

# FARMER TO FARMER

## A U.S.-CENTRAL AMERICA SOLIDARITY PROJECT

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### WHOSE SECURITY IS IT ANYWAY? LESSONS FROM COLOMBIA

Bridget O'Meara

In August, Farmer to Farmer helped me go to Colombia as part of a delegation of Colombia Support Group of Minnesota, which is the Minneapolis chapter of the national organization, Colombia Support Network, based in Madison. Like Farmer to Farmer, CSN seeks to build people-to-people relationships across national boundaries, to support nonviolent efforts toward social and economic justice and to educate US citizens about the impact of our practices and policies on communities in Latin America. Each chapter establishes a sister-city relationship with a community in Colombia in an effort to provide space for and protect civil society. After years of reading about colonialism, imperialism and neo-liberal globalization, this was the first time I had traveled to the so-called global South (also referred to as the “developing world” and “the 3<sup>rd</sup> world”). The experience has left me both more overwhelmed and more hopeful.

Colombia is a wealthy country, with diverse regions and peoples as well as abundant resources: oil, minerals, timber, productive land and biodiversity. Its location at the northern most point of South America, with ports on the Pacific and the Atlantic oceans, has made it strategically important for trade. It is one of the oldest democracies in the hemisphere. These simple facts, however, obscure a more profound truth about Colombia: it is a nation whose historical development has relied on and reproduced feudalistic relations of social, economic and political power. It is an exclusionary and repressive society, in which the wealthiest 1% own more than 80% of arable land and the top 5% own more than 90%. This imbalance (and not cocaine, which is a relatively recent development) is at the root of the forty-year civil war that continues to ravage the country. The armed actors in the conflict are the US-backed Colombian military and their illegal paramilitary allies versus the

Marxist guerrilla groups, FARC and ELN. But it is the poor and those who work in solidarity with them who bear the brunt of the violence—and it is this same civil society that must be strengthened in order to achieve peace with justice in Colombia.



*The Colombia Support Group delegation talks with a campesino-soldier who supports the Assembly in Mogotes*

Our delegation first traveled to Mogotes, a small town (and surrounding rural area) in Santander, north of Bogota. It is the sister-city of our Minneapolis chapter. Unlike many CSN sister-cities, Mogotes is not in a territory controlled by one of the illegal armed groups (in such areas, paramilitaries and guerrillas terrorize the civilian population, demand taxes on legal as well as illegal crops and control access routes). Although nowhere in Colombia is untouched by war, Mogotes is one of the few municipalities that have managed to keep armed groups out and declare themselves a peace community. In 1997, when the ELN came through the area, killed five people and kidnapped the mayor, the citizens of Mogotes organized to negotiate for the mayor's release—after which they promptly fired him for corruption and called for new elections. That same year, following this incident and drawing on their long history of organizing and resistance, Mogotes instituted a

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Constitutional Municipal Assembly, for which they won Colombia's National Peace Prize in 1999. The Assembly, legitimated at the national level by the 1991 Constitution, is actually a process that provides mechanisms for participatory democracy, for peace as a right and a duty, for citizen oversight of local governments, and for the communal development of cultural identity, political sovereignty and economic well-being. The Assembly meetings, which are held on the first Monday of every month and last all day, draw delegates representing the entire community—campesinos (who sometimes walk 8 hours each way to attend), teachers, youth, activists, businessmen, politicians, healthcare workers—and are

We gained a better sense of the daunting context within which peace communities like Mogotes struggle when we returned to Bogota for meetings of a very different sort—with Colombian and US officials. The discussions centered around so-called “peace negotiations” taking place between President Uribe's government and paramilitary groups, which is being enthusiastically supported by the Bush Administration despite the fact that the US State Department lists the latter as “international terrorists.” Both Uribe and Bush proclaim the negotiations a triumph for Colombian “national security” and the international war on terrorism.” However, as human rights groups have pointed out repeatedly, the nature of and motivations for these negotiations are dubious: there is no political or ideological difference between the Colombian state and the paramilitaries,

*Graffiti in Bogota links the President with the paramilitaries*

open to everyone. A Collective Presidency is shared by three members, who serve on the Presidential Committee along with representatives of Working Groups, which have been created around the needs of the town (such as education, health, economic development, and functioning of the assembly). This committee sets the agenda for the monthly meetings. During our visit we were privileged to attend and witness the process. We were deeply moved and inspired by the enthusiasm, ownership and commitment displayed by ordinary citizens. We even (half)-joked that we should bring this democracy thing back to the United States.

One measure of the effectiveness of the process is the opposition it has drawn from conventional seats of power. The mayor, the priest, and officers at the local military base all condemn the Municipal Assembly—accusing leaders of collaborating with guerrillas, of undermining local government and of being self-serving and irrelevant to needs of the community. Even more disturbing, the AUC (Colombia's largest paramilitary group) has started to make threats against the lives of Assembly leaders.

as both maintain the status quo through repression, exclusion and violence. So what exactly is being negotiated? Paras already commit more than 80% of politically motivated murders and massacres (campesinos, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian leaders, trade unionists, teachers, journalists, etc.), receive 85%-90% impunity for their horrendous crimes, share resources (funds, arms, training, information) with the Colombian military and enjoy the backing of moneyed interest, including narco-traffickers, large landowners and multinational corporations. Without truth, justice and reparations for the victims, the negotiations will legitimate relationships and operations that until now have been pervasive, but still illegal, by integrating paramilitaries into security forces. Meanwhile, Uribe recently delivered a speech to the army in which he claimed that some human rights groups are “fronts” for guerrillas, basically declaring open-season on all groups and individuals working for human rights, social justice and peace in Colombia.

Colombia's entrenched inequity is as crucial to profit-driven globalization as its strategic location and its abundant resources. With FTAA talks around the corner, Uribe's interest in “security” not coincidentally coincides with the interests of



## Farm-Peace Coalition

*Farmer to Farmer is involved with local farm issues as well as our projects in Latin America. The Farm-Peace Coalition is a recently formed group that reminds us of our roots: Farmer to Farmer came out of the North American Farm Alliance (NAFA), a group that worked hard on protecting family farms and addressing agriculture issues that affected the farmers during the farm crisis of the 80's. NAFA realized that American farm policies affected farmers all over the world and world peace depends on fair prices, fair international trade, land reform and sustainable methods of farming. Some members of F2F are involved with the Farm-Peace Coalition. Here is a bit about the group-*

Several individuals in Western Wisconsin are organizing to reconstitute a farm-peace coalition to be active in the election year, 2004. The urgency of this effort is underscored by the fact that MN and WI went to Gore by only a few thousand votes in 2000. The purposes of this coalition evolve as it develops.

At our first meeting we discussed Paul Wellstone's unfinished business in agriculture, and the need to establish a firm relationship with our elected representatives, in particular Senator Feingold. At recent meetings we have analyzed problems in farming, discussed political and agricultural strategies and goals, highlighted successes and positive experiences, and explored policy and local action.

Currently we are planning a strategy meeting with Mark Ritchie of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, and representatives of Russ Feingold's campaign staff. The purposes of this meeting include to:

- \* educate ourselves about peace and agriculture
- \* establish why it's important for activists to become involved in this particular election
- \* explore peace and agriculture as a window on the larger economy
- \* learn specifically the needs of the Feingold campaign
- \* and define a group that can strategize together and move into public discussion

The meeting will be held in November or December.

For more information, contact Greg Stark, 232-8532, gregorstark@hotmail.com.

## TAKE A TRIP!!

### The School Of the Americas

Continuing a long standing tradition some board members of Farmer to Farmer are planning a trip to the annual protest at the SOA in Georgia. (The new name of the school is WHISC). Farmer to Farmer has reserved a 14 passenger van to attend the School of the Americas protest/ celebration/ vigil. It will leave Eau Claire on Thursday evening at 6:00 p.m. arriving at Fort Benning on Friday afternoon. We will leave Fort Benning after the vigil by mid-afternoon on Sunday and be back to Eau Claire by early afternoon Monday, November 24th. Cost will be around \$100. Floor sleeping bag space is available with Farmer to Farmer members or you can try to reserve a motel room yourself in the Fort Benning area and we will drop you off there Friday and Saturday nights. Call Craig Adams (daytime) at 715-565-3066 x103 for more info or to reserve a place.

### Lake Atitlan, Guatemala

Jody Slocum is planning a trip to Guatemala in January to visit our group in Santiago Atitlan, Father Greg and his project in San Lucas, and El Por Venir. This is an excellent opportunity to visit the farmers who grow your coffee, see the reality of the conditions in Guatemala and use your Spanish! Call Jody at 715-265-3603 if you are interested in joining her. The exact dates have not been set.



### Resource Center of the Americas

Check out their web site for information on events at RCTA in Minneapolis at [www.americas.org](http://www.americas.org)

#### FAIR TRADE FORUM: FARMER SUMMIT

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 1st-International farmers and local small farmers—including organic farmers and members of immigrant farming communities—will join a Brazilian cocoa grower to discuss alternative agriculture, economic development and fair trade. The panel and roundtables will discuss what small farmers from different countries or backgrounds have in common, and link international fair trade with domestic fair trade and cross-cultural exchange. Organized by Domestic Fair Trade Group. Co-sponsored by the Resource Center of the Americas and Centro de Derechos Laborales, a Resource Center program. 2-4 p.m., Resource Center of the Americas, Romero Room.

## EL PORVENIR AND THE SAN LUCAS MISSION

Farmer to Farmer has contributed \$1,000 toward the purchase of a farm/plantation near San Lucas. The land is 800 acres, where 350 families, from 3 villages, who have been displaced will be able to live and work. We received this letter from Father Greg and the New Alm mission.

**Dear Friends,**

Thank you very much for your generous gift to the People of El Porvenir, Toltoya, and Tierra Santa. Your special care and concern for these families brings them a step closer to their dream of land for housing and farming. Know of our prayer in gratitude.

Kathy Huebert, our Mission Office Director, has deposited your gifts in a special account to be held until our goal of \$800,000.00 is reached. This amount, needed for the purchase of the Plantation La Providencia, is huge. However the purchase of this plantation for these three communities will give these families not only an area for safe housing but also farming land needed for them to live their own Mayan heritage as small independent farmers. It is a dream coming true. Your care and concern is making it possible. At this time, Kathy has deposited in this special account: over \$420,000.

Thank you again and again.

Right now we are especially concerned about moving the people from El Porvenir onto land of their own for housing. As you know, their temporary housing is available to them only until October 12, 2003. A decision has been made by the committees involved in this whole effort. The decision is to move ahead with the offer to trade land with the owners of the Plantation Sto. Tomas Perdido. This will involve giving up some of the farm land now used by the People of El Porvenir in exchange for safe land for housing. The land for housing borders on El Porvenir property. It is good for housing and water from springs on El Porvenir property will be able to supply that vital need for the families. The exchanged farm land will be used by the owners of Sto. Tomas Perdido for access to land they own south and east of the El Porvenir property. At this time we await the coming of an engineer to survey the properties in question. The engineer has volunteered his services and will be doing this work within the next few days.

At first, the People of El Porvenir hesitated at this idea of land exchange. However after much discussion, thought and prayer; they have decided to go ahead with the exchange. The land for housing will keep them close to the center of their original community that has a small but adequate school building, a small room for medical help when needed, a fine community hall and the large coffee

processing plant. The most important part of their original property that they are developing now is higher up the mountain side, land for growing high quality coffee and easily accessed from the planned housing land. The land that they must give in exchanged can be replaced by land on the Plantation La Providencia when the purchase is finalized.

There will be a considerable cost in moving from the temporary housing area to their new permanent housing property. The cost will include the purchase of materials for provisional housing, the transport of goods and the bringing of water by PVC pipes from the springs available to the permanent housing land. The work will be done by the people themselves. Permanent housing is being negotiated with a Government Agency called PROGUAVI. Time will tell how this develops.

Funds for the transport, materials, and water supply will be taken from a fund in a special account here in the bank in San Lucas. These funds have been sent directly to the people since the mud-slide of a year ago and held for their special needs when safe land for housing could be acquired. I will keep you aware of the use of these funds as needed purchases are made.

Thank you very much for your special goodness. Thank you for your patience as we take all of the steps necessary to get land for housing and farming for the three Communities we are all concerned about. I am particularly pleased with the work being done by the committees dedicating themselves to this whole complex effort. The time they must put in, the frustrations they face, the guidance they must offer is taxing to say the least. They have been faithful, dedicated and maintain the vision. All are Guatemalans. They understand their own people as only they can. They know what is needed. They work so hard to attain their goal. Your reaching out to them in confidence makes it all possible. We cannot thank you enough.

Gratefully,  
Father Greg

*Donations can be sent to San Lucas Mission  
1400 Sixth St N., New Alm, MN 56073 or to  
Farmer to Farmer with a note for EL Porvenir*



### *coffee coffee coffee*

French or Medium roast available-your purchases guarantees the Mayan farmers a fair price for their coffee. (We are paying 3 times the current open market price.)  
call Stephanie at (715)643-2919 for more information  
*Coffee makes great christmas gifts!*

LESSONS FROM COLOMBIA cont. from page 4

the Colombian elite, the United States government and the multinational corporations. This security is not about human rights. And it's not about meeting the needs of people, which would require land reform as well as Mogotes-like democratic participation on a national scale to secure development of infrastructure, health care, education and diversified agriculture. Ultimately, it's not even about defeating the guerrillas, who not only endure but actually grow stronger in times of repression. The security of Uribe, Bush, General Castano, Occidental Petroleum and Coca Cola is about masking Colombia's feudalistic relations in the name of free-trade, modernization and progress, with the few getting even richer at the expense of the many. Yet in the midst of this 40-year (500-year) war, in Mogotes and throughout Colombia, people not only continue to embrace the ideals of democracy and nonviolence but put them into practice as well... We might be inspired to do the same.

#### *Children in Mogotes Colombia*

#### **web sites of other groups**

#### **working in Latin America and peace issues**

Tillers International- [www.wmich.edu/tillers/](http://www.wmich.edu/tillers/)

Grassroots International-[www.grassrootsonline.org](http://www.grassrootsonline.org)

Resource Center of the Americas-  
[www.americas.org](http://www.americas.org)

Fellowship of Reconciliation-[www.for.org](http://www.for.org)

SOA Watch-[www.soa.org](http://www.soa.org)

Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua  
(WCCN)-[www.wccnica.org](http://www.wccnica.org)

The Network in Solidarity with the People of  
Guatemala-[www.nisgua.org](http://www.nisgua.org)

Nonviolent Peaceforce-  
[www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org](http://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org)

Peace Net-[http://www.igc.org/igc/gateway/  
pnindex.html](http://www.igc.org/igc/gateway/pnindex.html)

Witness for Peace-[www.witnessforpeace.org](http://www.witnessforpeace.org)

*Lucy Altemus and Carol Nies working hard at the booth*

## **MALT BOOTH**

Once again we spent 5 days at the Dunn County Fair. This is our major fundraiser for the year and it wouldn't have been possible without all the volunteers that gave their precious time to help out.

Thanks to Ellen and Annie Lieberto, Art and Bobbie Brandt, Lara Jablon and Leah, Steve Hearth, Carol Nies, Stephanie May, Rick and Marilyn Gauger and family, Janice and Roy Cox, Sandy Gordon, Bill Lewis, Ken Seguine, Karen Kirkwood and Jessica and Patti Kirkwood-Weaver, Simon and Gabe Sperl, Stefan Buetow, Cathleen, Patrick, Stephanie and Tara McCoy, Ryland Erdman, Rowen Berry, Sarah Bonsey, Zack and other friends, Bob and Kitz Cleary, Doug Johns, Vicky Wiegand, Terri Golen, Kathy Ruggles, John Thomas, Mabel Hoffman, Jody Slocum, Andy Gaetner, Jen Bush, Al Broadfoot and friends, and a special thanks to Cari Witcher and Lucy Altemus.

The Fair wasn't as busy as previous years. But we still generated \$14,042 for Farmer to Farmer and had a great time! Because attendance at the Dunn County Fair has dropped off, we are considering moving this event to the St. Croix County Fair in Glenwood City. Let us know what you think.



## **COFFEE UPDATE**

The coffee sales continue to grow. We are now selling our coffee to 3 coffee shops, 5 co-ops and various organizations and individuals. As of September our gross sales were almost 19,000, which translates into about 5,000 pounds of coffee sold this year. This is great help to the growers of San Lucas. Father Greg is now buying coffee from 450 families. Because the price of coffee continues to be so low on the open market, Farmer to Farmer continues to work to expand coffee sales and bring fair prices to Guatemalan growers. If you have ideas about where we might sell coffee, please contact us at [farmer\\_to\\_farmer@hotmail.com](mailto:farmer_to_farmer@hotmail.com) or call 715-643-2919.