



Mario Calixto, ex-President of the Sabana de Torres Human Rights Committee, being accompanied by two PBI volunteers, Colombia, 1998. Photo: Jon Spaul



Background

The last fifty years have seen Colombia undergo a period of great unrest and intense violence. A civil war has gripped the country, with rebel groups and paramilitary forces engaged in a violent confrontation where civilians are innocent victims.

The situation in Colombia is commonly seen as a drug war, where the cocaine cartels are fighting for power, but in fact drugs are not the cause of the huge unrest in the country – they are simply one of many complex factors which perpetuate the conflict. In the last ten years over a million people have been displaced from their homes, and every year tens of thousands of people are killed because of the turmoil in the country.

PBI's Colombia Project began in 1994 after it was invited into the country by local human rights and trade union organisations. Although the conflicts in Colombia are complex, PBI felt it could contribute to peace and reconciliation in the country, and the project is now PBI's largest.

INFORMATION

Population:

36,444,000 million (1996 estimate)

Capital: Santa Fe de Bogotá D.C

Language: Spanish

GNP per capita: \$2,140 (1996)

Duration of conflict:

About 50 years

Main conflict participants:

Colombian security forces, paramilitaries and insurgent groups (Fuerzas Armadas de Colombia - FARC, Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional - ELN, Ejercito Popular de Liberacion).

Human rights violations:

Kidnappings, disappearances and massacres, constant attacks by armed actors against civilians and human rights defenders, widespread displacement of the population.

Project website:

www.peacebrigades.org/colombia

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The Project

There are four PBI teams working in Colombia, with approximately 40 volunteers (in 2002) in the following places:

- The capital of Colombia, Bogotá
- The Magdalena Medio region, based in the town of Barrancabermeja
- The Urabá region, based in Turbo
- Medellín, one of the most important social and political centres in Colombia

The work that each team does is comprised, in very simple terms, of

- Protective accompaniment
- Reporting abuses to the international community
- Using the Emergency Support Networks
- Organising peace education workshops

Although the situation in Colombia is extremely dangerous, the PBI project has helped and protected a wide variety of people in the country and has encouraged peaceful dialogue to try to end the conflict there.

UK volunteer Tessa McKenzie worked on a project in Colombia for two years:

'If I was just some 'gringa' that happened to be following around a human rights worker, it would give them a certain amount of protection, but a very small amount.'

But she believes that the fact that they are volunteers with PBI makes all the difference:

'If any of us were killed it would be a huge international incident and people know that, the military know that.'

Tessa describes the huge difficulty local human rights groups in Colombia encounter everyday:

'They live and work under constant threat. For some it's very direct, they receive phone calls telling them that they are going to be killed. Others suffer a much more general sensation of surveillance, false accusations and intimidation. Hundreds of Colombian human rights activists have had to leave Colombia, some to save their lives, others to recover from the harsh psychological effects of living under these conditions. Many others have been killed before they had the chance.'

Osiris Bayther, ex President of CREDHOS, the Regional Human Rights Committee in Barrancabermeja, has received death threats because of her work for human rights in Colombia. PBI's daily accompaniment of her and her colleagues was vital:

'I am more aware than ever of the great role you have played and the work you do in my country where everyday horror is larger than fiction, just as I am convinced that I owe my life to you and that of my family too.'

Mario Calixto was a human rights worker in Barrancabermeja, working for a local Human Rights Committee. He began receiving death threats after publishing a report on local disappearances and killings. The people making the threats were the paramilitaries – clandestine death squads often used by the army.

Mario, fearing for his life, asked PBI to accompany him. Some time later, two gunmen burst into his house, pointing their guns at him. But Mario was being accompanied around the clock and had two PBI volunteers with him. They calmly explained that they were international observers with PBI, and persuaded the gunmen to leave. If PBI had not been there, Mario might well have been murdered in cold blood.



Signboard at the entrance to one of the internally displaced peace communities, San Jose de Apartado. The sign reads: "This community freely participates in communal works; says 'no' to injustice and impunity; doesn't participate directly or indirectly in the war, nor carries arms; doesn't manipulate or give information to armed factions." Photo: PBI

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