBI and risk continue by my side
A verification mission to Arauca

2005

Extrajudicial killings in Antioquia
An urgent call at midnight
Demanding comprehensive justice

2006

Don Petro resists in the midst of
African palm
Local self-protection initiatives
Walking for PBI Colombia
A journey to the end of the world

2007

Casanare: the fight against impunity



2008

Showing what is hidden
They killed Ualberto

2009

A stolen life
«Our private lives have been
scrutinised»
Stories to learn

INTERNACIONAL WORK- COUNTRY GROUPS

Exhibitions to raise awareness
A peace award
Between worlds
Making known the unspeakable
Creating a country group in Latin
America

Financiadores de PBI Colombia

Catalan Agency for Development
Cooperation
Spanish Agency for International
Development Cooperation
Palencia City Hall
Pamplona City Hall
Vitoria City Hall
Broederlijk Delen
Canton Vaud (Suiza)
Christian Aid
Diakonia Suecia
Diakonisches Werk
Individual donations
Fons Mallorquí
Government of Cantabria
Government of Navarra
Intermón-Oxfam (EU)
Kerk in Actie
Mensen met een Missie
Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Misereor
Overbrook Foundation
PBI Italy
PBI Switzerland
Project Counselling Service (EU)
Civil Peace Service
Sigrid Rausing Trust
Trocaire
Weltwärts
Zivik



Editorial

15 years of Peace Brigades International in Colombia, 15 years alongside communities and human rights defenders, 15 years receiving gratitude and, in turn, expressing gratitude for the lessons on courage and dignity we have been taught. 15 years, and there is still more to do.



Today, we mark these 15 years in Colombia, but these are few when compared to the years that organisations and communities have been demanding the fulfilment of their rights. Hopefully, in the future, State institutions and society will respect and understand their valuable work and make unnecessary the presence of international organisations for their protection.

This edition of PBI's Bulletin seeks to bring together these 15 years: the delight, tears and hopes. We are giving a voice to human rights defenders and to the people who have contributed to making this dream a reality by dedicating a part of their lives to PBI.

The opinions and positions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of Peace Brigades International or its funding agencies.

Print: Editorial CÓDICE Ltda.
TEL: 2177010 - 2494992
casaeditorial@etb.net.co

Timeline

of PBI Accompaniments

1994

- PBI opens office in **Bogotá** and **Barrancabermeja**
- Association of Family Members of Detained and Disappeared (Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos - ASFADDES)
- Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (Corporación Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos - CREDHOS)
- Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission (Comisión Intereclesial Justicia y Paz - CIJP)

1995

- José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective (Corporación Colectiva de Abogados José Alvear Restrepo - CCAJAR), **nationally**
- Grass Roots Women's Organisation (Organización Femenina Popular - OFP) in **Barrancabermeja**
- Sabana de Torres Regional Human Rights Committee (Comité Regional de Derechos Humanos Sabana de Torres) until the forced exile of Mario Calixto in 1997

1997/1998

- PBI opens office in Turbo for the region of **Urabá**
- CIJP, in **Urabá**
- Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, in **Urabá**
- Centre for Research and Popular Education (Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular - CINEP) and Peace Communities of San Francisco de Asís, in **Urabá**
- Political Prisoners Solidarity Committee (Fundación Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos - FCSP) in **Bogotá**
- Association for Alternative Social Promotion (Asociación para la Promoción Social Alternativa - MINGA) in **Bogotá** and Norte de Santander (Catatumbo) and Putumayo departments

1999

- PBI opens office in **Medellín**
- ASFADDES Chapter in **Medellín**
- Popular Training Institute (Instituto Popular de Capacitación - IPC) in **Medellín**
- FCSP Chapter in **Medellín**
- Berenice Celeyta in the city of **Cali**
- ASFADDES Chapter in **Barrancabermeja**, until its closure in 2000

2000

- Community for Self-Determination Life and Dignity (Comunidad de Autodeterminación, Vida y Dignidad - CAVIDA), in **Cacarica**, **Chocó** Department

2001

- Corporation Judicial Freedom (Corporación Jurídica Libertad - CJL) in **Medellín**

2003

- National Association of Peasant, Black and Indigenous Women (Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas, Negras e Indígenas de Colombia - ANMUCIC)

2004

- Manuel Cepeda Vargas Foundation (Fundación Manuel Cepeda Vargas), **nationally**

2006

- Luis Carlos Pérez Lawyers' Collective (Colectivo de Abogados Luis Carlos Pérez - CCALCP) in the **Norte de Santander** and **Sur de Bolívar** departments

2007

- Peasant Farmer Association of Antioquia (Asociación Campesina de Antioquia - ACA)¹

2009

- Peasant Farmer Association of the Cimitarra River Valley (Asociación Campesina del Valle del Río Cimitarra - ACVC) in the **Magdalena Medio** region
- Social Corporation for Community Advice and Training Services (Corporación Social para la Asesoría y Capacitación Comunitaria COS-PACC) in **Casanare** and **Boyacá** departments
- Jorge Molano (lawyer), **nationally**

¹ In 2007, PBI began the initial stages to accompany the ACA.

Colombia: a new challenge

In 1993, several members of PBI conduct an exploratory mission and conclude that international accompaniment can make a positive contribution to the situation in Colombia.

Luis Enrique Eguren (Spain), founding member of PBI Colombia

It was a short call from Francesc, brimming over with excitement; something like «the funds are in place, we're on the way: we're going to Colombia». Several church-based aid agencies had joined together, at the initiative of Werner and PBI Germany, to cover the costs of the exploratory mission of PBI to Colombia. The objective? To evaluate whether or not the combined experience of PBI in Guatemala, El Salvador, Sri Lanka and other countries could be transferred to this context. We had received several written petitions in this respect, amongst others from the Justice and Peace Intercongregational Commission, as it was then known, the Association of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared (ASFADDES) and Eduardo Umaña Mendoza¹. From the outset, we saw that the gravity and complexity of the human rights situation in Colombia required a careful and reflective approach on our part, as there was little experience of international accompaniment in the country. To put it briefly, we needed to understand if the presence of international volunteers would

be capable of protecting human rights defenders from threats and attacks and in what conditions or with what strategies that would be possible.

A few months later we arrived in Bogotá to begin what we had already guessed would be two intense months of interviews, reading and journeys: a steep learning curve in the broadest sense of the word. The team was composed of four people from different countries, all with experience in PBI: Francesc (Spain), Janey (USA), Marcela (Colombia) and Quique (Spain). We were warmly received by Justice and Peace, who made us a provisional space in their office, which we used as a base for our operations. They helped us with our initial contacts, which gradually developed into a wide and varied network. From Bogotá other visits were arranged to Barrancabermeja, Barranquilla, Meta and Sucre.

Looking back over these 16 years and at the conversations we had as a team, I believe for the four of us it

Photo: Jorge Mata/Surimages-IPA



Member of the Community for Self-Determination, Life and Dignity (CAVIDA) from Cacarica, Chocó

was one of the most intense periods of our lives. We learnt about a beautiful and complex country immersed in different concurrent conflicts. We were immensely fortunate that hundreds of people agreed to share their analyses, opinions and direct experiences with us. These ranged from members of NGOs, communities and social organisations, to members of the government, security forces, embassy staff etc. I can also say that we laughed, cried and grew as individuals. Colombia lodged itself in our heads and our hearts.

Following the mission we spent several weeks producing a report that ended up totalling more than two hundred pages. We concluded that international accompaniment had a role to play in Colombia in certain scenarios and under certain conditions. Based on this report, PBI held a series



Photo: Jorge Mata/Surimages-IPA

Demobilisation of a paramilitary group in 2005

The first steps

We had three very specific petitions: one from Padre Javier Giraldo to accompany and provide an international presence in the shelter of Justice and Peace for displaced persons in Barrancabermeja; another from CREDHOS to accompany them in Barrancabermeja, and finally one from ASFADDES to provide accompaniment in Bogotá.

In the report we established that there was no international presence nor had there ever been in the past. The presence of PBI would therefore be something completely new in Colombia and the need for international accompaniment was felt very keenly by human rights NGOs.

The initial assessment took place in May-June 1993 and the first team from PBI Colombia arrived in the country on 3 October 1994. We had the impression, later confirmed, that this was the PBI project that would receive most support from individuals, NGOs, institutions and embassies.

Francesc Riera, founding member of PBI Colombia (Spain)

►► of discussions that culminated in the decision to open a project in Colombia, after which the fundraising work began. The idea of accompaniment was well received by the aid agencies and we were soon able to open a small support office in London, train volunteers and carry out a lot of other work. In November we opened the first team in Bogotá, shortly followed by the opening of a team in Barrancabermeja. Of course we felt an enormous responsibility. Was our analysis correct that we could offer protection to human rights defenders? Would we be putting human rights defenders and volunteers at risk? Fortunately the passage of time, experience and all the support that we received from the beginning seem to answer these initial questions, as well as many others that have arisen since, in the constant challenge of international accompaniment in Colombia. ●

¹ Eduardo Umaña Mendoza was a prestigious lawyer, responsible for very sensitive cases and especially those of the disappearances of the siege of the Palace of Justice and of the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. Umaña Mendoza was assassinated in Bogotá on 18 April 1998.

In the early 90's the paramilitary pressure intensifies and many human rights defenders seek exile abroad.

Xabier Zabala Bengoetxea, volunteer from the Basque Country (1994-6)

Barrancabermeja was experiencing a relatively calm period; one could now say it was the calm before the storm. It was a city with an established equilibrium. This included a well-defined boundary between the neighbourhoods in the East and the rest of the city, a boundary that separated much more than just districts. Within this context it was difficult to define the work of accompaniment. Human rights workers didn't feel the risk. They even made jokes about our impatience to define the work.

We accompanied the Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS) in their office, as well as accompanying its president Osiris Bayther and the human rights promoters in their trips to Yondó, El Centro and Cantagallo. We had a relationship with the OFP in which we shared analysis, undertook ad hoc accompaniments of young people from the neighbourhoods in the east of the city and sometimes we accompanied them to the municipalities. With the Human Rights Committee of Sabana de Torres, which belonged to CREDHOS, we reached agreements on visits and we travelled to the more remote villages in this municipality, confirming violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by

the Los Güanes counter-guerrilla battalion; we witnessed how the paramilitaries would occupy the territory straight afterwards; we witnessed their arrival in Sabana Torres, Yondó and Cantagallo, and we witnessed the siege tightening its grip on Barrancabermeja.

The accompaniment of the Sabana de Torres Human Rights Committee, with Mario Calixto and Mireia resisting paramilitary pressure, was one of the most important accompaniments of PBI during that period. When, sadly, they could resist no longer, Mario Calixto and Mireia along with Osiris Bayther, left the country to go into exile. The paramilitaries ended up taking possession of Sabana de Torres and made it into an important centre of their operations. The prologue for the paramilitary entry into Barrancabermeja was written. The consequences in terms of human rights violations, establishing an economic model based on land seizure, and the closure of space for human rights defenders was dramatic. December 2000 marked the climax of the paramilitary entry into the eastern neighbourhoods of Barrancabermeja; Tora¹ would never be the same again. ●

¹ «Tora»: name given to Barrancabermeja by Laura Restrepo in her book «The Dark Bride».



Osiris Bayther (left) with the British volunteer Tessa Mackenzie

Looking for support

In 1994 PBI opens an office in Barrancabermeja and three volunteers begin to accompany the President of CREDHOS.

Chiara Gambardella, volunteer from Italy (2008-9)



Francisco Campo (left) with Spanish volunteer Ernesto Calvo

Francisco Campo is a political activist who worked in the Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS) from 1987 until 2004. He is currently a member of the Nation Corporation in Barrancabermeja. An attempt was made on Francisco's life in 1989 and this forced him to leave Barrancabermeja. Nevertheless, he returned to work with CREDHOS as a rural human rights promoter and then as vice president from 1995. PBI has accompanied CREDHOS since 1994.

PBI: Why did CREDHOS ask PBI for accompaniment?

Francisco Campo: The decade from 1986 to 1996 was a very tough period in the Magdalena Medio, in particular the period between 1987 and 1992, when the Armada 007 network was active. This was an intelligence network that worked with hired assassins and in collaboration with the Nueva Granada Army Battalion. They were known as «death squadrons».

This «dark age» began with the assassination of Leonardo Posada Pedraza in 1986. He was a representative of the Patriotic Union Party in Congress. CREDHOS was born in this context in the year 1987. The organisation's desire to expose those implicated in this criminal network had a high cost. CREDHOS lost six of its members between 1991 and 1992, and almost the entire management committee was forced to leave the city, and in some cases the country. In 1993

an assembly was held for the purpose of restructuring the management committee of CREDHOS. At the assembly we made the decision to request accompaniment from PBI. This was at the suggestion of Father Javier Giraldo as well as members of the Association of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared (ASFADDES).

PBI: What do you remember about the relationship between CREDHOS and the first PBI team?

FC: In 1994 the first PBI team arrived in Barrancabermeja. There were only three people: Javier Navarro (Spain), Nicole (France) and Jenny (USA). They would work on a rotational basis: spending the day in the CREDHOS office, in the PBI house or accompanying Osiris Bayther, who was the President of the organisation at that time and at very high risk. We built up a relationship of fellowship and of total integration with these individuals. It was also a very romantic time: citizens from the West would leave their homes and life projects to go to the «Third World» in order to accompany individuals who, in turn, were putting themselves at risk

to accompany other people. It was a challenge for them, trying to understand our particular outlook on life put them in a state of permanent uncertainty but that eventually resulted in the creation of a very close bond.

PBI: What do you think the accompaniment of PBI meant for CREDHOS?

FC: PBI played a fundamental role throughout this period of consolidation for CREDHOS, above all for the message that it transmitted. These three PBI volunteers represented the support of the international community for CREDHOS. Thanks to the dissuasion that PBI exercised over the State and the illegal armed groups, CREDHOS was able to raise its voice once more in the region and to extend its work to more areas. Furthermore, the political work that PBI undertook overseas gave us the opportunity to look beyond Colombia. PBI was the link that made it possible for CREDHOS to approach other international organisations such as Amnesty International and Christian Aid. ●



Francisco Campo (centre) during an event in the city of Barrancabermeja in 2001

Father Giraldo: a story to tell

After learning about PBI's experience in Central America, Father Javier Giraldo requests accompaniment for Colombia.

Mari Vera, volunteer from Spain (2007-9)

Father Javier Giraldo radiates serenity¹. For many years, he has led the struggle to defend human rights and has often witnessed barbaric violence. However, he still maintains the composure of a person convinced in what he is doing and why.

Father Giraldo was one of the key individuals behind PBI's arrival in Colombia in 1994. At the end of the 1980's, he learned about the experience of international accompaniment in Central America and thought it could be a useful tool in the Colombian context, given the grave situation of long-term patterns of systematic human rights violations in the country. He saw that a crucial role could be played by these «international witnesses», people that arrived saw what happened and later explained it so these acts did not remain entirely unpunished and silenced.

With a mischievous smile, he recalls the frightened stare of the person at PBI International in London when he made the request for accompaniment. She was only able to say: «Colombia is different, Colombia is different», by way of explanation for the initial negative response to accompany in the country.

But a few years later, in 1993, a small exploratory commission came to Colombia with the purpose of determining the feasibility of a future PBI accompaniment. After a month of observation, they wrote a report of colossal proportions. What they saw during these few weeks was an ever-greater presence of paramilitaries



Father Javier Giraldo, Mónica from Operazione Colomba (Italian NGO), and Italian volunteer Chiara Gambardella.

endless demand for a small group of volunteers.

Nonetheless, he stresses how PBI's presence has helped save many lives throughout these years. For instance, during a paramilitary takeover of Dabeiba it was rumoured that Carlos Castaño² was at the checkpoint. The PBI volunteers, who were accompanying members of CIJP, were questioned at great length. In the end, they were allowed to continue on their way without any trouble. Father Javier also stresses PBI's moral support

According to Father Javier, the present time presents a challenge for PBI. The current strategies of attacking human rights organisations are more orientated towards criminal prosecutions, false accusations, and stigmatisation of human rights defenders. These are more subtle forms of aggression, but the effect are the same: undermining human rights work, weakening organisations, and silencing reports of abuses. Impunity; what Father Giraldo calls the strategy of «lady justice and the rifle».

«THE CURRENT STRATEGIES OF ATTACKING HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS ARE MORE ORIENTED TOWARDS CRIMINAL PROSECUTIONS, FALSE ACCUSATIONS AND STIGMATISATION».

employing violence against communities and causing displacement, death and destruction. At this time, the annual figures for deaths were exorbitant. The following year PBI returned to Colombia, but this time to stay. Father Javier recalls the principal problem at first being the

and recalls the difficult task of searching for dead bodies after the massacre of La Resbalosa in 2005, in which members of the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó were murdered. PBI was also there at the time, accompanying in these moments of extreme pain and anger.

International accompaniment continues to play a key role in all of this. We are completing 15 years in Colombia – how long will we have to continue? ●

¹ This text is based on an interview with Father Javier Giraldo in August 2009

² Former paramilitary leader

«Giving in is worse than death»

In 1995, PBI begins to accompany Josué Giraldo, a human rights defender who fought to bring to light the human rights violations committed in Colombia. One year later he is murdered.

Soraya Gutiérrez Argüello, José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective (CCAJAR)

Peace Brigades International began to accompany the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective (CCAJAR) in 1995. In this same year, the first contact took place between PBI and the Civic Committee of Meta, a forum of human right organisations, social organisations, doctors, agrarian and trade-union leaders and members of the Patriotic Union political party. The Civic Committee had come together due to the grave human rights situation existing in the department and the murders, threats and harassment faced by social and political leaders in the region.

After being established as a political movement, the Patriotic Union (UP) won many votes in several regions of Colombia, which allowed the party to gain various positions within public institutions. In Meta, the UP had many mayors, council members, and deputies who won seats to represent the nascent political party. Given the Patriotic Union's impact in the department, the paramilitary structures, which operated with the complicity and acquiescence of the Seventh Brigade of the National Army, implemented a systematic policy of persecution and elimination of UP members¹.



Sister Noemí from the Civic Committee of Meta with two PBI volunteers.

established as a space to counteract the para-State violence and broadly report the abuses committed by paramilitary forces and their ties with Víctor Carranza, an important emerald merchant, and the military forces. Furthermore, the Committee reported the existence of paramilitary training centres supported by British and Israeli mercenaries and former military members from the Magdalena Medio region.

At this time, Peace Brigades International also began to accompany the Civic Committee. The first human rights defenders to be accompanied were Josué Giraldo and Sister Noemí Palencia. I remember one of the first PBI volunteers. She was young, tall, and had long hair. Her name was Pascale, but I affectionately called her «Pascual», which is a name commonly used by farmers in the Cundinamarca and Boyacá.

HE USES THE ONLY WEAPON HE POSSESSED, HIS VOICE, WHICH WAS THE VOICE OF THOUSANDS OF VICTIMS. HE DENOUNCED WHAT WAS OCCURRING IN COLOMBIA.

Death, hopelessness and fear smothered the inhabitants of the region; every day UP members were murdered. It is estimated that from 1985 to 1995 36 massacres were committed and 700 persons were murdered², including mayors, deputies and other leaders from the region. All of these actions had the clear objective of annihilating the Patriotic Union in Meta³.

Faced with this situation, in 1991, the Human Rights Civic Committee was

The members of the Committee were not exempt from this campaign of persecution once it came into existence however. As a result, then-President Josué Giraldo Cardona went to Bogotá in order to look for support and solidarity. He met with different organisations, including the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission, the Political Prisoners Solidarity Committee, the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective and the Colombian Commission of Jurists, among others.

At the beginning of 1995, the Committee was forced to close its doors and the members were forcibly displaced to Bogotá. As a way to support the Committee's work, we began the campaign Human Rights SOS for Meta and achieved the establishment of a follow-up commission, which included human rights organisations, the Colombian State, and accompaniment by the German Embassy and PBI, who both actively supported the commission's establishment.

▶▶ One of the objectives of this campaign was to support legal proceedings relating to several crimes committed in the department. However, the Colombian State's lack of political will rose like a wall and hindered progress in these cases. Nonetheless, Josué's work did not cease. As a result of the advocacy carried out as part of the campaign, he was invited to visit the European Parliament in 1995 and attend the hearings of the then United Nations Human Rights Commission. With a suitcase filled with denunciations and with the hope that international solidarity would create pressure to improve the human rights situation, Josué travelled to Europe where he presented the testimony of his experiences, based on his commitment to the victims, based on his relentless fight against impunity and injustice. He uses the only weapon he possessed, his voice, which was the voice of thousands of victims. He denounced what was occurring in Colombia. The humanity expressed in his words was able to awaken the awareness of many sectors and the European Parliament issued a pronouncement on the human rights situation in Colombia and in the department of Meta. Today we still hear his words:

«The defence of human rights arises in me connected to the problem of violence, because when we started to process the demands for justice before different judicial

institutions and disciplinary mechanisms, it was accompanying the widows of murder victims and disappeared persons. [...] We have wanted to respond with a central proposal based on life, the importance of life, the constancy of life, and the urgency of defending it to allow democratic confrontation in the civilised game of words and not within in an environment of murder, massacres or war. [...] For it to be possible to place life as a central value, we consequently had to demand not only the cessation of human rights violations, but also of the war itself. Our message continues to be the urgency of peace»⁴.

Josué was a person of integrity, an exemplary father and husband, and a human rights defender willing to defend life with dignity. Despite having suffered an attack on his life in his hometown of Pensilvania that nearly killed him, he did not give in faced with the pain of the victims, he did not abandon his fight for truth and against impunity –this impunity that corrupts the deepest foundations of a State and society, this impunity that has allowed the crimes to be repeated, this impunity that murdered Josué on 13 October 1996 when he was in Villavicencio with his two young daughters, five and seven years old. Because, despite the threats against his life, he wanted to be human, he wanted to be a father, he wanted to be a friend and he visited his family to try to share a weekend with his young girls. However, the

reaper of dreams and hopes took the life of this extraordinary human being⁵.

Josué used to repeat: «Giving in is worse than death» and in 1997, we published a report with this title in homage to his memory. Thirteen years after the murder of Josué, the Committee has reopened its doors. With PBI's accompaniment, it continues to support the organisation of victims, the reconstruction of the social fabric, and the defence of the rights of victims to truth, justice and comprehensive reparation, so that more crimes are never again committed. ●

1 «Ceder es Más Terrible que la Muerte: 1985-1996; una Década de Violencia en el Meta», Abogados Demócratas, ASCODAS, Justicia y Paz, Bogotá: 1997

2 «Cortarle las alas a la impunidad», Testimonio de vida de Josué Giraldo. Testimony gathered by Luis Guillermo Pérez Casas, Centre National de Développement au Coopération, Brussels, Belgium: 1997, page 25

3 «Ceder es Más Terrible que la Muerte: 1985-1996; una Década de Violencia en el Meta», Abogados Demócratas, ASCODAS, Justicia y Paz, Bogotá: 1997

4 «Cortarle las alas a la impunidad» Testimonio de vida de Josué Giraldo. Testimony gathered by Luis Guillermo Pérez Casas, Centre National de Développement au Coopération, Brussels, Belgium: 1997, page 104

5 «During the 53rd period of sessions of the United Nations Human Rights Commission on 11 March 1997, a moment of silence was observed in the plenary in homage to the memory of Josué Giraldo. [...] In the same sense, in the plenary on 9 April 1997, the Rapporteur against Summary Executions, Mr. Bacre Maly Ndiaye expressed that human rights defenders, as in the case of Josué Giraldo, deserve more than a posthumous homage. We, governments, United Nations Bodies, owe them respect and protection». Taken from «Cortarle las alas a la impunidad» (page 114)

Out of pain, out of love

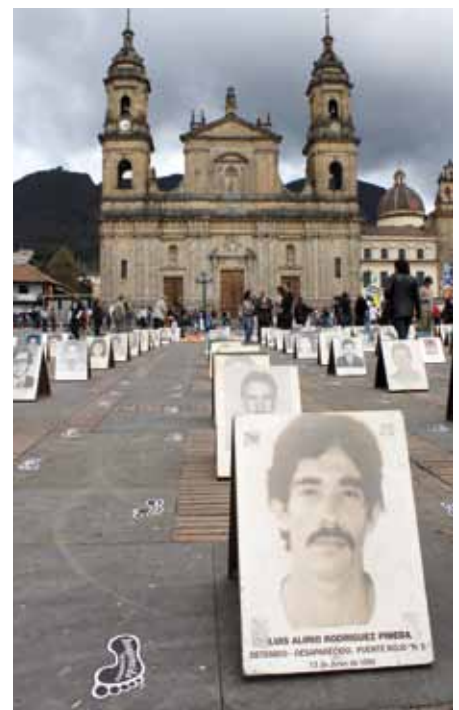
After years of intense surveillance, ASFADDES asks PBI for accompaniment in 1994.

Julia Wältring, volunteer from Germany (2007-9)

Gloria Luz Gómez, national coordinator of the Association of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared (ASFADDES) and Esperanza Merchán, general secretary, are currently working tirelessly, along with many other family members, for the ratification by the Colombian government of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, adopted by the United Nations in 2006. There is, however, much more to ASFADDES' work: the association also accompanies relatives in the search for the disappeared. It provides moral and physical support

to the relatives and also promotes legal and political mechanisms to bring about measures against those materially and intellectually responsible, and for the ethical, moral and integral reparation of the families. It also promotes and supports grassroots organisation of the family members of the detained or disappeared, providing opportunities for training and education.

ASFADDES was one of the organisations that requested accompaniment from PBI in 1994, a very difficult time for Colombia. ▶▶



ASFADDES commemorates the International Week for Disappeared Persons in Bogotá

▶ «At that time there were massacres and assassinations every day. We used to wonder whether we would wake up the next morning. We were constantly being followed, our office was being watched and we began to receive more direct telephone threats», remembers Gloria.

The disappearance of the lawyer, Alirio Pedraza, in 1990 was one of the events which confirmed that the Association's members could be attacked as human rights defenders. In the end, intense surveillance and harassment during a march by ASFADDES in 1993 led them to take the definitive decision to ask PBI for accompaniment. The presence of PBI could not completely remedy this situation of harassment and persecution, but the relationship with the international community helped during this highly traumatic period.

During the nineties when the defamation and accusations against human rights defenders, and the devaluation of their work, were on the rise, the fact that



Gloria Gómez, national coordinator for the Association of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared, with Belgian volunteer Catiane Vander Kelen in Popayán

«AT THAT TIME THERE WERE ASSASSINATIONS EVERY DAY. WE USED TO WONDER WHETHER WE WOULD WAKE UP THE NEXT MORNING».



«Has anyone seen them? This is my uncle; he was disappeared 10 years ago». ASFADDES commemorates the International Week for Disappeared Persons in Bogotá.

the international community had turned its gaze towards Colombia and was a constant presence, contributed to the strengthening of non-governmental organisations.

In spite of all its problems, ASFADDES managed to raise awareness amongst Colombian society because according to Gloria: «nowadays the media talk about forced disappearance; six years ago nobody talked about it». Furthermore, the classification of forced disappearance as a crime under Law 589 of 2000, with mechanisms to search for disappeared persons, was the fruit of the tireless efforts of ASFADDES. According to Gloria, another very specific advance is that «a language has been generated specific to the relatives of the disappeared and there is education for family members that is based on our own experience».

Esperanza Merchán concludes that «in spite of the pain and the anger that we feel, we remain constant through pain and love, and it is these feelings that keep ASFADDES going. It is the courage within us. The support that we have received from the international community has also been one of the foundations on which we have resisted and continue to resist». ●

Operation Genesis: demanding justice

As a consequence of Operation Genesis, more than 10.000 small farmers are forcibly displaced from the Lower Atrato (Department of Chocó).

Bianca Bauer, volunteer from Germany (2009)

PBI talked to Danilo Rueda about Operation Genesis and the opening of the PBI office in Turbo. He is a member of the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission (CIJP) which has worked in the Urabá region since 1996.

PBI: What do you remember about Operation Genesis?

Danilo Rueda: The Genesis military operation was carried out in the area of the Cacarica and Salaquí rivers between 24 and 27 February 1997. It was part of a strategy to exert control over the population and territory by implementing the paramilitary strategy, led by the army's 17th Brigade. It was carried out in four ways – through bombardment, attacks by air and land, the murder of Marino López and the forced displacement of over 10.000 campesinos.

Marino López was an ordinary small farmer; he wasn't an opposition party activist. According to his family and the people closest to him, he was a shy person, a worker from the countryside, an Afro-Colombian, who didn't get

involved very much in political activities or the community leadership. He had a nice family, with two children. They killed him because they wanted to instil terror and he was the man chosen for that purpose.

He was decapitated, his body cut up into several pieces, and thrown in the river. After they had cut off his head, they played football with it. It's a crime which has shocked a lot of people who have heard eye-witness accounts of it, and it has inspired poems, songs, music and deep reflection.

PBI: To what extent has there been justice in the wake of Operation Genesis?

DR: There was total impunity. Now, General Rito Alejo del Río Rojas is behind bars, pending trial. The General is subject to legal proceedings for the crime against Marino López, but this investigation can not be divorced from the issue of forced displacement and the paramilitary operation carried out in the Lower Atrato region.



Years after their displacement, the communities return to their land in Chocó.

PBI: Why is the civilian population repressed to this extent in the region?

DR: They're aiming to steal the land through the displacements, and most people have decided to keep quiet and accept this dispossession, which is associated with businesses linked to palm-oil, bananas, cattle-ranching and deforestation. The extraction of natural resources is being carried out through mining, as has occurred in the north of the Chocó, and as may happen in the Lower Atrato. In addition, there are infrastructure schemes such as the Pan-American Highway. They want to impose a social and economic model, and the indigenous, mestizo, and Afro-Colombian population which does not fit within the logic of this development model has to either leave or die.

PBI: Why did you request accompaniment by PBI?

DR: We've known PBI for fifteen years; we travelled with members of PBI during their first exploratory exercise before they had decided who they would accompany. Initially, you accompanied us in Bogotá and to some regional activities, but we saw that it was important for you to work not only with human rights organisations but also with communities which have been victims of the conflict and this was the concrete request for accompaniment we made in 1997 at a meeting in Germany. In December 1997, it was agreed that a team would be created in Urabá which has been very important, both for the human rights organisations and for the communities in the region. ●



A severe blow to organisations

The raid on the CIJP office is one of many attacks against the organisation. Nonetheless, they continue to accompany communities.

Alessandra Miraglia, volunteer from Italy (2008-9)

PBI interviewed Luz Alba Santoyo, associated with the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission (CIJP) in two stages. During the first, from 1993 to 1999, she worked in the then Inter-Congregational Justice and Peace Commission (Comisión Intercongregacional de Justicia y Paz) directly supporting the work of Father Javier Giraldo, who was the organisation's legal representative. She returned to the CIJP in 2006 and is currently responsible for the documentation centre.

PBI: Justice and Peace's office was the target of a raid in 1998. Can you describe what happened in during that operation?

Luz Alba Santoyo: The raid on the headquarters began at one o'clock in the afternoon on 13 May 1998. It was authorised by the terrorism unit of the Regional Public Prosecutor's Office in Bogotá, and was carried out unlawfully by army officers and members of the Cuerpo Técnico de Investigación (Technical Investigation Corps of the Public Prosecutor's Office), many of them experts in recovering computer documents¹. Other soldiers surrounded the building and prevented CIJP members who had gone out to lunch from returning, which left only a few members of the

organisation in the office². Entry was also denied to representatives from the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Colombia Conference of Bishops. No government officials were present³.

PBI: What do you think was the motive behind the raid?

LAS: The raid was in response to military intelligence reports, according to which there was an ELN arsenal, explosives and propaganda in the building. The operation was in line with the interests of the 13th Brigade, commanded by General Rito Alejo del Río, who has been repeatedly condemned by CIJP, both for the crimes perpetrated in Urabá when he was in command of the 17th Brigade, and for his alleged links with paramilitarism⁴. The soldiers concentrated on the Nunca Más (Never Again) project, a database which held information on the crimes against humanity committed in Colombia from 1966 onwards⁵. Those conducting the raid pointed their weapons at the people there, confiscated their identity documents, intensively interrogated them, and branded them «guerrillas»⁶. After preventing them from having outside contact, they began filming



Photo: KOLKO

In 2009, the Embera indigenous people of Chocó, accompanied by CIJP, voted against mineral exploitation in their ancestral territory.

them and checking over and reading documents, examining the computers and copying their contents⁷.

PBI: What were the implications of the raid for the Justice and Peace Commission?

LAS: On the one hand, it was a severe blow to the CIJP since it led to Father Giraldo leaving the organisation, as he was declared a military target and forced to go into hiding⁸. On the other, it has made the Commission stronger, and it has continued to face false legal accusations levelled at some of its members, such as Father Giraldo, Abilio Peña and Danilo Rueda. None of them have ever been found guilty of any offence⁹. ●

«It's a way of exerting psychological pressure, creating doubts about us».

«CIJP was the victim of eight legal actions between 1997 and 2008. We have received seven death threats, a kidnapping last year, two attempted forced disappearances and a murder. When repression with bullets and intimidation fails to work, they try judicial persecution.

It's been difficult for our organisation because instead of being able to think about protecting the population's human rights and about how to be more legally effective in regaining land, we are having to defend ourselves from false charges.

In addition, there has been illegal phone-tapping of members of CIJP. It's been over a month and a half since this illegal tapping came to light, and so far the Public Prosecutor's Office has not allowed us to protect our legal rights, we haven't been able to gain access to the files which cover the work which we legitimately perform and our family lives. It's a way of exerting psychological pressure, creating doubts about us and therefore seeking to make it impossible for us to accompany the communities on a permanent basis».

Danilo Rueda, member of the CIJP

1 «Public Statement by the Inter-Congregational Justice and Peace Commission on the events of 13 May 1998», CIJP, 18 May 1998

2 Interview with Luz Alba Santoyo, Bogotá, 22 July 2008

3 «Statement by the Chairman of the Colombia Conference of Bishops, Alberto Giraldo Jaramillo, on the raid on Justice and Peace», Colombia Conference of Bishops, Bogotá, 14 May 1998

4 «Public Statement by the Inter-Congregational Justice and Peace Commission on the events of 13 May 1998», CIJP, 18 May 1998

5 «Reaction to the raid on the Justice and Peace Headquarters in Bogotá», Human Rights Defenders' Ad Hoc Committee, 16 May 1998

6 «Public Statement by the Inter-Congregational Justice and Peace Commission on the events of 13 May 1998», CIJP, 18 May 1998

7 Father Peter Schorr: «Letter to the Public Prosecutor's Office», International Office of Justice, Peace and the Safeguarding of Creation, Rome, 21 May 1998

8 «The threats to human rights continue in Colombia», CIJP, 10 July 1998

9 Interview with Luz Alba Santoyo, Bogotá, 22 July 2008

The massacre that stained our history

During their incursion into the capital of the Magdalena Medio region, the paramilitaries murder seven people and disappear another twenty five. The organisations respond with protests and condemnations.

Lars Helmersson, volunteer from Sweden (1995-2004¹)

On Saturday 16 May 1998, at eight in the evening, about 50 men dressed in civilian clothes, heavily armed and travelling in four trucks, invaded Barrancabermeja's south-eastern district. They began rounding up the people they regarded as collaborators with the guerrilla. Those who resisted were murdered on the spot.

Despite the strong army presence in the city and the fact that the action had been announced beforehand², the paramilitaries were able to continue with their operation until 11 o'clock that night, and then leave the city with the lorries loaded with the people they had captured³.

After the first days of confusion, it was established that the death toll from this paramilitary incursion totalled 7 murders and 25 disappearances. A new paramilitary group which called itself AUSAC (Autodefensas de Santander y Sur del César - Santander and Southern César Self-defence Forces) claimed responsibility for the action, arguing that the victims were members of the ELN, although this was denied both by their relatives and by the ELN itself⁴.

The strong protests, including a general strike of several days, showed that Barrancabermeja was a force to be reckoned with, that the paramilitaries would not succeed in destroying civil society with similar operations.

The organisations which led the protests and condemnations received many threats and PBI increased its accompaniment of the Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS) and the Grassroots Women's Organisation (OFP), so that it was round-the-clock. Despite this, Osiris Bayther Ferias, the then president of the Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS), was in the end forced to flee the country.

In November of that year, the relatives of the disappeared formed the Barrancabermeja chapter of the Association of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared (ASFADDES)⁵, which received accompaniment from PBI until it closed due to the paramilitary takeover of Barrancabermeja in 2001.

A year after the massacre, a controversial International Tribunal of Opinion was held in Barrancabermeja, which issued a judgment against the



Act of commemoration for the victims of the massacre of 16 May 1998

Colombian state for its responsibility for the massacre⁶.

Although, the information gathered during the testimony of demobilised paramilitaries gave rise to many questions and doubts, it has led to the location of the remains of some of the disappeared. To date, five have been identified⁷ and given a burial. According to testimonies by paramilitaries known as «Julián Bolívar» and «El Panadero», they realised that the people they had captured were not really guerrillas⁸. They stated that it was «Camilo Morantes», the late paramilitary commander who, while on a drinking binge, gave the order to murder them⁹. It seems that it is always those now dead who are responsible for the murders. The organisations continue to seek the truth. ●



Commemoration of the massacre of 16 May

1 Lars Helmersson was in PBI for four years between 1995-2004

2 Vanguardia Liberal newspaper, 19 May 1998

3 CREDHOS, 17 May 1998

4 Vanguardia Liberal newspaper, 5 June 1998

5 «Veinte años de historia y lucha», («Twenty years of history and struggle»), ASFADDES, 23 April 2008

6 El Espectador, 17 May 1999

7 Vanguardia Liberal, 8 January 2009

8 Vanguardia Liberal, 13 July 2007

9 Vanguardia Liberal, 23 April 2008

Massacre causes exodus of small farmers

For four months, 14.000 people in the Magdalena Medio region demand their rights in the city of Barrancabermeja.

Pascal Blum, volunteer from Switzerland (2007-9)



Berenice Celeyta

In 1989, Berenice Celeyta founded ISEMBRAR, an organisation that she left in 1992 to form the Association for Alternative Social Promotion (MINGA). This organisation operates in the north-east of the country, in the department of Norte de Santander and the Magdalena Medio region. With MINGA, Berenice carried out criminal investigations, provided legal advice and, above all, worked on issues related to forced displacement and the return of displaced people. In 1999, she began to work in the Valle de Cauca department with

«AT THE END OF 1997 AND BEGINNING OF 1998, MANY CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY WERE COMMITTED IN THE REGION. AT THAT TIME, THE PARAMILITARY ACTIVITIES IN MAGDALENA MEDIO WERE VERY VIOLENT».

the Association for Investigation and Social Action (NOMADESC), which focuses on economic, social and cultural rights!

PBI: Is there any event in your working life which is engraved in your memory?

Berenice Celeyta: Yes, in 1998 I was working with MINGA in Barrancabermeja. That year, there was a mass exodus of small farmers and miners from Sur de Bolívar department. About 14.000 people fled the area: some came on foot, others by boat or by bus. They arrived in Barrancabermeja

and looked for somewhere to stay. They began to occupy various places, such as schools, colleges, and the Human Rights Ombudsman's offices. The exodus lasted more than four months during which the city was completely packed. The living conditions for the people who had been displaced were terrible. There were children and pregnant women. I think that the first fortnight was the worst because there were no suitable living spaces, and people even lay on the ground. In addition, so many people packed in the same place - up to 1.000 in a single school - spread a lot of disease.

PBI: What was the reason for the exodus?

BC: At the end of 1997 and beginning of 1998, many crimes against humanity were committed in the region. At that time, the paramilitary activities in Magdalena Medio were very violent. There were three Blocks concentrated in the region: the Peasant Farmers' Self Defence Groups of César, the Southern Bolívar Block, and the Magdalena Medio Block. They carried out several massacres, but the direct cause of the exodus was the massacre in Cerro de Burgos, a port an hour away from Simití. It was a massacre which spread terror throughout the population. The paramilitaries arrived at Cerro in four boats, entered a pool hall, dragged out the people and killed them. They travelled round the area and went to houses calling for the people named on the lists. The people who



Farmers from Magdalena Medio



► lived in the area had no choice but to leave their homes if they wanted to stay alive. However, the exodus was also a message to the government that it needed to solve the paramilitary problem in the region.

PBI: What happened during the exodus and what was MINGA's role?

BC: At the beginning of the exodus, we started negotiations with central government, which we attended as MINGA. The meetings were attended not only by the small farmers, but also by the miners, a range of organisations from southern Bolivar, and civil society organisations from Barrancabermeja. They were high-level negotiations, primarily with Presidents Samper and later Pastrana. As they were so long and complicated we had to go to Bogotá to carry out advocacy work. In parallel with the negotiations there were activities such as a commission of verification with the international community and a negotiating committee, which still operates today, 10 years later. MINGA was present at every stage of the negotiations.



Farmers from Magdalena Medio

When one of the miners' leaders was assassinated (they cut off his head and played football with it), the paramilitaries said that they were cleansing the area so that the multinationals could enter it. Another issue was the introduction of the African palm monoculture. Palm plantations were being introduced throughout the region, and the small farmers received no benefit from this. Quite the opposite – it was clear that the operators and beneficiaries

the government's failure to honour the agreements. To sum up, while they have gained in some respects, they still live in sub-human conditions. Their situation has not improved. ●

1 The «DESC» of «NOMADESC» is the Spanish acronym for economic, social and cultural rights.

«THE LIVING CONDITIONS FOR THE PEOPLE WHO HAD BEEN DISPLACED WERE TERRIBLE».

PBI: What were the demands of the victims of this displacement?

BC: Basically they were the creation of a Bloque de Búsqueda (Search Unit) to combat the paramilitary groups, and demands for decent living conditions. Obviously, the Bloque de Búsqueda never materialised, because after the displaced people returned there were even worse massacres. The miners specifically wanted to continue to mine gold in the traditional way, and not with modern techniques involving cyanide and mercury. They did not agree with the multinationals entering their territory, still less so under the circumstances in which it was happening.

were the paramilitaries. The companies which introduced African palm were made up of people known for their links with paramilitarism.

PBI: What did the small farmers and miners gain from all of this in the end?

BC: I think, on the one hand, not being definitively driven from their territories. They created a very strong resistance movement within their communities which has allowed them to stay in the region despite the conflict. The war enabled them to learn about human rights, to know their own rights. However, it will soon be the 10th anniversary of



Farmer from Magdalena Medio

A new team in Medellin

At the end of the 90s attacks against human rights organisations in the capital of Antioquia increases.

Matteo Burato, volunteer from Italy (2009)

At the end of the 1990s violent acts against human rights defenders gave rise to concerns about an increase in their persecution. The explosion of a bomb in the entrance of the Association of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared (ASFADDES)¹ offices and other explosions throughout the city², the kidnapping of four researchers from the Popular Training Institute (IPC) and the assassinations of human rights defenders including Jesús María Valle Jaramillo³ and Hernán Henao Delgado⁴ revealed the implementation of a paramilitary strategy aimed at eliminating all forms of resistance in the region.

In fact, throughout this decade, Medellin experienced a real urban war so violent that the entire social movement was hit extremely hard, which in turn affected the social fabric and all political initiatives in the city.

It was precisely in this violent environment that some NGOs began to feel the need to create a feeling of solidarity, not only at a local or regional level, but also internationally. PBI arrived in Medellin in October 1999 with the aim of accompanying ASFADDES, IPC and the Political Prisoners Solidarity Committee (FCSPP). The IPC recalls that the members of PBI at that time carried out considerable advocacy work with the

local population and that those efforts contributed to maintaining the security of the individuals and the organisations they accompanied.

Outside of the city limits, the work of PBI was primarily focused on Eastern Antioquia where the Corporation Judicial Freedom (CJL) was carrying out prevention and assistance work with communities that had been displaced as a result of the armed conflict. Elkin Ramirez, lawyer and co-founder of CJL, highlights the fact that, accompanied by PBI, the Corporation was able to access areas that were difficult to reach because of the numerous checkpoints that represented a high security risk. From 2001, when the situation in the neighbourhoods was getting worse, accompaniment was opened up to the comunas, or districts, in Medellin where the Seeds of Liberty Human Rights Collective (Colectivo de Derechos Humanos Semillas de Libertad-CODEHSEL)⁵ was carrying out training programmes with grassroots organisations.

The words of those accompanied reveal that a very close relationship was built between the members of PBI and the NGOs at that time. The strategy director of IPC defines it as «as a strategic accompaniment in terms of the role of PBI accompanying an NGO at risk». ●



ASFADDES member at a demonstration in Medellin

Photo: Jorge Mata/Surimages-IPA

1 On 24 June 1997, a bomb exploded outside the ASFADDES offices in Medellin.

2 This is a reference to a bomb that exploded in the Prado neighbourhood on 20 August 1999 aimed at the IPC and at least two other devices were placed in Medellin the same day with the aim of affecting the Workers Cooperative of various companies (ASEO).

3 The lawyer from Antioquia, President of the Antioquia Human Rights Committee was assassinated on 27 February 1998 in his office after threats received after he had reported links between members of the military and the massacres in Ituango (Antioquia) at the end of the previous year.

4 On 4 May 1990 Hernan Delgado, Director of the Institute of Regional Studies – Antioquia University was assassinated by persons unknown that broke into his office in Medellin.

5 Platform of human rights organisations that work both in the town of Medellin and the Antioquia department

Sharing happiness and tears



Martha Soto and US volunteer Teresa Panepinto

Martha Soto, Association of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared (ASFADDES)

About ten years ago, we had great hopes about having a team in Medellin. It was a difficult year and the assassination of Julio González y Chucho Puerta when we were just starting out had a major impact on us and showed us how defenceless we were.

That is how we started work and the first volunteers, Pilar and Mikel arrived, a couple of Spaniards who were spending their first Christmas in the PBI house and who accompanied, primarily, the Association family members. Then the team expanded with the arrival of Fidel, Teresa, Jacobo, Helena, Mariana, Mirjan and Roberto, a team that not only accompanied us in our work, but also at parties and shared in our joy; they were also there for us at a very difficult time for ASFADDES and CODEHSEL, the forced disappearance of Ángel and Claudia. They were at our side when we reported the case and as we carried out an incessant search, a search that still continues and forms part of our lives.

After those difficult months, when the regional office in Medellin had to close, the Medellin team somehow managed to keep the family members together with the excuse that it was Christmas. In February 2001, when we made the decision to go back to work, PBI accompanied us constantly, in the office and in all our other work until we built the office back up to what it had been.

With total conviction that the accompaniment of PBI in our city has been fundamental for our work, we give our most sincere gratitude to each and every one of the volunteers who have been part of the team and who have made our accompaniment of victims possible.

«Iñigo and Jorge Luís have become a symbol in this land»

Spanish aid worker and a clergy member are murdered by paramilitaries during a humanitarian mission in Chocó Department¹.

Nuria Tellería and Iñaki Markiegi (Paz y Tercer Mundo-Mundubat)

«The incidents took place on 18 November 1999. The accompaniment commission to the communities in resistance in the Lower Atrato had just carried out the Paz y Tercer Mundo programs in this region. We left by boat from Murindó at 5:30 in the morning [...] when we arrived to Las Mercedes, some 45 minutes before Quibdó, it began to rain. During this trip we were surprised there had not been any paramilitary checkpoints. Having passed Las Mercedes we felt calm, since it was the last reference we had of paramilitaries on the river. As we arrived, I sat next to Iñigo and Jorge Luís. Iñigo acted like a winger, giving instructions. I was told he was an old sea hand. I said: Exactly, the sea! Because he doesn't know anything about rivers. We started to laugh and talked for a bit. Just when we were arriving to Quibdó, we were overwhelmed by a speedboat that suddenly put itself perpendicular to our boat, breaking the wooden bow and expelling Iñigo Egiluz, the PTM delegate, and Father Jorge Luís Mazo, the parish priest from Bellavista, Bojayá»² –both of whom died.

An important dimension of the work carried out by Paz y Tercer Mundo (PTM, presently Mundubat) since its arrival to Quibdó in 1998 has been the defence of human rights, especially for Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, always in coordination with the Dioceses of Quibdó and other Colombian organisations. At the time of the incidents, the work consisted in travelling to different communities and gathering testimonies from the inhabitants of the Middle Atrato. Over the last years, these people had been witnesses to paramilitaries carrying out forced displacement, summary executions, forced disappearances, and restrictions to the circulation of persons and food. Through these reports, PTM wanted to show the reality concealed and distorted by the official media,



Photo: Jorge Matiar/Surimages-IPA

Girl in front of a destroyed house in the Middle Atrato (Department of Chocó).

and which the judicial authorities did not investigate or punish. With the intensification of the violations to their rights, resistance processes emerged and strengthened as the only alternative remaining for the physical, territorial and cultural survival of these people. This is why international solidarity has been –and continues to be– needed as a watchdog to stop the barbarity and horror of paramilitary violence.

In that time, PTM and PBI had met on different occasions and always wished to do more together as they shared many aspects in common. Paradoxically, the first time the organisations jointly carried out a mission was for the International Observation for the murders of Iñigo Egiluz and Jorge Luis Mazo.

The perpetrators of the double murder were the self-defence forces of Carlos Castaño³, although only the direct perpetrator has been convicted. At this same time, these paramilitary groups also

gravely affected the work environment and lives of the NGOs and the communities that had organised themselves as «Peace Communities» in the region of Urabá. «The national and international non-governmental organisations that work in the region of Urabá are on high alert, since they have become a clear objective of the paramilitaries»⁴. This is the environment in which these paramilitaries also perpetrated several massacres throughout the region, especially in 1999, in the Peace Communities of San José de Apartadó⁵ and San Francisco de Asís⁶. ●

1 Jorge Iván Castaño, bishop of Quibdó

2 Witness report

3 «Son responsables de Muerte de Español», El Tiempo newspaper, 25 November 1999

«Condena Europea por muerte de Cooperante Español», El Tiempo newspaper, 3 December 1999

4 «Alerta Roja para ONG en Urabá», El Tiempo newspaper, April 2000

5 «Paras atacan Comunidad de Paz», El Tiempo newspaper, 6 April 1999

6 «Nuevo Atentado a la Paz», El Espectador newspaper, 9 April 1999

Hope and bloodshed: my year in Urabá

Amidst massacres and threats against the San José de Apartadó Peace Community, PBI launches a permanent presence in the region.

Andrew E. Miller, volunteer from the USA (1999 – 2000)

My deployment to Urabá as a PBI volunteer – from April of 1999 through the end of February, 2000 – began and ended with massacres. The first night in Turbo, several human rights workers with CIJP came by the house to show us a video. It featured an interview with Catalino, an ex-community leader from Chocó, announcing that he had

San Francisco de Asís Peace Community, around the town of Rio Sucio, and killed at least 12 people². They also abducted a number of community leaders, to have a forced dialogue with Carlos Castaño about Catalino's version of events. The leaders denied the accusations as false and were eventually let go. But they continued to fear for their lives.

urban settlements. Each day we would do the rounds, visiting the displaced camps because the people responsible for the displacement were often seen around town. From time to time we would accompany groups of Afro-Colombian workers who were harvesting some small parcels outside of Turbo and displaced community leaders in their daily activities.

«SUCH IS THE LOGIC OF THE WAR: TERRORISE THE COMMUNITY TO ANNIHILATE THEIR RESISTANCE TO THE DIFFERENT ARMED GROUPS».

switched sides and from henceforth would be a member of paramilitary group under Carlos Castaño. Having just arrived, I didn't understand much of what he said. But the seriousness of his words was reflected in the horrified expressions of my new colleagues. They told me that he had accused even the nuns of the region of being ostensible guerrilla collaborators. The reaction that almost inexorably follows this kind of public accusation in Colombia was not long in the coming.

The following evening, a Sunday, a paramilitary unit entered the San José de Apartadó Peace Community. The paramilitaries killed three people, including Aníbal Jiménez, one of the community's founders¹. Such is the «logic of the war»: terrorise the community to annihilate their resistance to the different armed groups. PBI did not have a physical presence in the town when the attack happened; they phoned us in the middle of the bloody events. Back in Turbo, I learned how a PBI «activation» functioned, starting with rapid-fire phone calls all night long and a departure for the community at first light the next morning.

Over the coming days, paramilitary soldiers spread out across the Lower Atrato river region. Groups of armed men entered different riverside hamlets belonging to the

Such was my welcome to Urabá. I was asking myself, «Damn, is this what happens here every weekend?» Later I would realise that these events were indicative of a new stage in the evolution of the region's armed conflict.

At that moment, the people from Cacarica who had been displaced by Operation Genesis in 1997 were still found in Turbo's coliseum and other

With the assistance of the Intercongregational Commission of Justice and Peace, the displaced in Turbo were organising a mass return to their territories, just south of the Darien Gap (border with Panama). Over the course of 1999 they set different dates, but the security and other conditions weren't conducive and they had to postpone several times. In October, we accompanied what was ►►



German volunteer Moritz Hartnagel with young people from the communities of Dabeiba and the Cacarica River Basin, the latter were displaced during Operation Genesis



Volunteers Luigi Cojazzi (Italy) and Joke Reijven (The Netherlands) in the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó

►► called The Exploration, or several field missions in preparation for the return. For me personally, it was one of the most significant experiences during my year. We would spend a week at a time with a group of roughly eighty displaced people in their home territory, which offered an opportunity for more personalised interaction. I sensed a change in the morale of these folks who, at long last, had escaped the confines of the Coliseum for their fecund lands with an obvious joy.

Meanwhile, the threats against San José de Apartadó increased. Priests with the local church told us that Carlos Castaño had personally accused the community of supplying the guerrillas and lending them the community telephone in order to organise kidnappings and killings along the Banana Axis. From that moment on, PBI initiated a permanent presence within the community and intensified our preventative political work in order to avoid a new incursion. We were concerned that something would happen over the holidays. We were wrong about the date, but our fears were not misplaced.

One weekend in February I went to the Peace Community on a routine accompaniment. Along with my fellow volunteer, Jorge Ruiz, I walked up to La Union, an outlying hamlet about an hour and a half from San José. We came back down that afternoon to have dinner with the community leaders and the full-time Justice and Peace workers. As we finished dinner, we settled in to watch the nightly news at 7:30. Just as the program started, we were frightened by tremendous sounds coming from the central plaza, just outside our building. BOOM, BOOM. BOOM. Gunshots from high-powered rifles echoed through the valley. Immediately we could see the silhouetted figures of camouflaged, armed men walking within the community. We would realise later that they had already shot their first victim, Albeiro Montoya.

During the incursion, several groups of armed men looked for their targets with the assistance of two hooded men who did the identification. In the billiards hall they found the town baker, Mario Urrego, who had sold me bread the week earlier. According to a witness, he said, «Don't worry, it's just the Army»³. He should have worried. The armed men forced Urrego to stand in the doorway to his house where they killed him with a shot to the head, in front of his family. Similarly, they continued with two small shop owners, Luis Ciro and Alfonso Jiménez. Finally, they entered an evangelical service, which continued during the whole attack amidst the unmistakable sounds of gunshots. They grabbed a young man, Uvaldo Quintero, and assassinated him at point-blank in the street⁴. ►►

«WE DON'T HAVE A SPECIAL POWER TO TURN BULLETS INTO FLOWERS».

▶▶ Jorge and I stayed up in the Missionary House with the community leaders and Justice and Peace companions. Using our satellite phone, we called the PBI house in Turbo at three-minute intervals, informing the team of the situation. For their part, they phoned the office in Bogotá, which in turn made a series of national and international calls. In the meantime, we positioned ourselves at the top of the stairs in case the armed men decided to enter and come up. Fortunately, they didn't.

Twenty-five minutes after it all started, we received news that the armed group had left along the road towards Apartadó. As documented by Justice and Peace, multiple witnesses provided information that pointed toward the incursion being a joint operation between members of the Army's 17th Brigade and paramilitary soldiers. There had been significant military presence around the community during the day. One of the hooded men was identified as a former guerrilla who had surrendered to the Army the previous month.

We maintained guard, along with members of the community, for the rest of the night. Few people could sleep, out of fear of another incursion. In the morning, two Brigadistas arrived to replace Jorge and myself. I remember leaving with a tremendous feeling of shame for not having been able to avoid what happened. I thought, «Now I get to leave while the community members have to wait here for the next atrocity».

Three years building together

Juan David Villa Gómez, CINEP team in Urabá (1999 – 2002)

In 1999, the communities in the Bajo Atrato river basin in the Chocó department were slowly returning to their lands. We accompanied this process together with the Apartadó diocese and the priests from the Riosucio Claretian parish. At this time, the Centre for Research and Popular Education was working with limited resources. For us, this situation represented a risk because of the conditions in the region, wide expanses of land without access through which we had to travel in small boats, our only protection being a religious symbol or a flag. Given the situation and without having received any specific threats, we thought that PBI's field accompaniment could dissuade the armed actors from attacking us and contribute to our ability to mobilise our organisation to act before the state authorities.

For us, the presence of PBI was symbolic, a testimony, an abstract presence that is now called the «international community». People that believe in our cause from so many different countries that left a safe and comfortable place behind in order to share their destiny with those of us who are trying to build a better world in the midst of conflict, war and death. During those three years, PBI was our point of reference on security and protection issues, not based on force, but simply on the presence, faith and belief that another world is possible and in the belief in the value of life and the need to make respect for human rights real.

Prior to these events, I had dreamt of accompanying the first wave of returnees to Cacarica, which finally happened on 1 March 2000. However, I ended up missing the occasion by one day, as I left Turbo on February 28th toward Bogotá and ultimately my country. Within the Project we had decided that the most strategic use of my time would be to push the case of

the Peace Community in Washington, DC. With the support of allies there, I carried out an advocacy campaign with the US Congress and presidential administration. Three months to the day after the massacre, a letter signed by 49 members of the Congress' House of Representatives was published, expressing serious concerns about what happened in San José de Apartadó.

As such I ended my year with PBI, having learned through my personal experience that international presence is not enough to stop Colombia's conflict in all its brutality. We don't have a special power to turn bullets into flowers as they mark their victims. The community members and the valiant people who work in defence of human rights, however, continue to ask for Peace Brigades' presence. They continue to say, «Please, don't abandon us». Even with all their difficulties, ten years later, Urabá's communities in resistance have persisted. And PBI has not abandoned them. ●



Monument to the forced displacement of communities in the Cacarica River Basin (Department of Chocó)

Photo: Jorge Mata/Surimages-IPA

1 «Colombia: Retorno a la esperanza – Las comunidades desplazadas de Urabá y del Medio Atrato», Amnesty International Report, June 2000 (pages 13-14)
 2 Ibid
 3 Letter written by the Inter-Congregational Justice and Peace Commission to President Andrés Pastrana Arango, 20 February 2000
 4 Urgent Action, Amnesty International, 21 February 2000

A meeting of embraces

From Turbo, a village that receives thousands of displaced persons expelled from their lands by paramilitaries, the return is organised to the Cacarica, river basin, in the department of Chocó.

Roberto Rodríguez, Beatriz García, Pedro Lázaro y Beatriz Muñoz, volunteers from Spain (1999-2006)

Photo: Julien Menghini



A happy return for some of the members of the displaced community of Cacarica

From first light, people were arriving in the port of Turbo with their sacks and personal possessions. There were the leaders, and those who were accompanying from the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission and PBI. During those early hours everything was hustle and bustle, movement, children, happiness, uncertainty. The chalupas (small canoes) were being loaded, the PBI launch was prepared. The brigadistas went back and forth bringing people from the shelters in the car. Others stayed at the port, walking up and down, observing, talking with the people from the Community for Self-determination, Life and Dignity (CAVIDA). There were a lot of people watching and there was a sense of unease.

The people got into the chalupas, start the motors, cry and sing «Hear me Chocó». Many people waved from the bank of the river. The return had begun. That is how we remember the different phases of the return to Cacarica. During the year 2000 there were three returns. As members of PBI we sometimes accompanied as far as the settlements and on other occasions we waved them off from the port. It was the year of reunions, returning to former lands, organisation, happiness, fear and solidarity. We were there, working together in order to make all this possible.

The shelters where we used to sleep, drink coffee, play with the children and

listen to stories gradually became empty. The journeys along the river Atrato grew more frequent. The paramilitaries continued to kill in Turbo and in other communities accompanied by PBI. Feelings of all sorts intermingled with hard work. The PBI volunteers were a small part of this visible story of solidarity that brought together the conditions for the return to Cacarica.

Around 200 displaced persons crossed the mountains of Darién and took refuge in Panama. From there they were repatriated to a place on the Pacific coast called Cupica, which was far from their lands and families. In 2000 they left this village in order to be reunited in Turbo with their families and to return together to Cacarica:

The preparations continued, the sacks piled up besides the houses, the children ran around, there were happy faces and worried faces. People said goodbye to the friendships of those three long years. They gave personal belongings to their neighbours and agreed who would keep the wood and the houses. The light aircraft began to arrive. Pregnant women and babies got on first, followed by the elderly and families. Laughter, hugs and enthusiasm. The light aircraft took off with people, hunting dogs and the few belongings. Finally those providing accompaniment got into the last light aircraft with some mementos, all our dreams and a knot in our stomachs because of what we were

Nueva Vida is one of the places of return in Cacarica and has been organised into a humanitarian zone as a measure of self-protection. The women here organised the community soup kitchen and the reception area, a place to meet over a dish of rice. We all slept in the school and the chapel. The PBI volunteers became very efficient at putting up mosquito nets, living with mosquitos, and rising early to fish. We witnessed the building of the first houses, football tournaments, long meetings until nightfall, and the conversations with the companions from Justice and Peace. We lived through times of great ambivalence, the «normality» of every day life, bathing in the river with the news of massacres in other communities and the accusations and threats against CAVIDA.

That was the year 2000, and the people continued to return «in the midst of the war», as they always used to say. They would qualify this by calling for state responsibility, international accompaniment and expressing their desire to «live and work in peace as dignified communities that can restore their rights and perhaps see justice one day»¹. And PBI was there. ●

¹ «Return to Cacarica», El País newspaper (Spain), 16 March 2000



Photo: Sebastian Rötters

experiencing. Ten days later we returned to the house of the PBI team. They were waiting for us with dinner and a few beers and we talked and talked about everything that had happened. We went to sleep with images in our heads and emotions in our heads. Many months of work, happiness and sadness had taken on meaning and value.

Roberto Rodríguez, volunteer from Spain (2000-5)

Coming together in difficult times

In the year 2000 Claudia Monsalve and Ángel Quintero are disappeared. They were members of the Association of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared (ASFADDES) in Medellín.

Roberto Montoya, volunteer from Spain (2000-9)

It was 10.00pm on 6 October 2000. Claudia Monsalve said that she was going home. Ángel Quintero stood up to accompany her to the bus. They were meeting with other members of ASFADDES, the Association of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared, in Medellín. The two of them were searching for their disappeared and disappeared themselves. We never saw them again.

It was already Saturday. Gradually, as the hours passed, our worst fears became reality. It was a time of confusion, dashing around, telephone calls, going places, looking in places, asking people, searching. Nothing. They did not appear.

We didn't know where to find the energy to organise ourselves amidst this tragedy. Fear, horror, despair, tears, unfinished sentences, whispering, silence, not knowing what to do, how to go on. We were in the PBI house with family members from ASFADDES and the families of Ángel and Claudia. We were supporting each other, accompanying each other.



Photo: Manon Schick
Ángel Quintero before his disappearance in 2000

«Fleeing and hiding again. How many more times?», asked Ángel's eldest daughter on the morning of 8th October. Again, we did not know what to say. And again, a

Her elder brother was eleven and could not cope with the idea that his mother was absent. For this reason, the information in the media linking more than 2.500 intercepted telephone calls with the disappearance of his mother and Ángel was destroying him¹. «For the boy it was like shattering the daily illusion that he retained of seeing her walk through the door. That's why he cried all the time. He didn't want to eat or go out. The news brought him despair, but perhaps it brought him closer to the truth. If there is anyone who has had to endure the harsh reality of forced displacement it has been Claudia's children. It is like losing her twice over. They lost her when she learnt of the disappearance of Edgar, our younger brother, and they have now lost her again, perhaps for ever», commented another of Claudia's brothers.

Today, nine years later, we still think of Ángel and Claudia. Their disappearance still makes me sad, it still hurts me. I still feel those hugs.

Where are Ángel and Claudia? ●

«LIFE CONTINUED, BUT SOME INJURIES NEVER HEAL».

«Where's my Daddy? Why isn't he in PBI?» Ángel's small son asked us. What could we say? Taking him in our arms and giving him a big hug was all we could think of at the time. We did not want him to see our eyes filled with tears or hear us say the unspeakable. Relatives, family members from ASFADDES and PBI volunteers were all in the same situation.

We left the house to go to a safe place with family members from ASFADDES, Ángel's wife, his four daughters and the small boy who would not let go of my hand. In silence. We arrived, we laid out the mattresses on the floor and we tried to sleep. The smallest ones fell asleep straightaway. For the rest of us, even the slightest noise would keep us awake. We were scared.

hug saved us from having to explain the inexplicable or of giving hope to despair.

Days later; packing again, another destination, another location, another place to hide. In Bogotá; saying goodbye in the airport. Family members from ASFADDES, the small boy holding our hands and Ángel's silenced wife and daughters, all there. We cried, we hugged each other, we needed each other.

That was not the last time they packed their bags. Years later they left the country. Six months later: life continued. But some injuries never heal. «I can't hear, I can't hear, I'm deaf», and she put her hands over her ears so that she could not hear. At six years of age, Claudia's daughter used to do the same thing every time somebody mentioned her mother's name.

¹«Hallan 2.020 "chuzadas" que fueron ilegales», El Espectador newspaper, 15 April 2001

The pain of exile

As a result of continuous threats, the founders of the Manuel Cepeda Vargas Foundation have to leave Colombia. Psychologist Claudia Girón remembers the four years of exile in France.

Francesca Nugnes, volunteer from Italy (2008-9)

Claudia Girón co-founded the «Manuel Cepeda Vargas Foundation» with Iván Cepeda. PBI has been accompanying Claudia since 1998. From its inception in 1994, the Foundation has been dedicated to an untiring work for justice. Its work is based on the conviction that progress in the fight against impunity in Colombia essentially depends on the action of the

Amnesty International and the Catholic University of Lyon, we managed to obtain two scholarships to study at postgraduate level for two years. Exile is always tough but in our case the first two years were well invested. The idea was always to return. However, when we were going to return in 2002, they told us that there were no guarantees for our return. This was

because Carlos Castaño had made public threats and had accused us of being part of the Manuel Cepeda Front of the FARC in Bogotá. They said that it was best not to go back. That was the most difficult period because we were no longer students and we had to work very hard.

PBI: How was the return to Colombia after four years in exile?

CG: We returned in April 2004. The return was very liberating because we wanted to return. Exile is not only about survival and being forced to leave, it is also about how your countrymen and women are. It's very painful. Networks are broken up and families are separated. Fear provides is the reason for not returning and people live in a bubble of nostalgia and sadness. In many cases they never adapt to the new societies and they do not feel a part of a new world, they feel isolated. Exile is a very complicated condition existentially. As a psychologist I am very aware of the problem of affectation, culture and family links; of how hard it is to have been somebody in your country and to

«EXILE IS NOT ONLY ABOUT SURVIVAL AND BEING FORCED TO LEAVE, IT IS ALSO ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS TO YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR COUNTRYMEN AND WOMEN. IT'S VERY PAINFUL. NETWORKS ARE BROKEN UP AND FAMILIES ARE SEPARATED».

victims. Amongst the many fruits of its activities, particular mention should be given to: the promotion of several processes of historical memory and truth about crimes against humanity; strong support to the organisation and public visibility of victims of such crimes; contribution to the recognition of state responsibility in the genocide perpetrated against the Patriotic Union; and the undertaking of extensive work to disseminate information about human rights in the mass media. Claudia, as well as working for the Foundation, is a Lecturer in Psychology at the Javeriana University.

PBI: Why did you and Iván Cepeda decide to go into exile and how do you view that period?

Claudia Girón: In 1998 we began to receive serious threats because we had managed to bring the military officials implicated in the assassination of Manuel Cepeda, Iván's father, to justice. In April 2000 we left the country. We had to leave to lower the tension. With the help of



Claudia Girón

►► arrive in a country where one becomes monothematic, because you only speak about the little you know. There are some cases of people who have successfully integrated and contributed to the new society without forgetting who they are and without forgetting their pasts. This has a lot to do with individual attitudes and with the challenge of remaining the same person but learning to be different.

PBI: How did the accompaniment with PBI begin and how do you see it?

CG: PBI began to accompany us on an ad hoc basis in 1998-1999. When we returned in 2004 the accompaniment was more permanent. We began to work with other organisations on the positioning of the National Movement for Victims of State Crimes with respect to the Justice and Peace Law, which we view as a law that excludes the victims. From 2004 onwards we have been accompanied by PBI, above all when we travel to other regions, but sometimes also in Bogotá. The work of PBI is fundamental in making us feel relaxed and safe. Above all, going to the regions with PBI gives us a lot more security.

PBI: What is the biggest challenge facing national and international organisations?

CG: The biggest challenge at the moment is confronting the State's tactics of stigmatisation to delegitimise both our work and yours. The challenge is to generate much more legitimacy. In your case I believe that it is important to raise the cost of the State's attitude, discrediting people who are doing serious work and who have no nothing to do with any illegal or armed action.

Colombian NGOs have not acted forcefully enough over the *chuzadas*¹. It's scandalous. The State is lecturing us on legitimacy through illegitimate actions, for example, defamation, slander and illegal interceptions, which are punishable under national and international law. ●

¹ Claudia Giron refers to the illegal monitoring carried out by the Department of Administrative Security (DAS), for more information, see article page 50



Lars Helmersson (centre) in front of the OFP «Women's Centre»

Remembering the paramilitary take-over

Barrancabermeja: One of the Women's Centres operated by the Grassroots Women's Organisation (OFP) is in the neighbourhood of Prado Campestre in Southeast Barrancabermeja. On 27 January 2001, at 11 in the morning, paramilitaries attempted to take over the Centre, but the OFP, accompanied by PBI, refused to turn over the keys. By that afternoon, families, who were escaping from their homes, found refuge in this Centre. We began a 24-hour presence there which would last for almost a month, until the displaced people could be relocated to other places.

Most of the families come from Pablo Acuña, a nearby neighbourhood established by displaced people 12 years ago, which is situated like an island on the outskirts of the city. Almost all of the people were recently displaced. The OFP, with our accompaniment, helps them leave. Many of these people cry as they leave the homes they built together with much effort. The Army patrols the streets of Pablo Acuña, claiming all is calm.

After a few days, there are 22 families at the Centre –with their children, dogs, chickens and everything they could bring. There are two women in advance stages of pregnancy, one of whom is only 14 years old, who will give birth in the next month. The Centre is packed, hot, dust-ridden and a mess. At night, we take turns keeping watch; sometimes we hear gunshots.

It is a few minutes before eight in the morning at the Women's Centre on February 8. I have been there since the night before. There will be a solidarity meeting at nine in the morning. People are cleaning up and the patio door is open. I am standing in the patio, a few metres from the door, when two 18-year-old young men dressed in blue jeans and t-shirts enter with unhesitating steps. I immediately grasp they are paramilitaries. One of them comes towards me and with a bossy tone aggressively says: «Papers». With a mixture of anger and fear, I respond: «Why?» «Papers and your mobile», he repeats more aggressively. «I present my documents to the authorities, but not to you», I respond. Both of them put their hands in the waist of their pants where under their shirts I see the bulge of their pistols. For a fraction of a second, the urge to give an emphatic «no» crosses my mind, but I cannot measure the consequences and I reach for my things. He grabs my passport and my other mobile. Before quickly leaving out the door, he points to me and says: «As of now, you are a military objective of the Self-Defence Forces». The same had happened to OFP coordinator Jackeline Rojas, who was just a few metres away from me.

It all happened in 20 seconds and I feel a slight tremble in my hands as I take the mobile someone hands me. I try to call the PBI team, but all the lines are busy. I also was not able to get through to any of the three mobile numbers for the military base in the neighbourhood. Meanwhile the OFP reports what happened and the place is soon flooded with organisations, press, Police and Department of Administrative Security (DAS) agents. After answering questions, I return to our home. The project makes the decision that I will leave Barrancabermeja on the next flight in the morning.

The national and international reaction was quick and conclusive. At this time, Sweden held the presidency of the European Union. The following day, the local newspaper *Vanguardia Liberal* quotes an AUC spokesperson: «our organisation did not carry out any action against the OFP or Peace Brigades International. Yesterday, not one of our commands ordered actions of this nature».

That same day, my passport and mobile are returned by a professor who says he found them at a neighbourhood school. By the afternoon, the boy who had threatened me comes to the Women's Centre, along with another man, and in a friendly tone asks for «the old guy with glasses» in order to say that «it was a mistake» and promise to return what was stolen. But I am not there.

I go to the airport. As I say farewell to the organisations, I notice something is different. Nonetheless, on 20 February, I come back to the delight of the people we accompany. «Lars returning is a victory for us», said Francisco Campo from the Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS).

Lars Helmersson, volunteer from Sweden (1995 – 2004)

A Christmas of «grief and blood» in Barrancabermeja

The paramilitaries capture this city and impose political, economic and social domination. The incursion causes deaths and disappearances.

Paco Simon Conejos, volunteer from Spain (2000-2)

Barrancabermeja had the sad privilege of becoming one of the most violent cities in the world in the year 2000. There were 567 assassinations and the crime rate was 227 deaths per 100.000 inhabitants¹. This population, which emerged at the beginning of the 20th Century parallel to the mining of oilfields, is home to the main oil refinery in the country. Since its origins Barrancabermeja was an epicentre for the Colombian social movement and there was a strong presence of the FARC and ELN guerrilla movements in its neighbourhoods. These characteristics made it a target for the paramilitaries of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), who launched their conquest that year. Human rights organisations made repeated formal complaints that their neighbours were being threatened with a Christmas of «grief and blood». However, despite a heavy presence of the state security forces, which with forces of more than 2,000 made it into one of the most militarised cities in Colombia, a hundred men from the AUC began the final phase of the capture of Barrancabermeja on 22 December. They inexorably imposed, by armed force, the political, economic and social domination that they still exercise today, although in a less visible way. I had been in the team for two months and the rest of my time in PBI can be perfectly summarised with a phrase from Saramago: «We humans are like that; we feel it all the time». Grief for the dead and the disappeared, and joy for the resistance of the living. Fear for the high risk of those that we accompanied and the wish to be permanently at their sides. Tiredness due to so much work and satisfaction for the attitude of my team.

During the first 45 days of 2001, 145 people were assassinated, most accused of collaborating with the guerrilla². Those who fell included men and women who had led the demands for improvements in the deplorable living conditions of the inhabitants in one of the richest areas of the country in terms of natural resources. The human rights defenders of the Regional



Ana Teresa Rueda from the OFP with Spanish volunteer Paco Simón

Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS), the Grassroots Women's Organisation (OFP) and the Association of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared (ASFADDES), who we were accompanying, began to experience all sorts of pressures and

«I FELT AN ENORMOUS IMPOTENCE WHEN SEVERAL OF THE RIGHTS DEFENDERS COULD NO LONGER RESIST AND HAD TO LEAVE BARRANCABERMEJA».

threats to stop public condemnation of these crimes and to abandon the city. At any moment the alarm would be raised and we would have to leave at all hours of the day or night to undertake an accompaniment or to make the calls necessary to safeguard their security. We also provided 24 hour accompaniment to some of those most threatened and to several houses

of the OFP. The stress that I experienced was different to that of my previous jobs. It was not the work, but rather the feeling that the lives of those we accompanied depended on every decision that we took. I felt an enormous impotence when several of them could no longer resist and had to leave Barrancabermeja. At the time I felt like fleeing but, little by little, I understood that accepting our limitations formed a very part of the effectiveness of PBI's work.

It was also the year in which the AUC declared PBI to be a military objective. On 8 February 2001, whilst he was in the house of the OFP, two paramilitaries took the passport and mobile phone from our colleague Lars. As they left they said to him: «from now on you are a military objective of the Self-Defence Forces». Instead of providing dissuasion against threats we were now threatened ourselves and NGOs were very concerned about the stance we would adopt. Lars spent a period in Bogotá denouncing what had happened and not only PBI did not reduce its work in Barrancabermeja but rather it doubled the size of the team. It was both a brave and an important decision. It just remains for me to reiterate what I said on a previous anniversary: I am not the same since I was with PBI. PBI

opened my eyes. It put me in the midst of a conflict alongside the victims in order to help them and they helped me to see the situation as it really is. ●

¹ «Magdalena Medio, un espejismo de paz», report presented by the Rebirth Corporation to the Inter American Human Rights Commission in 2003

² Resolution No 007 of the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman, 6 March 2001

Resisting for our lives

Throughout his long career as a human rights defender, Pablo Arenales has been a victim of threats and attacks on his life.

Vicente Vallies, volunteer from France (2001-9)

Photo: Sebastian Rötters



Pablo Arenales

The day I met Pablo he was on his way home following a speaking tour in Spain; it was the end of 2001. He had left the region a few months previously, after having suffered an attack in 1999 and after the paramilitary takeover of Barrancabermeja, where he worked at the heart of the Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS), an organisation accompanied by PBI since its arrival in the country in 1994. I met with him having been given the difficult task of telling him that we were still debating in PBI whether we had the capacity to provide him with protection.

Today, eight years later, we meet again to talk about that time. Pablo Arenales joined CREDHOS in 1991. There were many years of harassment and threats and often the threats were carried out, as shown by the assassinations of Blanca Cecilia Valero, Jahel Quiroga's secretary, who was then the President of CREDHOS, Julio Cesar Berrio, member of CREDHOS and the failed attempt against Jorge Gómez Lizarazo, President of CREDHOS. All of the above were organised what came to be known as the 07 Navy intelligence network¹ and, as a result, various members of CREDHOS were forcibly displaced or exiled in 1991 and 1992.

Pablo was injured in 1992 when he was participating in a verification commission for the massacre that took

«THERE WERE MANY YEARS OF HARASSMENT AND THREATS AND OFTEN THE THREATS WERE CARRIED OUT».

place in the Versailles neighbourhood in the north east area of Barrancabermeja. «The massacre happened on 10 June 1992 in a billiard hall; a group of hired assassins, hired by the 07 Navy network arrived on a bus. When they arrived they started to shoot, killing various people. The following day, 11 June, a verification mission was formed, made up of members of the Grassroots Coordination group (*Coordinadora Popular*) and CREDHOS. We went to the place where the massacre had taken place and then we went to the funeral parlours where people were mourning their dead to obtain information about what had happened and also to show our solidarity with the families of the victims. When the commission was about to leave, various armed men at the side of the road shot at us». Fortunately, they

were unhurt, thanks to the driver who had not turned his engine off, «he drove off with the tyres blown. (...) He shot me here (pointing at his right shoulder). That day, after the scare, we went to the CREDHOS offices where we celebrated the fact we were still alive».

Given this situation, CREDHOS decided to request international accompaniment from PBI and the first team arrived in October 1994, in spite of the initial scepticism of the members of CREDHOS who were saying: «How will they protect us if they are not armed?» PBI gained the trust of the people. As Pablo says, «even though the threats, stigmatisation and accusations did not stop, there were fewer of them and the dissuasion worked».



The oil-rich city of Barrancabermeja (Magdalena Medio).

Photo: Sebastian Rötters



Family farmers in the Magdalena Medio region where CREDHOS works for human rights

► In 1999, Pablo suffered a direct attempt on his life when he was waiting in a restaurant. «After all the threats we had experienced, we were always vigilant and aware of what was going on around us. On that day, after he heard the sudden braking of a motorbike, he turned round to look and saw the motorbike passenger turning round and taking a gun out».

«WE CELEBRATED THE FACT THAT WE WERE STILL ALIVE».

Pablo hid behind the counter in a room and the hired assassin shouted «where is that son of a bitch, where is he?» However, as the element of surprise he was hoping for had been lost, he decided to leave. Pablo was able to call Jim from PBI who came to pick him up and he spent the night in the PBI house to ensure his protection.

What came to be known as the paramilitary takeover of Barrancabermeja took place on 23 December 2000. For Pablo, it was the result of a «long term process, like the drop of water that falls onto the rock until it breaks». Given the situation, various like-minded organisations

recommended that Pablo leave the country and in order to carry on resisting he decided to carry out a three month speaking tour in Europe to raise awareness about the human rights and humanitarian crisis situation in the region and faced by the human rights organisations working there.

On his return, PBI decided to continue to accompany him until 2005 when he was forced to leave the country again following new threats. Today, Pablo continues to work as a human rights defender from Bogotá, with another organisation, *Reiniciar* that fights for the restoration of the memory of the Unión Patriótica genocide victims, demanding truth, justice and reparation and working to ensure that this type of crime is never committed again.

At the end of the interview, Pablo highlights the fact that «these last fifteen years should be seen as a homage to all the volunteers that have worked for PBI, those whose presence, accompaniment and national and international advocacy work, as well as their commitment to a more just society, have enabled human rights defenders in Colombia to continue to carry out our work in a repressive, violent and polarised context. To you and all of those who have gone before you, thank you very much and I hope that your work defending life and dignity continues». ●

Recognised for an ideal

PBI receives the Ennals prize for its work accompanying human rights defenders

Manon Schick, volunteer from Switzerland (2003-4)

«The PBI volunteers are a direct expression of international concern about human rights defenders in the field. Their courage and dedication express the highest ideals about the defence of human rights. In the year they dedicate to being a volunteer, those who risk their lives calmly whilst being fully aware of the cause they are supporting deserve this prize more than anyone».

This speech was made by Hans Thoolen, President of the Martin Ennals Foundation on handing over the prize to PBI for its work in Colombia in 2001. This was the first and only time that this prize was awarded to an NGO and not a human rights defender.

«The death penalty that hangs over each of us has not been carried out because we are not alone, Peace Brigades International accompanies us», stated a Colombian human rights defender during the ceremony in Geneva.



Swiss volunteer Nadia Akmoun

The Martin Ennals prize was also awarded, in 2003, to one of the most well known Colombian human rights defenders, Alirio Uribe, a lawyer with the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective. The lawyer thanked PBI for their accompaniment by saying: «I think that the accompaniment of PBI is the most effective protection for us as human rights defenders. A non-violent, political accompaniment is much more effective than armed bodyguards».

¹ Members of the Colombian state security forces, coordinated by the National Navy assassinated more than 130 social, grassroots leaders and human rights defenders in Barrancabermeja. «Concerns about human rights defenders in Barrancabermeja», Colombia Campaign: We want them alive!, Amnesty International

Resisting an agenda of death

The Grassroots Women's Organisation receives reports of the abuses committed by the paramilitaries in Barrancabermeja in the community kitchens where they work.

PBI Barrancabermeja

Yolanda Becerra, coordinator of the Grassroots Women's Organisation (OFP) and of the Women's Movement Against War and For Peace, remembers the paramilitary forces taking over Barrancabermeja at the end of the year 2000 and the impact this had on the social movement and particularly on the OFP.

THE PARAMILITARY INCURSION

Yolanda Becerra: On the night of 23 December 2000 the paramilitaries arrived in the town. They set up their command posts and they entered the 1 May neighbourhood. They killed various people in the street and on the football field. They took over the houses of the community and social leaders in the neighbourhoods, 10 or 20 of them went into each house. They held the families captive: the women had to prepare them food, they used the family members' clothing and the children were unable to go to school.

THIS IS HOW THE PEOPLE OF BARRANCABERMEJA RESPONDED

YB: On 24 December we went to the 1 May neighbourhood. It was like a concentration camp. There were men dressed in black and armed to the teeth as far as the eye could see and all the doors were closed. The police took food to the paramilitaries in those houses.

In order to help the families held captive, the women who came to the community kitchens to buy a bowl of



Photo: Manon Schick

OFP march in Barrancabermeja

soup, together with the Oil Workers Union (USO) that played an important role then, were able to organise a special verification mission to take statements and so that people could report. This commission condemned the links between State institutions and the paramilitaries and the paramilitary responsibility for the takeover of Barrancabermeja. In spite of their anxiety and fear, many people made statements; others were assassinated or forcibly displaced.

We worked very hard for the young women; we saved a lot of young lives.

THE RESISTANCE OF THE OFP WOMEN

YB: At that time the OFP was strong and that enabled us to resist, but the six years of resistance wore us out. The work in a context of terror and destruction of the social fabric affected the members of the organisation. The women had searched for those who had been disappeared, pulled dead bodies out of the rivers, accompanied the families, made denouncements and raised awareness of the situation with all the international commissions that arrived. All of this made us forget about ourselves and it affected us, it had an impact that has remained with us.

«**THERE WERE MEN DRESSED IN BLACK AND ARMED TO THE TEETH.**»

soup gave us a slip of paper with the address of their homes. They knew we could make reports about what was happening.

From then on, we began to receive denouncements in the community kitchens every day. At that time, the Human Rights Defenders Working

CODES OF CONDUCT

YB: During this time, codes of conduct were imposed that established rules of behaviour for everyone: bed times, the colours people could wear etc. Young men were not allowed to wear earrings because they would have their ears pulled; young women who rejected the advances of the paramilitaries were threatened and beaten.

In addition, the political trust of a strong community, a strong region, of resistance in Colombia was lost. That too affected us. In spite of the high human, economic, and political costs as a result of this situation, we were able to resist for a long time. They were unable to completely silence us or make us conform. ●

Apparent peace

The urban conflict in Medellín: Despite the paramilitary demobilisation, the marginalised neighbourhoods in Medellín continue to register high levels of violence.

Dorrit Timmer, volunteer from Holland (2002-2004)



Photo: Jorge Mata/Surimages-IPA

Dutch volunteer Dorrit Timmer on an accompaniment with the Corporation Judicial Freedom at an IDP settlement in Altos del Oriente, Medellín

From the house, we heard the sounds of the helicopters flying over the city for hours. It was May 2002; Operation Mariscal was taking place in the *Comuna* 13, or District 13 neighbourhoods. We saw on the news how a massive military deployment invaded that working class area of Medellín. They captured militia and alleged militia, others were wounded and around a dozen civilians were killed.

I had only been in the PBI Medellín team for a few weeks. In spite of the fact that life was carrying on as normal in most of the city, we felt like there was a war taking place nearby. We tried to maintain communication with the volunteer who was

context. From then on, many organisations condemned military and paramilitary control in certain areas of the *comuna*¹.

In spite of the fact that the armed checkpoints between the borders of the different neighbourhoods, which had sometimes made us feel uncomfortable and scared, disappeared, from that day forward, we rarely accompanied activities there. The community work had for the most part broken down because no one trusted anyone else. The few times we went, we felt the strange silence that reigned over the area. People were in their houses but they no longer said hello. Was this the peace that had been talked about?

considered to be suspicious and subversive and those who dared to denounce attacks or violations had to leave or they paid with their lives. Mass graves were discovered years later³.

The show of a massive handing over of arms at the end of 2003 marked the official beginning of the disarming of the Cacique Nutibara Block in Medellín. Some 900 paramilitaries from this group laid down their arms to return to civilian life. In exchange for the truth they would receive reduced sentences and new opportunities sponsored by the State. Since 2006, in my new job in the middle of the historic comunas, I have been able to get closer to the reality lived by most people in Medellín, although the city is different now.

«In spite of the official discourse of the government about the fact that paramilitarism no longer exists in Colombia, there are telephone calls from the self-entitled Black Eagles, leaflets with fascist messages, intimidation and theft of information from social organisations in areas where there is state control, the presence of local mafia groups linked to drug trafficking and sexual exploitation of young people. Levels of violent deaths reaching more than 20 some weekends as a result of scores being settled make us think of previous times and provide a glimpse of a hidden reality in the capital of Antioquia»⁴.

The image of apparent normality cannot hide the reality of the violence that continues to devastate Medellín. ●

«WAS THIS THE PEACE THAT HAD BEEN TALKED ABOUT?»

accompanying a lawyer in the disputed area. The commission that was verifying that human rights were being respected was in the midst of the groups that were fighting.

They told us that they had started to «take over and pacify» the *comuna*. A few months later, a new operation called Orion, left more victims because of the excessive military force used in the urban

The work with victims and talking about human rights became delicate subjects because, according to the Center for Research and Popular Education (CINEP) and the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission (CIJP), the military, the police and the paramilitaries were working together and all information ended up in the wrong hands². Criticism was

1 «Colombia: Los paramilitares en Medellín: ¿desmovilización o legalización?», Amnesty International, 1 September 2005

2 «Los organos de justicia y control compartiendo arbitrariedades de la Fuerza Pública», Political violence database, CINEP and CIJP, May 2003

3 «Sentencia judicial confirma fosas comunes y control paramilitar en la Comuna 13 con posterioridad a la Operación Orión», Movimiento de Víctimas, April 2008

4 «Las "Águilas Negras" anuncian limpieza social en un sector de Medellín», Caracol Radio, 31 January 2008

Operations against the civilian population

In 2002, the security forces carry out Operation Orion in the District 13, which results in one death, 28 wounded and 355 detentions. According to local human rights organisations, forced disappearances are also a pattern of repression.

Peter Biermann, volunteer from Germany (2008-9)

«More than a thousand armed Army, Police, Department of Administrative Security and Technical Investigation Unit officers (...) arrived in District 13 in Medellín in lorries and armoured tanks»¹. In the same year, there was a series of operations against the militia of the Comandos Armados del Pueblo (CAP), ELN and FARC in this area: Operations *Otoño*, *Contrafuego*, *Mariscal*, *Potestad* and *Antorcha*².

Nelly Osorno of the Popular Training Institute (IPC) remembers how in May, during the Mariscal Operation, the inhabitants held up white handkerchiefs and clothing and went out into the street in the middle of the confrontations³. This

with women in some neighbourhoods and developed production chains in the textile sector whilst CJL carried out human rights trainings with leaders of community action groups, young people and neighbourhood committees in District 13. Adriana remembers that there was a strong social movement there. Nelly explains that many neighbourhoods sprang up as shantytowns and «of course, they had to build their houses and pavements together in solidarity with their neighbours».

A 2003 report cites one death, 28 injuries and 355 arrests as the effects of Operation Orion on the civilian population⁴. «There was a complete siege and no-one could get in»⁵. In the following months, the military

«We had denounced that one of the patterns of repression in District 13 was forced disappearance, especially of young people, in the months following the operations». Later they would report the appearance of paramilitary groups: «We started to see new people, many from Uraba. The paramilitaries began to take control»⁶.

She concludes: «One of the major negative impacts of the operation was the distrust it created between people, because no-one knew who was who. So Operation Orion changed the question regarding what to do with the organisations: first we had to rebuild trust».

As a result of these events, CJL decided to warn people and raise awareness this operation, which they viewed as a comprehensive militarisation strategy in the city. The organisation increased its presence in the north-eastern part of the city where it accompanied the Internally Displaced Persons Settlements for Peace and Human Rights with the Seeds of Liberty Human Rights Collective (CODEHSEL). «Of course we went there with PBI and we organised joint embassy visits», Adriana remembers. However, in January 2003, the Army and the Police began Operation *Estrella 6* in those same settlements. A CODEHSEL communiqué from that time reports that they raided houses and arrested around 100 people⁷.

Human rights violations reported in District 13 after the military operations led CJL to begin work with victims' family members. This work is continued up to the present, for instance demanding the exhumation of mass graves in *La Escombrera* in District 13⁸. ●



Photo: Jorge Mata/Surimages-IPA

Italian volunteer Delia Innocenti during an accompaniment to *Comuna 13*

mobilisation got the fighting to stop. Adriana Arboleda of the Corporation Judicial Freedom (CJL) recounts that they were able to organise a verification mission comprised of a member of CJL, accompanied by PBI, together with the Human Rights Ombudsman Office and United Nations, that created enough pressure to stop the operation and to avoid further risk to the communities.

CJL and IPC have worked in District 13 for several years. In the mid-1990s, the IPC began a training and education process

walked around together with hooded men. Nelly remembers very clearly how one unfounded accusation led to the arrest of three leaders of the Women's Association of the *Independencias* neighbourhood (AMI). «When I was informed of her detention, we ran out as fast as we could to the base in the *El Corazón* neighbourhood, but they wouldn't let us enter. At dawn, the women's place of detention was changed several times; but there was always one of us following the police car so as not to lose track of the prisoners». Adriana continues:

1 «Comuna 13, la otra versión», CINEP and CIJP, Political violence database, May 2003

2 «Memoria histórica de la Comuna 13 de Medellín», Elkin Ramírez (CJL), 26 February 2008

3 Entrevista con Nelly Osorno, IPC, 6 August 2009

4 «Comuna 13, la otra versión», Political Violence Database, CINEP and CIJP, May 2003

5 Interview with Adriana Arboleda, CJL, 8 August 2009

6 Interview with Nelly Osorno, IPC, 6 August 2009 and «Comuna 13, la otra versión»

7 «Advierten sobre un estado de excepción de facto en Medellín», CODEHSEL, 8 December 2004

8 «Diego Fernando Murillo reconoce coordinación con la Fuerza Pública en la Operación Orión», CJL, 3 March 2009

We will continue the struggle

Still no convictions five years after the assassination of OFP member Jackeline Rojas's brother.

Manon Schick, volunteer from Switzerland (2003)

«They failed to eliminate me and they killed the only man in my family!» Jesús, Jackeline Rojas's brother, was assassinated on 3 December 2003. He was a professor in Barrancabermeja; his sister, one of the leaders of the Grassroots Women's Organisation (OFP), accompanied by PBI on a regular basis. Although the facts remain unclear, the evidence suggests that paramilitaries carried out the assassination¹.

A year after the assassination the police had yet to arrest any suspects. Today, five years later, nobody has been sentenced. Jackeline's family had already suffered the assassination of two men: «my ex-

husband and my father were assassinated by the guerrilla. My father worked as a driver for the military responsible for guarding the oil installations. In Colombia, when you are not on one side, you immediately become the enemy. The government sees us, the OFP, as terrorists because we criticise it»².

The funeral was dramatic, with hundreds of students in the church crying at the loss of their professor. The whole team in Barrancabermeja accompanied the funeral and as the women of the OFP marched, dressed in black, through the city. They were difficult moments. We were deeply affected by the sadness of Jackeline

and her family. It made us feel even more powerless in the face of so much violence. The assassination also served as a further reminder of the danger that women's rights defenders face every day.

It was very difficult for Jackeline to accept that Jesus died simply because he was the brother of a woman who defended human rights. Jackeline confided in me one year later during a conference tour in Switzerland: «They want to finish us off. They want us to stop fighting. But that is all we know, so we will continue». ●

1 CCAJAR communiqué, Bogotá, 11 December 2003

2 «Portrait - Après cinquante ans de guerre», 24 Heures (Swiss journal), 8 December 2004



Photo: Sebastian Röttgers

Women from an OFP community kitchen in Barrancabermeja

Our strength is believing in what we do

Due to her work for the respect of human rights,
Soraya Gutiérrez and her daughter face threats and illegal surveillance.

José Antonio Serrano, volunteer from Spain(2008-9)



Lawyer Soraya Gutiérrez and Spanish volunteer José Antonio Serrano

Four years after an attempt on her life and serious direct threats against herself and her family, recalling the events still brings tears to lawyer Soraya Gutiérrez's eyes. She inevitably links it to recent acts of espionage and surveillance that are part of the DAS's Operation *Transmilenio*¹ of which she has been subject as a member of the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective (CCAJAR).

armoured car that she had been assigned. Another vehicle crossed her path. Three heavily armed men got out and tried to force her to get out of her vehicle. Fortunately she managed to escape and reach home. On previous occasions, Soraya and those around her had been followed and subjected to intimidating acts. All these acts were appropriately reported. Nevertheless, according to Soraya, they never obtained a satisfactory reply from the authorities and there was no proper investigation. Nor was there an investigation following the new threats that she was subject to two years later, this time involving her daughter. In addition to the child's school bus being followed, a parcel addressed to her daughter was received at home, falsely sent in the name of her grandfather. Inside the parcel was a dismembered doll painted with red nail polish and a note saying: «you have a very beautiful family: don't sacrifice it».

The impact on Soraya's personal and professional life was enormous. «When you take on human rights work in a country like this, you put your career and your profession at the service of the fight against impunity. You know that you run a certain risk and you are prepared for that. It is different when they go for your

I was very distressed, but I never thought about leaving the country permanently. I am convinced that I am not going to leave Colombia. I am never going into exile. I am convinced that the work to defend human rights has to be done here. Those who want us to leave are never going to get their way, at least not with me».

It is difficult to put oneself in her position and to know where this woman and people like her get the strength to continue with their work in such a hostile environment. Soraya recognises the difficulty: «our strength is the belief that what we are contributing towards improving the situation in this country, creating justice and finding the truth. We are convinced that our work is an ethical and lifelong commitment. It is all the work that we have done together as a team, not just as one or two lawyers, but as a Collective. The support we give to each other makes us strong. We also gain strength from the national and international recognition that we have won. We are helped by the work of sister organisations, aid agencies and organisations like PBI that accompany us. It's not only the physical accompaniment but everything that is involved in protecting our work space. These are the conditions that keep

«WHEN YOU TAKE ON HUMAN RIGHTS WORK IN A COUNTRY LIKE THIS, YOU KNOW THAT YOU RUN A CERTAIN RISK AND YOU ARE PREPARED FOR THAT. IT IS DIFFERENT WHEN THEY GO FOR YOUR WEAK POINT, YOUR FAMILY AND LOVED ONES. THE IMPACT IS VERY SEVERE».

In February 2003 Soraya was working on the case of a massacre that occurred in El Páramo de la Saran, where fifteen people were assassinated whilst travelling by bus. Days after meeting with victims of this massacre, the lawyer was heading for her home in Bogotá, driving the

weak point, your family and loved ones. The impact is very severe». These events seriously affected her familial and married life, forcing them to move and influencing her daughter's childhood development. But nonetheless, she continued with her work. «In the first months that followed

us going. It is a personal, political and institutional mix and the belief that we are helping to achieve peace. Otherwise, we would have already left like many others».

¹ «La "pesadilla del DAS" continúa», CCAJAR, 4 May 2009

Fighting with dignity

Jorge Molano: «You have to renounce the right to freedom in order to defend human rights in Colombia».

Simone Droz, volunteer from Switzerland (2009)



Lawyer Jorge Molano and Swiss volunteer Simone Droz

When we ask human rights lawyer Jorge Molano if he has thought about going into exile overseas because of the dangers of his work, he says laughing: «no, because I wouldn't be able to eat *gallina criolla con papas*» (creole chicken with potatoes). Jorge has spent half his life working as an independent human rights lawyer and works on landmark cases that involve high-ranking military officers and high level government officials, such as José Obdulio Gaviria, former adviser to President Uribe Vélez¹. In spite of the risks, for many years he did not want to make use of the security detail offered by the State. Nevertheless, owing to public exposure in the media, which has revealed the cases that he has and the identities of the people involved, he has been forced to take on a protection scheme. It hurts Jorge that, in a country like Colombia, in order to defend human rights you have to renounce the right to liberty and intimacy. Nevertheless, in spite of these restrictions affecting human rights defenders and the many

«THE CASE OF OPERATION DRAGON CAN BE SEEN AS A PRECEDENT TO THE CURRENT ILLEGAL INTERCEPTIONS BY DAS».

companions that he has lost on the way, assassinated or in exile, he maintains the conviction that the only option is to fight with dignity.

PBI has accompanied Jorge Molano within the context of his work on Operation Dragon, a plan drawn up at high levels of the national Government, together with the state security forces and private companies, to assassinate human rights defenders, union leaders and members of the opposition in Colombia². The department of military intelligence of the Third Brigade of the Colombian Army in Cali contracted two private security companies to gather information

on 170 human rights defenders. This intelligence work was supported by the unit of the Technical Investigation Corps (CTI) of the Public Prosecutor's Office in Cali, the police in Cali, and the DAS³. In 2004 Senator Alexander López Maya, of the Democratic Pole party, was alerted to this criminal plan. According to the information received, he was the first in the list, followed by the human rights defender, Berenice Celeyta, President of the Association for Investigation and Social Action (NOMADESC) and the union leader, Luis Antonio Hernández Monroy.

The case of Operation Dragon can be seen as a precedent to the current illegal interceptions by DAS, says Molano. Persecution by the State, illegal monitoring and infiltration of security details leads one to believe that the lives of human rights defenders have been put in the hands of their murderers.

According to Molano, PBI has «made it possible for me to interview witnesses, police commanders and the army; but more than allowing me to enter safely it has enabled me to come out alive». Nevertheless, for him PBI is not only a physical presence, but also recognition of the human rights situation that legitimises the work of human rights defenders outside the country through their testimonies to the reality of Colombia. ●

1 Interview with Jorge Molano, May 2009

2 «Baseless prosecutions of human rights defenders in Colombia: In the dock and under the gun», Human Rights First, February 2009

3 Ibid

Both PBI and risk continue by my side

Journalist Claudia Julieta Duque subject to threats and illegal wire-tapping for investigating the murder of comedian Jaime Garzón.

Claudia Julieta Duque O., journalist and correspondent in Colombia for Radio Nizkor



Claudia Julieta Duque

PBI came into my life for the first time in February 2004, when the police carried out a «technical» inspection in order to check whether my telephones were being illegally intercepted. I had already

This work began in 2001 after convincing Alfredo Garzón, Jaime's brother, to grant a power of attorney to Alirio Uribe, a lawyer with the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective (CCAJAR). Alirio

«2004 WAS PERHAPS THE WORST YEAR OF MY LIFE. THERE WERE DAYS WHEN I WOULD RECEIVE AS MANY AS SEVENTY THREATENING TELEPHONE CALLS».

reported threats and harassment to Jorge Noguera¹, the Director of the Department of Administrative Security (DAS). This led to a petition to the Ministry of the Interior's Programme for the Protection Journalists, of which I have been part since December 2003. The backdrop to these actions was the investigation that I was conducting into the August 1999 murder of the journalist and comedian, Jaime Garzón.

Uribe represented him as the claimant in criminal proceedings relating to two people in prison accused of being the material perpetrators of the assassination. Until then I had dealt with one kidnapping, several cases of harassment, threats, constant surveillance and one trip into exile. In previous years Alirio and I had revealed the existence of an intricate set-up that diverted the investigation of the Garzón case, the principal architects of which were DAS officials from Antioquia and Bogotá.

PBI was in my home that afternoon, as was Soraya Gutiérrez, also of CCAJAR, the NGO that I had been working for since August 2003. We witnessed yet another mockery of my situation: after examining my telephone connections with a voltmeter, a Police captain concluded that my line was «clean». Two minutes later, when the Police had barely left the building, I received a call in which a man with a shrill voice shouted at me «I stole her, I stole her», alluding to my daughter, who during this whole time had been the common denominator in the acts of terror against me. It is not without reason that the archives of the Special Intelligence Group 3 (G-3)² describe her as my «biggest weakness» and my «weak point».

My telephone was not «clean» and the voltmeter was not an appropriate instrument to carry out this test.

Amongst the G-3 materials found by the Public Prosecutor's Office are, in addition to countless emails, several telephone conversations of mine prior to February 2004. One of these refers to the visit of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Shirin Ebadi. This was a conversation I had with a colleague and friend from *Semana* magazine, whose privacy was also violated because of this case. Today he laughs about this saying «you're no good for me». It is difficult for me to laugh.

2004 was perhaps the worst year of my life. There were days in which I would receive as many as seventy threatening telephone calls. Sometimes they would play me funeral music, or distressing shouts about torture and suffering, or insults describing me as «gonorrhoea», «damned», «stupid» and «big-mouthed expletive», amongst others. A floral arrangement was sent to my home with the flowers buried upside down and with a giant putrefied cheese full of maggots. There were also the taxis and vehicles that used to park around my house. I was followed on foot, by motorcycle and by taxi. All this made many of my friends and colleagues dismiss me as paranoid, and some of them stayed away from me. ►►

«PBI CAME TO OUR HOME AND STAYED WITH US THROUGH THE EARLY MORNING HOURS OF INSOMNIA AND THREATENING PHONE CALLS. THEY CAME WITH US WHEN WE HAD TO MOVE URGENTLY».



Caricature of the humorist Jaime Garzón

But PBI was always there to save my daughter and mine's lives. Its members became my guardian angels, my friends and essential company. If I was able to smile during that period it was thanks to them. It was thanks to these foreign nationals, so concerned for our situation, who worked with dedication and deep respect. I was fully aware that without their presence the threats might turn from words into actions. PBI was with me the day that I went to make a statement to the DAS as part of an «investigation» being carried out by Carlos Alberto Arzayúz, today prisoner due to the systematic persecution that this entity carried out against, amongst others, CCAJAR, journalists, members of the opposition and Supreme Court justices.

PBI came to my home in the early morning hours of insomnia and threatening calls. They stayed with us one night in November when we had to move urgently because a man telephoned

to inform me that my daughter «would be raped, mutilated and tortured using unimaginable means because I had got involved with the wrong person». PBI was there 24 hours a day every day until we were forced into a second exile. PBI accompanied us in the sad walk towards Immigration and went with us as far as the door of the plane. One of its members had to literally push me onto the plane whilst I cried uncontrollably.

Today, PBI (and risk) continue by my side. The *brigadistas* are my friends. Nevertheless, we both wish that their presence was not necessary. But it is, and my gratitude is boundless.●

1 Jorge Noguera is currently being investigated for his ties to paramilitary organisations. «Acusación de la Fiscalía contra Jorge Noguera por tres homicidios mantuvo la Corte Suprema», El Tiempo newspaper, 8 September 2009

2 «CIDH expresa preocupación ante operaciones de inteligencia sobre actividades de la Comisión Interamericana en Colombia», CIDH, Press release no. 59/09, 13 August 2009

A verification mission to Arauca

One of the first proven cases of «false positives» occurs in the Department of Arauca.

A former volunteer from the US

In 2004 we accompanied a human rights training course in Saravena, Arauca. We planned another journey to the area at the beginning of August, but due to a possible armed stoppage we were debating whether or not we would be able to undertake the accompaniment.

The situation became even more complicated on 5 August when several organisations told us about the formation of a verification mission following the assassination of three social and union leaders in the village of Caño Seco, close to Saravena. They told us that in the early morning a patrol of the Mechanised Group No. 18, Revéz Pizarro, of the Army arrived in Caño Seco and executed Leonel Goyeneche, treasurer of the local section of

the United Federation of Workers (CUT), Alirio Martínez, former President of the Departmental Association of Small Farmers (ADUC) and Jorge Prieto, President of the National Association of Hospital Workers of Colombia (ANTHOC)¹. At that time, two of the three victims benefited from protective measures ordered by the Inter American Commission on Human Rights. However, according to the version of the National Army there had been a combat and they «took out» the three insurgents. Likewise, Vice President Santos indicated in several media sources that those recently assassinated allegedly had links with guerrilla groups².

We arrived in Arauca a few days later owing to the importance of the verification ▶



Homage to Alirio Martínez, who was murdered on 5 August 2004

►► mission in shedding light on events. We were accompanying several organisations, including the Political Prisoners Solidarity Committee, the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective, the Association for Alternative Social Promotion (MINGA), and the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission. Today I only have a hazy memory of the journey, but I will never forget the heavy atmosphere and the presence of death in the humid air. When we reached the village we found an isolated community that was terrified of future reprisals by the Army. In spite of the difficulties, the mission managed to interview a number of witnesses and collect important evidence, for example, the lack of signs of combat in the place where the events occurred³.

Photo: Jorge Matar/Surimages-IPA



«Troop strength increased from 160 thousand to 254 thousand soldiers from 2008 to 2009, respectively. This makes Colombia the largest military power in Latin America. We are talking about having an army larger than Brazil's which has a troop force of no more than 270 thousand»⁷.

This case, which is one of the first proven cases of the practice known as «false positives», only tells half the truth. It has been possible to prove that the three victims were executed outside combat and in a state of total defencelessness (the sub-lieutenant, the three soldiers and the guide who participated in the operation were sentenced to 40 years in prison). Furthermore, as part of the sentence an investigation was ordered of three former members of the national army for their possible participation as authors of the crimes committed, as they were allegedly the ones that planned the military operation to assassinate them⁴. However, the top level officials responsible for the operation have not been determined. Neither has the Vice President of the Republic retracted the accusations that he made against these union leaders at the time that their extrajudicial execution took place⁵. The fight against impunity continues. ●

«THE TERM “FALSE POSITIVES” PROVIDES A SORT OF TECHNICAL AURA TO DESCRIBE A PRACTICE WHICH IS BETTER CHARACTERIZED AS COLD-BLOODED, PREMEDITATED MURDER OF INNOCENT CIVILIANS FOR PROFIT»⁶.

«False positives» is a practice in which members of the state security forces kill civilians, generally small farmers or the unemployed, and present them as members of the guerrilla killed in combat. According to international humanitarian law an extrajudicial killing is a human rights violation in which a public servant commits a deliberate homicide and uses State authority to justify the crime.



1 «Report of the Verification Commission on the execution of the Araucan leaders Héctor Alirio Martínez, Leonel Goyeneche and Jorge Prieto», 9 September 2004

2 «Union leaders or guerrillas?», *Semana* magazine, 8 August 2004

3 «Report of the Verification Committee on the Execution of the Araucan Leaders, Héctor Alirio Martínez, Leonel Goyeneche and Jorge Prieto», 9 September 2004

4 Judgement No. 810013107001-200500060-01. Second Criminal Court of the Specialised Circuit (OIT), Bogotá DC, 23 August 2007. On 26 June 2009 Office 20 of the Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Unit of the Public Prosecutor's Office issued an order for preventative detention without right to release for these acts (filed 2009-OIT).

5 Interview with Alirio Uribe Muñoz, lawyer with the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective, who represents the claimants in the criminal proceedings, 16 July 2009

6 Statement by Professor Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial killings, Mission to Colombia, 8-18 June 2009

7 «Colombia parece transitar hacia una estructura militar», *Nuevo Arco Iris* Corporation, 8 May 2009

Extrajudicial killings in Antioquia

The lawyers of the Corporation Judicial Freedom (CJL) have spent years compiling cases on extrajudicial killings.

Louise Winstanley, volunteer from Great Britain (2004-6)

I will never forget the clothes of the children thrown around the courtyard of a small and very poor farm, where 14 members of a family lived. They were not all at home that fateful night, when it is asserted that the Army entered and shot everyone except the mother, her baby and a two-year-old boy. They riddled the father, brothers, sisters and young pregnant wife with bullets: eight people in total. There was blood on the walls, the floor and the bed. When we asked the lawyer, he said that it appeared that they had been assassinated in their beds.

This was a disturbing accompaniment that PBI had been asked to carry out with little warning. One of the lawyers that worked for CJL, a group of lawyers in Medellín that PBI has accompanied for many years, had received a telephone call and a visit from the mother asking him to accept the case of the assassination of her family, which was attributed to the army. He had to visit the crime scene and collect evidence, and we had to walk for six hours in the mountains of Antioquia in order to accompany him in this task.

This lawyer had been working for several years compiling cases of extrajudicial killings, many of which were what are known in Colombia as false positives: cases of innocent civilians

Every day a person dies victim to an extrajudicial killing in Colombia.

According to the Coordination Colombia-Europe-United States², the period from January 2007 to June 2008 was the worst in terms of reports of extrajudicial executions: 535 people were assassinated by the state security forces, that is to say, an average of one per day. Many victims were small farmers, or young people from poor neighbourhoods, who responded to false offers of work in other areas of the country and who were then executed by members of the Army, presenting them as guerrillas.



British volunteer Louise Winstanley in Eastern Antioquia

«THIS WAS A DISTURBING ACCOMPANIMENT THAT PBI HAD BEEN ASKED TO CARRY OUT WITH LITTLE WARNING».

assassinated by the army, who are then dressed in guerrilla uniforms. Weapons are placed at their side to pass them off as killed in combat. These would be added to the figures of the guerrilla felled by a particular army unit and the battalion would subsequently receive a reward. The questionable practice of offering rewards is regulated in Ministerial Directive Number 029 of 2005¹.

PBI's accompaniment in this situation was essential because the lawyer

was compiling cases of extrajudicial execution against the same unit that controlled the area where we were going to travel. Given the dangers that human rights defenders confront on a daily basis, it would have been very risky for him to venture alone into this remote region of Antioquia where not even basic means of communication exist.●

¹ «Ministerial Directive 029 of 2005», El Espectador newspaper, 1 November 2008

² Coordination Colombia-Europe-United States (CCEEU): Observing, bulletin No 6, October 2008

An urgent call at midnight

PBI volunteers accompany a commission to search for the disappeared when news of the massacre arrives.

Erika Zarate, volunteer from Canada (2004-5)

At midnight on 22 February 2005 Jesús, a member of the San José de Apartadó Peace Community, made an urgent call to the PBI house in Turbo. He told us that eight members of the community had disappeared, including the leader Luís Eduardo Guerra, and that the community feared for his safety. Jesús asked us for international accompaniment for a commission to search for the disappeared persons.

Robert, a Spanish volunteer with PBI, three other international persons, Elkin (a Colombian lawyer specialising in human rights with the Corporation Judicial Freedom) and I went to the Peace Community in order to accompany one hundred women and men in the search for their friends and family members. As a measure of protection, and also an act of solidarity, the community organised itself to go in large groups.

The commission left at four in the morning on 24 February, heading for the home of Alfonso Bolívar, one of the most active members of the Peace Community. The way was steep and muddy. After seven hours on foot we finally arrived at the farm. Soldiers and police surrounded us and Robert explained to them that we were international workers accompanying a civilian commission and that our team had personally informed the Vice President of Colombia, the General of the XVII Brigade and many embassies and UN bodies of our presence there. The military official in charge told his troops to lower their arms and to let the commission pass.

When we arrived we found ourselves contemplating a horrendous scene: a humble family home with blood splashed all over the entrance to the house, empty



Jorge Mata/Surimages-IPA

Members of the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó

«IT WAS A PAINFUL SHOCK TO SEE THE SOLDIERS TAKING PHOTOS IN FRONT OF THE BAGS THAT CONTAINED THE BODIES, MAKING SIGNS OF VICTORY WITH THEIR FINGERS.»

Demanding comprehensive justice

The case of the massacre of 21 February 2005 had much repercussion in the international community because of the cruelty of the acts and the fact that there were child victims. Initially the Government stated that the FARC were responsible for the massacre¹. However, since 2007 several soldiers from the XVII Brigade have been investigated² and the trial of eight of them began that year. They were charged with the homicide of protected persons, acts of barbarity and arrangement to commit an offence³. Similarly, in 2008 a Captain accepted a plea bargain, recognising his responsibility in the acts⁴. These military officials had supposedly been acting together with paramilitaries⁵. It is worth highlighting the broader context of the number of aggressions against the Community since its creation in 1997: more than 165 cases of assassination and forced disappearance and almost 600 cases of reported human rights violations⁶.

Another three coordinators have been assassinated since the massacre occurred⁷. Most of the crimes continue to go unpunished. The Peace Community benefits from provisional measures, ordered by the Inter American Court of Human Rights, which urge the Colombian State to order «immediate measures necessary for the effective protection of the lives and personal integrity of all the members of the San José de Apartadó Peace Community»⁸.

- 1 «La comunidad tenía razón», El Tiempo newspaper, 24 July 2007
 «Audiencia de juzgamiento a militares será en diciembre, niegan nulidad de juicio por masacre en Comunidad de Paz», El Tiempo, 26 August 2009
 2 «Verdades de la masacre de San José de Apartadó», El Espectador newspaper, 2 August 2008
 «Por homicidio en persona protegida y terrorismo, a indagatoria 56 Militares», El Tiempo, 22 February 2007
 3 «Audiencia de juzgamiento a militares será en diciembre, niegan nulidad de juicio por masacre en Comunidad de Paz», El Tiempo, 26 August 2009
 4 «Capitán (r) del Ejército aceptó su responsabilidad por masacre de San José de Apartadó», El Tiempo, 1 August 2008
 5 «Verdades de la masacre de San José de Apartadó», El Espectador, 2 August 2008
 «Audiencia de juzgamiento a militares será en diciembre, niegan nulidad de juicio por masacre en Comunidad de Paz», El Tiempo, 26 August 2009
 6 «La Historia vivida», San José de Apartadó Peace Community, 21 December 2006
 7 «Paramilitares asesinan a Dairo», San José de Apartadó Peace Community, 15 July 2008
 «Cronología de agresiones contra la Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó y población de la zona, con posterioridad al 7 de agosto de 2002», San José de Apartadó Peace Community, 31 January 2008
 8 «Medidas provisionales respecto a Colombia, asunto de la comunidad de paz de San José de Apartadó», Resolution of the Inter American Court of Human Rights, 6 February 2008

▶▶ cartridges on the ground, and the severed hand of a small girl sticking out from a pile of rotten cacao fruit shells. A painful silence overcame us.

I called the PBI team in Turbo and I gave them the exact location of the farm so that the forensic team of the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman could find us easily. Its helicopter landed hours later and the authorities and scientists began to work immediately. The forensic process was observed by the Colombian lawyer, several leaders from the community and three international companions.

The investigators found three adults and two small children in a mass grave. The adults displayed torture marks made with a machete. The five had been beheaded. The victims of the massacre were: Alfonso Bolívar; his partner, Sandra Muñoz; their children, Natalia (six) and Santiago (two) and a farm worker, Alejandro Pérez.

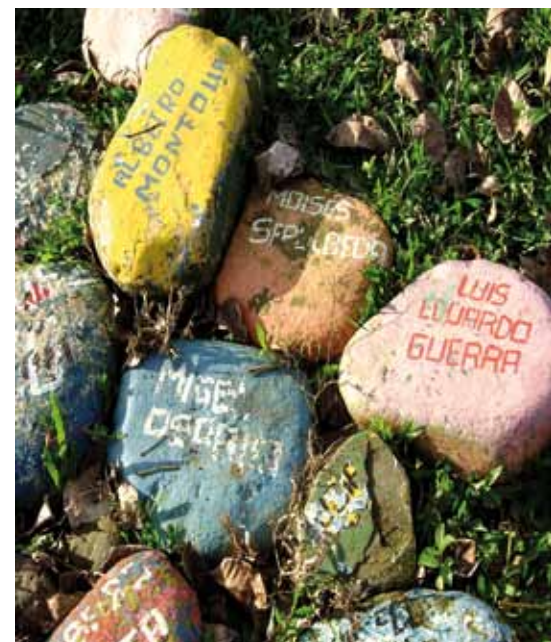
When the helicopter arrived to collect the forensic team and the plastic bags that contained the human remains, the commission prepared to continue the search, heading towards the house of Luis Eduardo Guerra and his family. As we were about to leave, it was a painful shock to see the soldiers taking photos in front of the bags that contained the bodies, making signs of victory with their fingers.

After some five more hours walking, and without any sign of the disappeared persons, we decided to camp on an abandoned farm until the following morning. I was at the front of the commission that day. After following the river for a long time I stumbled across the skull of Deiner, a playful but timid boy of ten with whom I had shared sweets and free time on previous occasions. We all continued up river in a state of numbness until we found the bodies of Luis Eduardo Guerra and his partner Beyanira Guzmán, and the remains of their son Deiner.

Whilst we waited for the forensic team, we took turns scaring away the crows and hogs that tried to eat the corpses. We waited until nightfall, but when we realised that nobody from the team of the Office of the Human rights Ombudsman was going to arrive, one part of the commission, accompanied by us, returned to San José de Apartadó. We left behind a group of 25 members of the community and the human rights lawyer to guard the last victims of the massacre.

The return to Turbo was dizzying. PBI had mobilised an urgent action and members of all the teams were busy sending emails, making telephone calls and meeting with any actor who had a role or responsibility in resolving the massacre. PBI sent me to Bogotá to meet dozens of UN representatives, various embassies and high level civilian authorities, in order to promote the protection of the peace community and to demand a transparent investigation into the massacre.

Five years later we continue to accompany the leaders of the San José de Apartadó Peace Community, a pioneer and model community, who continue to defend their principles of non-violence, justice, solidarity, freedom, dialogue and respect. ●



In homage, the stones are marked with the names of the victims from the Peace Community.

Don Petro **resists** in the midst of **African palm**

Amidst threats and attempts on their lives, small farmers from the Curbaradó river basin (Chocó Department) fight to recover their lands.

Mariana Niessen, volunteer from Brasil (2005-9)



Don Enrique Petro

In January 2006 PBI received a petition to accompany the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission (CIJP) to the home of small-scale farmer Enrique Petro, and then on to his farm, which was located in the middle of an African palm plantation in Curbaradó. This was the second time in less than one month that CIJP had requested accompaniment from PBI to visit this region. It is an area affected by land disputes, whose remote location requires a one-day journey traversing a large area of African palm plantations.

In October 2005, Petro and a member of CIJP witnessed the kidnapping of Orlando Valencia, a leader from this region and spokesperson on environmental damage caused by the cultivation of African palm in the area. Valencia's body appeared days after the abduction, lifeless in a river. The purpose of this evil act appeared to be to sow fear and

to weaken the organisational processes of the small farmers in Curbaradó, who had been dispossessed of their lands from 1996 onwards by military actions with alleged paramilitary participation. These operations resulted in the destruction of their properties and the native forest. It also opened the way for the mass cultivation of African palm on these lands, which belong to the Afro Colombian communities under constitutional law.

In spite of these difficulties, Petro was determined to recover his land and to make it possible for other small farmers to build a humanitarian zone on his old farm, which would make it possible for them to organise themselves in order to return to their lands. Our accompaniment on this journey provided protection to members of CIJP and to Petro. The purpose of the visit was to establish a plan of action to begin the process of return.

It was not a simple journey of accompaniment. We walked for four hours under a burning sun without any chance to shelter in the shade. We were in the midst of a plantation of African palm trees and had to put up with the looks of the workers and security personnel on the cultivations. This was the first time that PBI had undertaken this journey on foot, showing international accompaniment and putting its power of dissuasion to the test. As well as the political challenge, we faced the physical and mental challenge of carrying all the food, mats and water for the days that we would be staying in the heart of the plantations, waking with fear if a dog started barking, or listening to imaginary footsteps. Is that someone approaching the house?

The accompaniment, like most in which PBI participates, ended without incident. It represented one of the first steps towards the safe return of small-scale farmers to their lands. Since then numerous humanitarian and biodiversity zones have been established in Curbaradó thanks to the initiative of these displaced persons. However, in spite of the permanent accompaniment of PBI since January 2006, the tension in Curbaradó has not diminished. There have been further repeated attacks, hostilities and threats. These culminated in the assassination of Ualberto Hoyos, one of the leaders of the Caño Manso community's return process. There is still a long way to go before small-scale farmers can once again find tranquillity and live in peace on their lands. ●



Young people from the Curbaradó River Basin

Local self-protection initiatives

Numerous communities in the country have been searching for ways to protect themselves from the armed conflict that besieges Colombia. Several indigenous communities have what they call «permanent assemblies», places clearly identified as zones of refuge for the civilian population. Similarly, the communities of Bajo Naya have created what they call «places of refuge».

PBI accompanies several communities in Urabá that utilise the concept of Humanitarian Zones, clearly delineated areas identified by fencing and placards. The entry into these zones of any armed person is prohibited. These spaces seek to locally adapt the concept of protected zones provided for in International Humanitarian Law. They seek compliance with the principle of distinguishing between combatants and the civilian population, which is fundamental for those civilians caught in the middle of both internal and international armed conflicts.



The communities have also sought to protect the environment, as caring for it is essential for their continued ability to live in their territories. For this reason they have created special zones, such as the Biodiversity Zones in the Urabá region, for the protection of natural resources, fauna and flora, and to confront agricultural expansion and land seizure. In the Magdalena Medio region, following a long process that began in 1998, the Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform (INCORA) finally accepted the creation of the Peasant Reserve Zone of the Cimitarra River Valley. The following year the Colombian government decided to suspend this zone «for reasons of general interest». Today the Peasant Farmers' Association of the Cimitarra River Valley (ACVC) continues to insist that this suspension be lifted.



Walking for PBI Colombia

After volunteering with PBI, the musician Flakito travels 750 Km of the Santiago Way (Spain) to collect funds and raise awareness about the human rights situation in Colombia.

Flakito¹, volunteer from Great Britain (2002-4)

Walking is the most basic form of transport, it is not very quick but it has become my preferred means. In my first year as a volunteer with PBI I was in Barrancabermeja walking alongside brave members of NGOs such as the Grassroots Women's Organisation (OFP) and the Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS). I accompanied them in their work and journeys around the Magdalena Medio region. Several times I walked as a witness alongside the mass marches of all the social organisations in Barrancabermeja. In my second year I was in Urabá, in more remote zones accompanying inspirational communities that are committed to non-violence and that do not want to be involved in the war. In Cacarica, during the dry season when there was insufficient water in the river for the canoes, we had to walk for hours in order to reach the isolated settlements. In San

José de Apartadó where the road (which is only suitable for all terrain vehicles) ends, one had to walk or go up by mule or horse in order to reach the villages. I remember crossing endless mud in the mountains when we climbed up to the «Small Farmers' University» in Arenas Altas on foot. This was a meeting of small farming communities resisting the war. They came from different regions of the country in order to share knowledge and experiences.

Before going to Colombia with PBI I earned my living through music, playing in a band or solo, and using the accordion to accompany my songs. I frequently used to travel in my van around the United Kingdom and Europe. I still continue with my music, but I no longer have the van. When I returned from Colombia I set the goal for myself of walking part of Spain. I decided to



Flakito playing music at a community in Urabá during his second year with PBI

take the *Camino de Santiago* (Santiago Way), a route that has been followed by pilgrims for over one thousand years. It is complete with its own infrastructure of hostels for the walkers who come from all parts of the world. Previously, I had recorded a CD called «*En Camino*» with several musician friends, in order to sell it along the *Camino* and to donate the funds to PBI Colombia.



Children from the Magdalena Medio region where Flakito accompanied

Amnesty International in Spain helped me with the costs for the hostels, providing me with a white sackcloth bearing the Amnesty logo and website address to cover my cart, as well as leaflets about their Colombian human rights campaign. I handed these leaflets out to the walkers that I met during my three months along the *Camino*, from April to June 2006. The local Amnesty groups in Pamplona, Logroño, Burgos, Palencia, León, Ponferrada and Santiago de Compostela organised concerts and talks in the municipal halls, colleges and universities, interviews with mayors, counsellors, the press, radio and television. We did this as a show of international solidarity to demonstrate what can be achieved with Amnesty International and PBI. Sometimes in other villages, when the owner of a hostel unexpectedly invited me to give a talk for their «pilgrims», I found myself performing a type of mental acrobatics trying to speak in Spanish, English and French, showing a DVD about San José de Apartadó for example and, of course, entertaining with some live songs.

I enjoyed those three months very much, although it was physically demanding owing to the distance (750km from the border with France) and the weight of my backpack. I carried my accordion, flute, percussion, amplifier and small microphones, Amnesty leaflets

and CDs for sale to benefit PBI; all this in a small «all-terrain» two-wheel trolley. Several times members of the local Amnesty group accompanied and helped me for the day, meeting me as I entered or exited their city. On these occasions there was another very symbolic accompaniment, that of Pablo Arenales, a Colombian human rights defender residing in Spain and participating in Amnesty International's asylum programme. I had

explained what could be done to support their campaign.

El Camino de Santiago is famous for being a sacred or magical path, depending on your beliefs. For me the experience does not depend on beliefs, but on the act of walking, of being immersed in nature and the human world, watching landscapes unfold as they draw closer and then are left behind. Mountains, forests,

**«I REMEMBER CROSSING THROUGH
ENDLESS MUD WHEN WE CLIMBED UP
TO THE “SMALL FARMERS” UNIVERSITY
IN ARENAS ALTAS ON FOOT».**

accompanied Pablo many times during my first year with PBI in Colombia. Along the *Camino* through various cities we put together a complete presentation for interviews with the media. First of all I answered questions about the *Camino* and voluntary work with PBI in Colombia and the CD, and then Pablo spoke in more depth about the situation of human rights defenders in Colombia. Lastly, a representative of Amnesty International

valleys, rivers, monuments, churches and cities. It is very different from what one feels from inside a train or a vehicle. And the opportunity for leisurely in-depth conversations with other walkers, whether it be about human rights, the achievements of civilisation and what we have lost through haste and pressure, or simply to share life experiences. The trust created between strangers is something sacred. ●

1 Artistic name of the author

A journey to the end of the world

The José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective supports communities affected by carbon extraction in La Guajira Department.

Anita Linares, volunteer from Switzerland (2004-2006)

In April 2006 PBI accompanied the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective (CCAJAR) and the Swiss NGO, Swiss Working Group on Colombia (ASK) to La Guajira Department, visiting communities around the Cerrejón mine, the biggest open-pit coalmine in Colombia. The purpose of this journey was to meet victims evicted from the village of Tabaco, to gather information in the communities about the impacts of coal-mining (contamination, health, education, employment and infrastructure), to provide possible legal advice for negotiations between the company doing the mining and the communities with regards to their displacement, and to include these communities in the reparation process with Tabaco.

Many meetings, moments and impressions from this journey remain engraved on my memory; the most memorable of these are the following:

I was saddened by the heartrending situation of the villages around the mine, hit by the economic interests of multinational companies. The

communities live in precarious conditions, the land is contaminated and infertile and the vegetables do not grow. The contamination generates serious health problems and movement in the area is limited due to road closures. The royalties are not invested in the infrastructure of the villages closest to the mine. The local population has little chance of gaining employment in the mine and several communities are at risk of being displaced.

The meeting with the victims evicted from the village of Tabaco gave me an even better understanding of what being displaced means. Not only is their economic situation worse, making them dependant on help from their families, but they also suffer the consequences of the breakdown of the community's social fabric. In spite of their difficult experiences they maintain the spirit and the strength needed to continue fighting for the restoration of their basic rights, and for the receipt of adequate reparation. This reparation would not only give them the chance to rebuild a dignified life and

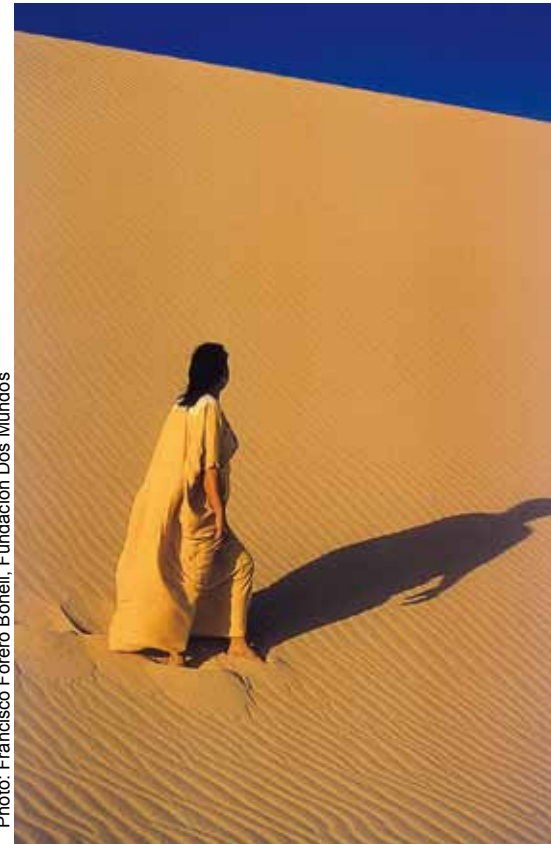


Photo: Francisco Forero Bonelli, Fundación Dos Mundos

Guajira woman in the desert

the social fabric of the community, it would also allow them to negotiate better conditions for other communities at risk of being displaced.

I was surprised by the strong commitment of organisations such as CCAJAR and its members. They continue to support the just fight of disadvantaged peoples and to offer their knowledge and resources in order to provide advice. Even though they live in precarious conditions, the Colombian people do not lose their positive spirit or their capacity to enjoy life.

Due to bad weather and a road closure at 6 pm it was impossible to return to Albania. We were taken in by a family in Remedios. They provided generous hospitality and even organised a «very Colombian» party. We all enjoyed ourselves and danced late into the night.

Later on, already in Switzerland, I had another chance to see José Julio (displaced from Tabaco). I am pleased that ASK and PBI continue supporting his fight for dignified reparation for the victims of Tabaco, and at the same time to obtain better living conditions for the villages at risk of displacement. ●



Village in La Guajira

Casanare: the fight against impunity

Gustavo Gallardo, a lawyer from the Political Prisoners Solidarity Committee listens to victims of extrajudicial killings in Casanare.

Kristina Johansen, volunteer from Norway (2006-7)

On 16 April 2007, an army GAULA¹ unit allegedly murdered the brothers Luís Guillermo Robayo Mora and Rubén Darío Avendaño Mora, 25 and 14 years old respectively, in Hato Corozal (Casanare)². Their parents, the farmers Jorge Avendaño and Guillermina Mora, explain their sons had gone to purchase cattle in Paz de Ariporo, but never returned. Instead, the authorities presented them as two guerrilla members killed in combat.

I recall the solemn stare of the two surviving younger siblings when I was at their farm in June 2007, while accompanying the lawyer Gustavo Gallardo from the Political Prisoners Solidarity Committee (FCSP). We were on our way to the town of Sácama when we passed by some soldiers who were on highway patrol. «You are traumatised and the children are also very traumatised. They have had trouble with school, because they're affected by what happened to their brothers. They don't say anything, but they think about it. And you also realise that perhaps it's not about their brothers, rather they're thinking something could also happen to them or to us», says Jorge Avendaño.

Unfortunately, the experience of the Avendaño Mora family is not unique. According to a report by the Public Prosecutor's Office, up to 20 December 2008, this institution was investigating 848 cases known as «false positives», in



Fabián Laverde, COS-PACC member. The organisation also supports victims of extrajudicial killings in Casanare.



The Uwa are an indigenous community in Casanare

which 1.375 persons died³. Of these 848 investigations, 768 correspond to cases after 2004. Of these, most were reported in 2007⁴. During this year and up to the present, PBI has been accompanying persons who have played a fundamental role in reporting cases on this reality. The work of human rights defenders consists in providing workshops, gathering information on reported abuses and advising the victims, from the cities to the most remote areas of the country. This work also entails directly confronting the alleged responsible parties in the military criminal justice system –where the investigations generally begin– as well as in the ordinary justice system. Another important task is to encourage public discussion of this issue. By going public, the family members and their lawyers run the risk of being stigmatised, threatened and even murdered⁵.

When, as PBI volunteers, we accompany these processes, we familiarise ourselves with the pain, fear and anger of the family members, but also all the other persons who accompany them in their fight.

I remember the night we accompanied Gustavo Gallardo to a park in Yopal, where he met with a woman whose husband had been recently murdered. While I

played with her five-year-old daughter, the woman told her story and cried on the lawyer's shoulder. Gustavo, who has also suffered the effects of persecution and forced displacement, later told us he felt like crying with the widow, but that he held back because he thought he should give her strength and hope. The persistent work of human rights defenders and the courage of the victims makes the world see that the life of a farmer is worth as much as anyone else's. As Jorge Avendaño says:

«What's most important is for this not to remain unpunished. A person may not take away someone else's life. No bible –or any law– says so». ●

1 Elite units, created by Law 282 of 1996, exclusively dedicated to preventing and acting against kidnapping and extortion. The units are made up of agents from the Administrative Department of Security (DAS), the Technical Investigation Unit (CTI), the Public Prosecutor's Office and the military forces. Presently in Colombia, there are 16 army GAULA units and two navy GAULA units. (Source: <http://www.ejercito.mil.co/index.php?idcategoria=71>)

2 «A juicio ex comandante del Gaula por 'falsos positivos'», El Espectador newspaper, 19 August 2009

3 «Nuevas capturas por falsos positivos», El Colombiano newspaper, 27 January 2009

4 «Más de mil militares: involucrados en falsos positivos», AFP/Terra Colombia, 28 January 2009

5 «Baseless Prosecutions of Human Rights Defenders in Colombia», Human Rights First, February 2009

Showing what is hidden

On 6 March 2008, nearly 300.000 persons march in homage to the victims of paramilitarism, *para-politics*¹ and State crimes.

Rokko Fermo, volunteer from Italy

Iván Cepeda—the son of Senator Manuel Cepeda, the director of the Cepeda Foundation and member of the National Movement for Victims of State Crimes (MOVICE), discusses the march for the rights of victims of paramilitarism that took place on 6 March 2008. PBI has accompanied the Cepeda Foundation since April 2004 when Iván Cepeda and co-founder Claudia Girón returned to Colombia after more than four years of exile in France, due to the death threats they had been receiving.

PBI: The march on 6 March was a success. Can you tell us how many people participated?

Iván Cepeda: Estimates reached a figure of close to 300.000 people who mobilised in almost 100 cities in Colombia and throughout the world².

PBI: How were you able to mobilise so many people?

IC: I believe it had to do with properly understanding the time in which the demonstration took place. In Colombia, crimes committed by state agents have been historically concealed and silenced. However, at the time of the demonstration, a favourable situation existed to begin awakening the solidarity of citizens with respect to these criminal acts: the *para-politics* scandal, the initial documentation of executions committed by members of the security forces, and the Uribe administration's involvement in crimes against humanity. All these factors that in some way were being timidly mentioned by the press and television gave rise to a situation that made it very difficult to keep hiding the fact there are victims of State agents. With much effort and in the midst of a very difficult situation, this reading allowed us to visibilise the situation of the victims of state agents.

I believe this was the beginning of a process that has gradually allowed recognising State crimes and the victims of State actors. The march is a significant reflection of the victims' public actions.



Iván Cepeda at a public hearing in San Onofre. He spoke against the ties between politicians and paramilitarism

Photo: Sebastian Rötters

It has also given rise to other more recent events that have allowed their public visibility and, consequently, improved conditions for demanding and enforcing the rights to truth, justice and reparation.

PBI: What is the MOVICE? How did it begin?

IC: The Victims' Movement is essentially a social movement. This means it is a manifestation of different networks and expressions, organisations, communities and persons who feel they are victims of State agents and paramilitaries. The Victims' Movement is part of a broad spectrum of Colombian social movements and organisations that work for substantive transformations in society and toward change in the political and socio-economic system. Its specificity is that it deems justice—judicial and social—and the truth of the crimes to be factors for democratising Colombian society.

I believe the Victims' Movement has been the political and social subject that has allowed victims in Colombia—particularly the victims of state agents—to begin to exercise and demand their rights and to more realistically aspire to wielding political power. I believe this harsh reality, which has worsened, may no longer be concealed or despised. The movement will be an important vector in this struggle

through mobilisations, as well as through the formation and creation of political ideals that allow victims, along with other social movements, to attain their desired transformations.

PBI: What are the challenges and risks faced by MOVICE?

IC: Basically, the social movement faces a criminal State structure in Colombia. Moreover, this unified and integrated structure derives from organised crime. As opposed to other forms of State criminality that persecute the opposition and silence sectors of civil society, in this case a State criminality—as a structure and apparatus—is also very involved in drug-trafficking. This means that power is fragmented and can therefore have multiple forms of aggression and persecution. It is a very powerful structure with media collusion that silences, manipulates and seriously distorts its essence. This is why the MOVICE faces considerable challenges. The movement confronts these challenges by collectively constructing an opposition with international support networks, as is done in the human rights movement. ●

¹ Ties between politicians and paramilitary organisations

² 70 cities in Colombia and 30 different cities in Europe, Australia, Canada and United States.

They killed Ualberto

Ualberto Hoyos was a well-known leader from the Curbaradó River Basin (Chocó Department).

Jaime Martínez and Andreas Riemann, volunteers from Spain and Germany (2007-2009)

On 14 October 2008 we travelled to the communities of Curbaradó with the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission (CIJP). The area was unsafe due to the recent threats made against CIJP and the communities, and by the recent abduction of a CIJP member. However, because of the perseverance of the communities and CIJP, we continued to accompany in this area. We spent the day at the Humanitarian Zone on farmer Don Petro's land in the midst of African palm. The persons we accompanied were preparing some activities. At four in the afternoon, we were informed that Ualberto Hoyos had just been killed in the Caño Manso community. Two men had shot him point-blank in front of witnesses in the middle of the day.

We knew Ualberto was a well-known leader for the Curbaradó communities and several of us had also met him. We remembered that just a year ago, one afternoon in September 2007, he had been previously attacked. A hit man had attempted to kill him and his brother while they sat in front of their house, which was near to where Orlando Valencia, another leader from the communities in the Lower Atrato region, had been disappeared two years before. On this occasion, Ualberto and his brother were seriously wounded by the gunshots and had to leave the area due to security concerns as well as to physically recover. However, a few



German volunteer Moritz Hartnagel with small farmers from Curbaradó

Up to July 1997, between 80 and 90 families inhabited the Caño Manso rural community. Their sources of subsistence were rice, corn, cassava, plantain, yam, and fishing. In July 1997, all the farming families left the area, fleeing armed groups. On 5 August 2007, after ten years of displacement, a group of families decided to return to their territory.

of the community leader Orlando Valencia. Precisely one day before his murder, the First Criminal Court of the Specialised Circuit Court in Antioquia had summoned Ualberto to provide testimony in the trial being undertaken against two well-known paramilitaries for the homicide of Orlando. Ualberto had also been granted provisional measures of protection by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and within this framework had received a security detail from the Ministry of Interior and Justice. Nonetheless, the persons in charge of his security were not with him during the week of his murder as they alleged there was damage to the vehicle they used to protect him¹.

«THE MESSAGE OF HIS MURDER PROVOKED A DEEP FEAR AMONG THE PEOPLE FROM THE COMMUNITIES».

weeks previous to his assassination, Ualberto had returned to the area of Curbaradó with security detail provided by the State: armed bodyguards and an armoured car. The message of his murder provoked a deep fear among the people from the communities and CIJP asked us to accompany them to immediately leave for Caño Manso.

Although Caño Manso is presently occupied by extensive cattle ranching and lumber extraction, several families had returned in October 2008 and Ualberto played an important role in this return. Moreover, he was also a witness in the legal investigations regarding the illegal appropriation of land in the region and in the case of the disappearance and homicide

We had to travel to Caño Manso by motorcycle at night. On the way, we crossed paths with the Army and the Police, who first tried to hinder our journey. Finally, at eight in the evening, we arrived to Caño Manso. We went to the community, which seemed abandoned. Silence reigned and you could feel the fear in the air, even though we could not see anyone. The CIJP

▶▶ member yelled: «Hello. Good Evening. Is anyone there?» We heard a reply that came from a house: «Justice and Peace?» When they heard «yes», people began to come out of their houses little by little and we met the beautiful and admirable people of Caño Manso. They quickly told us what happened and asked if we wanted to see the deceased body of Ualberto. The woman from CIJP looked at us and with difficulty said: «I suppose so». A boy grabbed Andreas's hand and said: «Come on, the man is over here». Ualberto was lying face up with six candles set up around him. Some of the gunshots could be seen.

The Police, the Army and the Technical Investigation Unit (CTI) of the Public Prosecutor's Office arrived some five hours after the incident was reported. Then the Public Prosecutor's Office received testimony for several hours and the procedures took the entire night. They also gathered some nine bullet shells next to Ualberto and took his body. At dawn, a woman from the community made coffee. After serving us, we witnessed another example of the integrity of the people



A small farmer in front of one of the humanitarian zones

«THROUGH THE SONGS THEY SANG, WE UNDERSTOOD THE DECISION WAS TO CONTINUE WITH THE STRUGGLE IN THEIR TERRITORY.»

from these communities: despite her fear and mistrust, the woman approached the police and also offered them coffee. It was a long and strange night. The two of us had never experienced such a tragic and sad situation. The people from the community gathered together and supported each other, remembering Ualberto. Someone read the Bible and together they reflected on the aggressions they faced and if they should continue forward. Through the songs they sang and their readings, we understood the decision was to continue with the struggle in their territory. They spoke about creating a Humanitarian Zone, which we believe was achieved a few months later.

the people from the community and the CIJP member, who had impressed us so much with the support she provided to the community. For Jaime, it was the last time he was in Caño Manso with PBI, though he hopes to see these people again. We also hope some day for there to be justice in the murder of Ualberto, the attack against him and his brother the year before, and the disappearance and murder of Orlando Valencia, in addition to the countless violations the Caño Manso community and the other communities from Curbaradó and Jiguamiandó have suffered and continue to suffer. Forced displacement has banished them from their territory for so many years. ●

The next day, since other PBI volunteers came to relieve us, we exchanged emotional farewells with

¹ «Informe 93: Curbaradó, Asesinato Ualberto Hoyos, Paramilitares asesinaron a líder de Curbaradó», Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission, 14 October 2008



Children from Chocó

A stolen life

ACVC member Miguel Huepa was jailed for 16 months, accused of rebellion. During his imprisonment, his son was the victim of an alleged extrajudicial killing.

Rob Hawke, volunteer from Great Britain (2009)



ACVC members

I am next to Miguel on the riverboat. He is telling me about the river's whims, depths, shallows, rapids and eddies. His delight is evident as he interrupts his story to effusively greet another local boarding a boat or to point out a turtle hidden along the shore. With satisfaction, he contemplates the green pastures and red ravines of the Cimitarra River Valley. After being jailed 16 months ago, he was recently released and now returns to his land for the first time.

Farmers' Association of the Cimitarra River Valley (ACVC), of which he is a founding member. Evaristo Mena is also on the riverboat. He is another ACVC human rights defender who was jailed with Miguel for several months in cellblock no. 4 of the Modelo Prison in Bucaramanga. Reunited, they are now resuming the training workshops, which had been interrupted by their imprisonment.

worried and nervous faces of his family and colleagues. Now, in Puerto Nuevo Ité, Miguel tells the community about that time in more detail.

«The UT [the prison in Barrancabermeja] is worse than a jail. People are put in the same cellblock that cannot live together. We didn't have any water, ventilation, bathrooms, like dirty swine. Many people arrive –doped, lit up, high- and walk around with knives».

For Miguel, life in a high-security prison meant fear and insecurity. There, «one lived expecting anything, be it a stabbing, beating, maltreatment or otherwise». Chilling stories circulated: that cyanide was put in the coffee, that a prisoner was doused with gasoline and set on fire.

In October 2008, Miguel was transferred from the Modelo Prison to the Palo Gordo Prison in Girón, after some disturbances between prison guards and some prisoners. «Gas prices fell, got cheap, and there was plenty for everybody. No one was ready for this. It was difficult, a very hard situation. Cells were destroyed, practically everything, to the point where they had to cover the cells in paper».

Nonetheless, the situation did not improve at Palo Gordo, where there was «a mixture of paramilitaries, thieves, all kinds of drug addicts, guerrilla members and people from organisations who had nothing to do with those problems». ►►

«JUST BEING DETAINED, WITH NOTHING TO DO, IS TORTURE. [THE KILLING OF MY SON] WAS TORTURE ON TOP OF TORTURE».

We are on our way to Puerto Nuevo Ité, where his family lives and where Miguel was detained under charges of rebellion on 20 January 2008. On 20 May 2009, he was acquitted by judicial authorities. It is the end of an immense and painful circle in the history of Miguel Ángel González Huepa and the Peasant

The first time I saw Miguel was at one of the hearings for his case at the Public Prosecutor's Office in Barrancabermeja. He was sitting handcuffed, surrounded by police, while the witness rendered his testimony. I was impressed by Miguel's temperament. He handled the problems with a good disposition, despite the



Evaristo Mena from ACVC (right) demanding the freedom of his companions in 2008.

► After disturbances took place, they forced him to strip in order to conduct body-cavity searches. Sharing this with his community, Miguel described the situation as «an indignity for people such as us».

He not only had to confront fear, but also loneliness. «When you are locked up, you suffer a lot of consequences, remembering your community and family. You think about a lot of things, which doesn't make you feel good».

The hardest thing was the news he received just one week after his arrest. His son, Miguel Ángel González Gutiérrez, also a human rights defender, was allegedly murdered by the Calibío Battalion of the XIV Brigade and later presented as a guerrilla member killed in combat. The incident occurred within the context of the 16 extrajudicial killings of farmers in the Cimitarra River Valley documented by the ACVC from 2002 to 2008, which were presented to the United Nations Special Rapporteur in July 2009. Up to the present, no one has been convicted for these crimes. According to the ACVC, these extrajudicial killings –as well as the baseless prosecutions against their leaders- are a strategy to weaken and discredit their work¹. Miguel Jr. was also from Puerto Nuevo Ité.

During the accompaniment, the community held a memorial for him. Miguel Sr. tells the community: «Just being detained, with nothing to do, is torture. It was torture on top of other acts of torture». «You have to see how you can settle yourself mentally to face these situations. Fortunately, as a person, what I did was think that even though I was physically imprisoned, I was not deprived of my ideas, thoughts, dreams and songs». It is worth mentioning the importance of songs for Miguel. Those who know him are always expecting some verse to come out of his mouth. Poetic songs of hope and solidarity. He concluded the memorial leading an emotional version of *Un Millón de Amigos* (A Million Friends) by Roberto Carlos.

I want to believe in a future peace
I want to have a safe home.
I want my son to walk firm,
Singing high, smiling freely.
I want to have a million friends
To be able to sing even stronger.



British volunteer Rob Hawke accompanying the ACVC

Solidarity, both within and outside of the prison, was a source of great inspiration for the imprisoned ACVC members. «You have to remember all of the work done nationally and internationally. We have to feel good because we are not alone. We have a lot of support».

His deep conviction in his work also gave him the strength to continue forward. «They can investigate all up and down the Magdalena Medio about who I have been –someone who has fought for community action in pursuit of the development of the communities. If they thought prison would hurt me, well it failed because I left with even more drive to work. I saw what we were doing was

life in the countryside, about what we did as an organisation and to look at what we would do to support the communities when we were released».

Miguel reflects that prison served as a school. «There you learn to value communities, value yourself, and value the need to work more every day for progress in the region».

Now he is newly involved in this work, which inspires him. He is free to carry out ACVC projects and to try to guarantee a dignified life for the small farmer population and for future generations. But right now he is enjoying his freedom and his return to his beloved countryside.

«EVEN THOUGH I WAS PHYSICALLY IMPRISONED, I WAS NOT DEPRIVED OF MY IDEAS, THOUGHTS, DREAMS AND SONGS».

just, so I don't have to fear anyone».

With the solidarity of other political prisoners, things have been improving. «I was there studying quietly. We began to set up workshops to teach people about

«Leaving prison, hopping around here, it's very good, of course! It's everything good in this world». ●

¹ «Miguel Ángel González Gutiérrez», Colombia Nunca Más, www.movimientodevictimas.org

«Our private lives have been scrutinised»

Colombian government officials abuse their powers affecting the work of human rights defenders; lawyer Alirio Uribe is one of the most persecuted.

Jacobo Blickenov, volunteer from the USA (2008-9)



Photo: Sebastian Rötters

Alirio Uribe, one of the most affected persons at the Lawyers' Collective, in the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta, while he gave a workshop to Arhuaco indigenous people

On 21 February 2009, *Semana* magazine revealed that the Department of Administrative Security (DAS) continued to carry out illegal interceptions and surveillance of members of the political opposition, Supreme Court magistrates and senior government officials¹. Since then, the wiretapping scandal began. This happened two months after the first reports that human rights NGOs were also victims of interceptions and surveillance by the DAS. Some of the organisations included: the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective

Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission (CIJP), the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, Father Javier Giraldo, the lawyer Jorge Molano, and the journalist Claudia Julieta Duque, all of whom are accompanied by PBI.

CCAJAR was one of the organisations most affected by the so-called «Operation Transmilenio», which was specifically directed against Alirio Uribe, president of CCAJAR at the time². According to *Semana*, the

this is that you are not sure what they were looking for. In the end, there may be several objectives, one being psychological warfare or threats, but you can also think that perhaps they wanted to attack some member of the Lawyers' Collective».

The first institution to carry out these illegal interceptions, the Special Intelligence Group «G-3», was created in 2004 when Jorge Noguera was the director of the DAS. CCAJAR represents the civil party in the cases against Noguera for homicide and conspiracy to commit a crime due to his ties to paramilitaries. The «G-3» group had orders to «destroy or neutralise the activities of civil society organisations»⁴. Later, there was the so called the National and International Observation and Verification Group (GONI), which had similar tasks and the same coordinator, Fernando Ovalle. The DAS continued to carry out these intelligence activities until at least 2008.

Presently the case is being investigated by the Public Prosecutor's Office. However, we will probably never know the totality of the information held by the DAS. On 22 February 2009, the day the new director took charge of this agency, videos held by the Public Prosecutor's Office show DAS agents removing material from the Intelligence and Counterintelligence Offices⁵. Alirio hopes for «there to be an investigation and for the responsible parties to be punished». In August 2009, *Semana* reported that «despite being in the midst of the worst scandal in its history, the DAS continues to illegally record magistrates, congress members and presidential candidates»⁶. ●

1 «El DAS sigue grabando», *Semana Magazine*, 21 February 2009

2 «Los del Siempre», *Semana Magazine*, 25 April 2009

3 «Las fuerzas oscuras», *Semana Magazine*, 12 June 2009

4 «Colombia: Vigilancia constante del CCAJAR y espionaje en contra del mismo y de otros defensores por parte del DAS», *Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders*, 23 June 2009

5 «El espionaje era peor», *Semana Magazine*, 25 April 2009

6 «Increíble... siguen chuzando», *Semana Magazine*, 29 August 2009

DAS REPORTS INCLUDED SOME OF THE MOST INTIMATE DETAILS OF HIS LIFE.

(CCAJAR), the Manuel Cepeda Vargas Foundation, the Association for Alternative Social Promotion (MINGA), the Association of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared (ASFADDES), the Luis Carlos Pérez Lawyers' Collective (CCACLP), the

DAS reports included some of the most intimate details to his life, even the type of food he liked³. As Alirio Uribe explains, «you get angry because all your private life has been scrutinised, but what most affects you about all of

Stories to learn

From a place of fear and pain, resistance and support, these stories speak, reflecting pieces of Colombia and ourselves.

Carlos M. Beristain, Psycho-Social support (1996-2003)

Fifteen years ago we came to Colombia. At that time, with the Colombia project and the accompaniment to be done by PBI, the beginning of an enormous challenge could be felt. We also sensed it in the part of the stomach where fear is felt. By psycho-social support, we refer to the reconstruction of social fabric since it means accompanying and opening spaces to re-weave stories, people and lives. In this work, we learned a lot about people, where the workshops, meetings, and support spaces we created opened themselves up little by little to become new processes, organisations, and challenges.

THE WOMEN

The OFP women weave together services, meetings, trainings, and support. These women also have a network of community kitchens in Barrancabermeja. Today we will eat in one of them. Ana and Josefa cook for the families that have children in school, for the people that cannot buy groceries because they are just trying to survive. Everyday, they perform the miracle of loaves and fishes. After everyone has gone, they satiate their own hunger, wash the pots and pans, and settle the accounts with simple arithmetic. The pennies left over from every kitchen depart in the afternoon and return to where they came from in the form of medical assistance, workshops, and services.

RETURNING TO URABÁ

We got on the chiva bus for San José de Apartadó. It was a bus taken out of some colourful story. In the midst of the bananas and the jungle, the chiva travels as best it can. Outside there is noise. Salsa and vallenato fight it out on the corners and fill the chiva from both sides, just like the people that board the chiva as it begins to move. There is a huge ruckus, almost as big as the silence here within. We come to a paramilitary checkpoint. A young man with a frigid stare stops the

bus and two other men come up on the sides. Eyes looking at faces, but not at eyes. Glances are not even traded. After a while, which should not have been even three minutes according to my watch, and after returning the keys to the driver and talking endlessly on the radio transmitter, after one's breathing is reduced to short, little breaths, they leave.



Photo: Sebastian Niasar

How many stories and sorrows are behind each portrait of the victims?

MEMORY GALLERY FOR THE DISAPPEARED

The room is full of transparent faces hanging from the ceiling by a string as faint and strong as the memories. The photos hang at the height of a face. Entering here, one perceives an air of respect. Some would say that it is something mystic, almost religious. For me, this silence is something else. It is a part of what family members of the disappeared carry inside them. For that reason, this gallery is not just an exposition. It invites accompaniment. In the presentation Gladys explains that the gallery is full of faces, not just to put a name or color to their memory, nor provide a place for their losses. She wants the people who see it to ask: «How do the families get through each day? Where are they?».

THE BALL AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

They explain the conflict as if it were a football match. On the one side are the community project and all the activities planted and cared for in the midst of war. On the other side are the conqueror, the landlord, and those who kill and divide us. It is a game

of strategy. The resistance is not only to the armed conflict. They look even farther: it means defending the life project. Later, someone finishes the explanation at the centre of the issue: the ball, the dispute, is our land.

IN THE MIDST OF COMBAT

Piedad and Socorro are in this workshop, which has become an assembly. 113 people are crammed together under this roof, under this sun. They bear the name of entreaty or help, depending on how you look at it. Although if you look at them, you are captivated by their eyes. This morning we work on presenting the reality they live and want to change. This time it concerns an emergency, after the last FARC attack on Toribio. It is a combat that puts people in the crossfire. One person from the community is wounded, everyone hides, and then everyone calls out to each other. ●

INTERNATIONAL WORK / COUNTRY GROUPS

PBI Country Groups are established in different countries throughout the world to support the PBI principles, including non-violence and non-partisanship. Presently we have 17 groups in North America, South America, Europe and Australasia. By way of political work, fundraising and the recruitment of field volunteers, these country groups support the protection of human rights defenders through the projects in Colombia, Guatemala, Indonesia, Mexico and Nepal.

Exhibitions to raise awareness

Lise Corpataux, Switzerland country group

In November 2008, the PBI Switzerland country group inaugurated the «Justice and Peace» exhibition. This photo exhibition, which was completed by Jorge Mata, a former PBI Colombia volunteer, presents some of the symbolic moments of the paramilitary demobilisation process undertaken as part of Law 975, also known as the «Justice and Peace» Law.

Up to now, the exhibition has been presented in four Swiss cities, attracting a large public and increasing awareness of PBI Colombia's work.

PBI Switzerland's inauguration of the exhibitions was initiated and encouraged by the success of «Frente a la Paz» («Face à la paix/Facing peace»), a travelling exhibition presented throughout the country in 2007 and 2008. This exhibition presented the experiences of eight former Swiss volunteers that participated in five PBI projects, and included a presentation of PBI Colombia through the perspectives of Manon Schick and Markus Bettler, who worked with the project in 2004 and 2005-2006, respectively. ●

Photos:

- Jorge Mata, Surimages/IPA
- Children from the Jiguamiandó River Basin (Chocó)
- Demobilisation of the «Elmer Cárdenas» Paramilitary Bloc in 2006
- Inhabitants of the Jiguamiandó River Basin, Chocó



A peace award

Belgium Country Group

In September 2007 the PBI Belgium country group, along with Broederlijk Denle, organised a press conference as part of the visit of Gildardo and Nohelia, two representatives from the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó.

The Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, which PBI accompanies, received the 20th Peace Award from the city of Aix-la-Chapelle. This distinction was granted due to the daily work of the community in favour of the construction of peace despite the ongoing threats they faced. The Italian city of Ovada followed the example of Aix-la-Chapelle and granted them the Testimone di Pace 2007 award.

On this trip, Gildardo and Nohelia also visited Brussels, where they met with members of Parliament and officials from the European Commission. The representatives explained the grave difficulties they face due to their effort to provide a non-violent response to the challenge represented by the simple will to exist. Unfortunately, this does not remove them from danger.



Photo: Jorge Mata/Surimages-IPA

Between worlds

The Peace Community of San José de Apartadó receives the Aachen Peace Award (Germany) in 2007.

Alexandra Huck, volunteer from Germany (2000)



Representatives of the Peace Community in Germany

We were in a large old hall in Aachen, Germany. All of the seats were filled. In a solemn act, the Aachen peace award was presented to the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó. At the podium, people took turns to honour the Peace Community's courage and commitment. From my seat in the audience, I could see Gildardo and Nohelia go up to receive the award.

How strange and wonderful to see them there! I recalled Gildardo in rubber boots and with a machete. I remembered San José de Apartadó: simple wooden houses, the smell of cacao beans drying in the sun, the surrounding green mountains, pigs walking around the streets of the community, and the farmers returning from the fields.

In this medieval hall in Aachen, the speeches from the podium –as well as the gaze from the audience– expressed the deepest respect for this peace project. It is such a contrast with the memories of San José de Apartadó: the days of feeling anguish with these people that was so intense I thought could almost touch it.

At last in Aachen, Gildardo and Nohelia were in the environment they deserved: recognition, with no danger or hostilities. I also recalled other visits from the Community. One time I was sitting with Wilson and Brígida on a sofa at the Ministry of the Exterior. They had a difficult time helping the official understand why it would go against international humanitarian law for the Community to improve the road hand in hand with the army engineer battalion. When the two visitors had a moment of relaxation, they discovered the Berlin underground, the ticket machines and the escalators.

The hardest part always comes at the end: the departure. After a last farewell, they got on the train. How many times did I have this fear at a departure? Will nothing happen to them as has happened to some many others who have been killed? In Aachen, when I went to look for Gildardo and Nohelia to say my farewells, they were surrounded by people in the middle of a party. Once again, I was concerned if I would seem them safe and sound again. This time I was hoping the peace award may at least give them a little more protection. ●

Making known the unspeakable

International human rights experts interview victims and witnesses of extrajudicial killings to make the issue known internationally.

Emma Marshall, UK Country Group

The recent visits to the UK of Liliana Uribe, of the Corporation Judicial Freedom (CJL), highlight the ways in which PBI can support accompanied human rights defenders in their international advocacy work, and the potential impact this can have.

When Liliana first visited Britain at PBI's invitation in 2005, she took part in a round table discussion on impunity with nongovernmental and lawyers' organisations. A key topic of discussion was extrajudicial execution. Due to the lawyers' concern about the issue, an idea developed for an international lawyers' mission to Colombia.

At the invitation of Liliana and the Coordination Colombia-Europe-United States, the International Observation Mission on Extrajudicial Killings and Impunity in Colombia took place in October 2007. Thirteen human rights experts from Europe and the US participated, including two British solicitors. They travelled throughout Colombia, hearing the stories of 132 relatives of victims and witnesses of extrajudicial killings, and meeting with both social organisations and state officials.

On their return, they produced a detailed report and made recommendations to their respective governments. Among the recommendations were: that the governments raise the problem of extrajudicial killings with their Colombian counterparts, and that they condition military aid on the cessation of extrajudicial killings. The British participants held meetings with officials from the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).

Due, in part, to the Mission, the issue of extrajudicial killings in Colombia reached the news agenda in Europe, the UK and the US. The participants wrote articles, spoke to politicians, the media and the public. PBI UK used the Mission's report to raise awareness of the issue in meetings with politicians and lawyers.



Photo: Sebastian Rötters

Liliana Uribe is an important source of information on the human rights situation in Colombia.

It is now being widely recognised as a serious problem.

Around this time, the US Congress blocked the release of more than US\$55 million of military aid to Colombia, due to concerns about extrajudicial killings among other human rights issues¹.

In March 2008, PBI invited Liliana back to Britain. This time, she obtained an hour-long meeting with the then Minister of State for Latin America, Dr Kim Howells. She also addressed events at the UK and Scottish Parliaments, and met with numerous MPs, NGOs and lawyers in the UK, Spain, Belgium and Germany.

Shortly after Liliana's visit a joint statement was released by three UN experts: the Special Representative on the situation of human rights defenders, Hina Jilani; the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Philip Alston, and the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, Leandro Despouy.

They were «deeply concerned by recent developments in Colombia indicating the deteriorating situation of human rights defenders in recent months, in particular the killings, harassment and intimidation of civil society activists, trade-union leaders and lawyers representing victims»². They called on the Colombian government to end impunity and give protection to human rights defenders.

This statement demonstrates an increase in public awareness and indignation about the issue at the highest level. This can only be understood as the result of the work of defenders like Liliana in creating international networks, and in developing ongoing advocacy work with those contacts. It is work that PBI, with its international structure, is perfectly placed to support.

¹ «Amnesty International Report on Colombia 2008», www.amnesty.org

² Press release: «UN human rights experts call for end to violence against human rights defenders in Colombia», Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 30 April 2008

Creating a country group in Latin America

In 2005, a group of volunteers conceives the idea of creating a PBI office in Argentina.

Bettina Priotti, volunteer from Argentina (2004-7)

2005: Over a hot night on a balcony at the PBI house in Barrancabermeja, under a fan that did not cool or keep away the mosquitoes, we began to wonder with Claudia, another member of the team, why a country group to disseminate and promote the ideas of our organisation did not exist in all of Latin America. This is when the first proposal arose that my friend unofficially presented to the PBI General Assembly in 2005. We spoke about diversity and integration and about broadening the horizon, looking beyond the Western world almost all of the volunteers came from. So we began to form a small group of persons who were willing to work to achieve this.

thought about the talks I could give to disseminate the work carried out by PBI in different parts of the world, especially in Colombia, which is what I knew. We kept in touch with the people who shared the idea of a country group in Latin America, more precisely in Argentina.

As I was leaving, Débora, a German-Argentinean volunteer, arrived to work with PBI. She also liked the idea, even though I would no longer be in Colombia. Claudia kept people excited about the proposal.

I gave some talks in my country. I also joined the Provincial Commission for Memory, which in mid-2007 organised an International Pedagogical Conference on Memory to which Claudia

interviewed on the radio. We establish relations with prestigious human rights institutions, including the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights, HIJOS, Argentine Human Rights League, Space for Memory Institute, Adolfo Pérez Esquivel's human rights course, and many more. While Claudia Girón was on vacation in Argentina, we also took advantage of her knowledge of PBI to define the feasibility of a country group here in the South.

2009: Presently, the following persons are working on the proposal: Juan, former Belgian volunteer who lives in Buenos Aires and volunteers with SERPAJ; Jorge, who just left to work a year with the PBI

«WE SPOKE ABOUT ABOUT BROADENING THE HORIZON, LOOKING BEYOND THE WORLD ALMOST ALL OF THE VOLUNTEERS CAME FROM».

2006: We spent this year thinking and discussing with other people in Bogotá. The idea evolved into the possibility of exploring in Argentina.

2007: After two and a half years in Barrancabermeja and Bogotá, I prepared myself to return home to Argentina. I

Girón, who I had proposed, was invited to give a presentation on the issue.

2008: Débora comes to Argentina. Supported by the Germany country group, she goes on a speaker's tour to Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Rosario and Mendoza. She gives public talks and is

team in Guatemala; Gabriela, a professor with the Pérez Esquivel human rights course; Daniela, a graduate of political sciences; Anabella, an anthropologist who plans to go to Guatemala next year; and Gisela, a graduate in political sciences who is training to go to Colombia. And lastly, there is the person who is wrote this article (that has hopefully been interesting to read), Bettina, a former volunteer in Barrancabermeja and Bogotá (2004-2007).

We have conducted PBI training workshops for the group. We wrote a letter supporting the work Juan will carry out in Guatemala as a volunteer. This letter was signed by prestigious organisations, including: Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, CELS, and SERPAJ (Adolfo Pérez Esquivel). On 28 July, we had our first meeting with the Ministry of Foreign Relation with the purpose of gaining political and financial support.

At the time of this article's publication, the PBI International Council approved PBI Argentina as an associated group. It is the first PBI country group in Latin America. ●



Photo: Bettina Priotti

Members of the new Argentina country group: Jorge Palomeque, Daniela Marelli, Anabela Estol, Gisela Jaure, Juan D. W. and Gabriela Cauduro.



Protecting human rights advocates since 1994

www.pbi-colombia.org



The displaced communities return to Cacarica (Department of Chocó) in 2000

Foto: Julien Menghini

Peace Brigades International (PBI) is a non-governmental organisation recognised by the United Nations, which has maintained a team of international observers/accompaniers in Colombia on an ongoing basis since 1994. PBI's mission is to protect the working environment of human rights defenders, who face repression due to their non-violent human rights activities.

PBI Colombia teams remain in the field, at the request of local organisations, accompanying persons and organisations under threat. This fieldwork is complemented by significant dialogue and advocacy with civilian and military authorities, as well as with NGOs, the Church, multilateral bodies, and the diplomatic corp, in order to promote human rights and disseminate information on the human rights situation in Colombia.

If you believe PBI's presence helps protect persons who carry out human rights work, you may do the following:

- Support us economically on a personal or institutional basis.
- Join the nearest PBI country group and support the international network from your place of residence.
- Apply to become a volunteer with one of the PBI projects.

PBI International Delegation
Development House
56-64 Leonard St.,
London EC2A 4JX, UK
Tel. (+44) 20 4065 0775
admin@peacebrigades.org

PBI Colombia Project
Rue de la Linière, 11
1060 Brussels (Belgium)
Tel. (+32) 2609 4400
info@pbicolombia.org

PBI Delegation in Colombia
Apartado aéreo 36157
Bogotá (Colombia)
Tel. (+57) 1287 0403
info@pbicolombia.org