

Colombia's "Dirty War" Against Trade Unions

By Patrick Keaney

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When his body was recovered, it was clear that Aury Sara Marrugo spent his last hours alive in agony. His gums had been butchered. A blowtorch had been used to sear the flesh under his arms and the soles of his feet. Over seventy small incisions were found on his corpse, and strong acid had been applied to his abdomen. At some point during the savagery, a single bullet was fired at close range into the middle of his face, ending his misery. Sara had been 'disappeared' on November 30, 2001. What remained of him, and the grisly warning it was designed to convey to his colleagues, turned up the following week.

Sara drew his final, tortured breaths in the town of Cartagena, on the northwest coast of Colombia. His executioners, members of a right-wing paramilitary group known as the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, wanted his punishment to be public knowledge. According to a statement by the AUC, Sara was executed because he was thought to be a member of one of Colombia's armed opposition groups, the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional, (ELN), National Liberation Army. Others familiar with the paramilitaries, and their role in Colombia's long-running civil war, point to a more likely explanation for Sara's murder: he was the President of Union Sindical Obrera (USO), the Oil Workers' Trade Union, Cartagena Section, and was therefore guilty of a crime that cost nearly 170 Colombian men and women their lives last year: he was a trade unionist.

The numbers are staggering. In the year 2000, 60 percent of all the union workers assassinated worldwide died in Colombia. In 2001, according to the Confederacion Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT), United Confederation of Workers, the country's 600,000 member central trade union, there were 169 assassinations of union workers, 30 more attempted assassinations, 79 "disappeared" or kidnapped, and over 400 reports of threats and intimidations. Many unionists went into exile. Of the 169 victims, 21 were women, marking an ominous departure from previous years, when female unionists were rarely, if ever, targeted. As of the third

week in January, 2002, the figures showed every indication of keeping pace with 2001's horrific toll: already there have been six assassinations, including Maria Roperero, President of the Union of Community Mothers, who was shot 13 times. Since 1985, there have been over 3,800 union workers and leaders assassinated in Colombia, making it by far the most dangerous place on earth to fight for workers' rights. According to human rights advocates, Amnesty International, in Colombia "the security and armed forces as well as their paramilitary allies often accuse trade unionists of being guerrilla sympathizers or auxiliaries." They are frequently referred to as "military targets."

Compounding the ongoing tragedy of Colombia's embattled trade unionists is the plight of the country itself. Now in the 38th year of a civil war between leftist guerrillas and the government, which claims the lives of more than 3,000 people annually, and having recently become the prime target in the United States government's "War on Drugs," Colombia's 40 million citizens confront a daily level of violence that would be hard for most Americans to comprehend. Further exacerbating the situation is the two-tiered class structure of Colombian society, in which a handful of wealthy elites own most of the land and resources, and have an equally disproportionate role in shaping governmental policies. Unemployment hovers around 20 percent, with underemployment affecting many more. More than half the country's inhabitants live in poverty. Finally, there is the role of international financial institutions in Colombia: the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is insisting on extensive privatization of the country's state-owned enterprises in order to pay off its external debt, which means more foreign corporations investing in, and taking profits out of, the Colombian economy, plunging it further into poverty.

The leaders of Colombia's labor unions believe they are being targeted because they openly denounce the violence and unjust distribution of wealth that is taking such a heavy toll on the majority of their country's population. As the most prominent mem-

bers of Colombian civil society, trade unionists, especially representatives of the threatened public sector, find themselves at the point where four very powerful vectors meet. First, there are North American and European transnational corporations, which look to take advantage of Colombia's vast natural resources and growing, low-wage labor pool. Second, there is the Colombian government, including the armed forces and national police, whose stability is threatened by the civil war, and whose stated goals are to eliminate the leftist guerrillas and enter the global economy. Third, there is the U.S. government, which has started to funnel hundreds of millions of dollars to the Colombian military, ostensibly to fight the "War on Drugs," but whose desire to protect U.S.-based corporations operating abroad is well-known. And, last, there are the paramilitaries, a group whose various links to the country's elites, the transnational corporations, the Colombian military, and, by extension, the U.S. government are a matter of record. Their primary function has traditionally been to perform the dirty work of torturing and killing Colombians like Aury Sara.

For decades, leftist guerrillas such as the aforementioned ELN and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces, have tried to loosen the grip that the wealthy landowners maintained on Colombia's economic life. Heavily influenced by Marxism's revolutionary ideals and rhetoric, the guerrillas were committed to a program of wealth and land redistribution, and resorted to kidnapping wealthy landowners and charging ransoms, as well as levying taxes on local businessmen's commerce, to fund their operations. By the mid-1980s, the ranchers, landowners, and drug barons who were frequent targets of the guerrillas decided to fund a private army of vigilantes to defend themselves. The paramilitary movement in Colombia was born. For several years, the Colombian Armed Forces openly trained, equipped, and operated alongside the paramilitaries. Together, they waged war not only on the guerrillas, but on anyone suspected of supporting them, which led to widespread atrocities. Ultimately, in 1989, the Colombian government, facing international condemnation due to the paramilitaries' escalating rate of human rights violations, declared them to be illegal.

Throughout the 1990s, profits from the drug trade, mostly the sale of cocaine, fueled the growth of both the paramilitaries and the guerrillas. The paramilitaries also benefitted from U.S. military aid to the Colombian government, which they accessed through their connections to the military. Despite the 1989 ruling against the right-wing death squads, collusion between them and the Colombian Armed Forces, as a counterweight to the guerrilla insurgency, continued. In reality, far from shunning the paramilitaries, the military simply shifted its dirty work – the assassination of trade unionists, human rights workers, outspoken professors, radical students, or anyone who questioned the status quo – onto the paramilitaries. According to Andrew

Miller, the Advocacy Director for the Americas at Amnesty International USA, "these missions have been outsourced to paramilitary groups that operate in heavily militarized areas and coordinate their operations with the army. The proportion of abuses directly attributable to the armed forces has declined in recent years, while abuses by their paramilitary allies have escalated dramatically." Although Colombia consistently had the worst human rights record in the hemisphere, military aid continued to flow from the U.S. Toward the end of the decade, there was a sudden and dramatic shift in the amount of money headed to South America.

The U.S. government spent close to a billion dollars in the last two years arming and training the Colombian Armed Forces, purportedly to stem the flow of cocaine and heroin into the U.S., which consumes more than 90 percent of Colombia's illicit drugs. "Plan Colombia," which President Clinton signed into law on January 11, 2000, is a military aid package that made Colombia the third-largest recipient of American military aid on the planet, behind Israel and Egypt. At the time the plan was proposed, human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch opposed it because of the high incidence of human rights abuses by members of the Colombian military in previous years, in addition to their continuing involvement with the paramilitaries. At the same time, lawmakers were under intense lobbying pressure by corporations, including weapons manufacturers and oil and coal companies, with interests in Colombia. Congress passed the plan, and Clinton waived the human rights conditions that would have normally blocked the aid, citing "national security interests." \$816 million has already gone to the Colombian military in the form of arms, training, and helicopters to fight "The War on Drugs." Another \$399 million was approved for this fiscal year, with the Bush Administration broadening "Plan Colombia" into the "Andean Regional Initiative."

Colombian labor leaders and their allies are skeptical of the U.S. government's claim that the money being sent to Colombia is for drug interdiction. They foresee the relentless militarization of their country's armed conflict resulting in a military state that will, conveniently enough, impose the kind of stability foreign investors require, and set an example for those who might otherwise balk at Washington's economic agenda for the region. They claim that transnational corporations, whose lawyers drafted the "free-trade agreements" for much of Latin America with the countries' finance ministers, want to eliminate organized labor's influence, so that maximum profits can be extracted. William Mendoza, a leader in Colombia's food and beverage workers' union, SINALTRAINAL, put it bluntly: "The motivation behind Plan Colombia is for the U.S. to assure the best control of these countries, and drown people in their own blood if they attempt to resist." Mendoza's union has joined the United Steelworkers of America and the International Labor Rights Fund in a federal lawsuit

against one of the U.S.'s best-known corporations, Coca-Cola, charging them, along with two Colombian subsidiaries, with complicity in the murder of union leader Isidro Segundo Gil.

On December 5, 1996, Gil, a member of his union's executive board, was shot down by paramilitaries at the entrance to a Coke bottling plant in Carepa. The union was involved in contract negotiations at the time, and the following day, the AUC reappeared and demanded that all union members resign. They also destroyed the workers' union hall, which was subsequently rebuilt and occupied by the paramilitaries. Mendoza, who is the Human Rights Chairman of SINALTRAINAL, said that the U.S. Embassy, as well as Coke's headquarters in Colombia and the U.S. were informed about the incident. To date, however, no formal charges have been brought in the killings. "Unfortunately," he explained, "impunity in this country is 100 percent." It is common for labor leaders to be assassinated in broad daylight, said Mendoza, who himself lives under threat of death by the paramilitaries. "The state says nothing about the killing of union leaders. It's out in the open, the link between the paramilitaries and the military authorities," he said. Coke has denied the charges, and Mendoza said that the company has countersued the workers.

Charges of corporate collusion with Colombia's right-wing death squads have also been leveled at an Alabama-based corporation, Drummond Coal Company. At a January 21, 2002, meeting with the president of FUNTRAENERGETICA, an energy workers' union, more allegations of corporations targeting unionists were made. The union's leader, who did not want to be identified by name, said that the assassinations of three union leaders in 2001 were traceable to paramilitaries, and that the company did nothing to respond to workers' repeated requests for protection. The union leaders were involved in negotiations at the time. "We have some serious denunciations about this case, because there is reason to believe the paramilitaries were involved," he said. The story is depressingly familiar. In March, Valmore Locarno Rodriguez and Victor Orcasita, the president and vice president of SINTRAMIENERGETICA, a coal miners' union, were traveling by bus from their jobs at the Drummond mine in Loma. The bus was stopped by a group of armed men, who searched the passengers until they found Locarno and Orcasita, who were promptly removed from the bus. Locarno was shot immediately in the face, and Orcasita was taken away. He was later found dead, and his body showed signs of torture. "The paramilitaries attack any worker who speaks out against what the owners want," the unionist concluded. "Anyone who dares to speak out, asks for social justice, or refuses to conform, is declared a military target." Six months later, the president who succeeded Locarno, Gustavo Soler, was also killed by paramilitaries. No charges have been brought in the murders.

Standing outside the offices of the Corporacion Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos

(CREDHOS), Regional Corporation for Human Rights in Barrancabermeja, an oil town in the heart of Colombia that is home to USO, the country's biggest union, the specter of violence is nearly invisible. The streets below, viewed from the second story balcony that juts out above a triangular intersection known as the 8th Diagonal, buzz with the kinds of activity seen in any medium-sized city in South America. Taxis, minibuses, mopeds and bicycles flow in opposite directions through the fork where the roads meet. Dozens of fruit carts, brightly hand-painted all the way down to their wheel hubs, squat side by side under two shade trees, which the small concrete island miraculously supports. An elderly man in a yellow hat steps from behind his cart, pours water on a rag, and starts to polish his oranges. Even the two young soldiers chatting with a young female vendor of scarves and handbags seem benign. But there are signs of the danger.

The thick steel grates and bulletproof glass that span the front of CREDHOS' office are only the most obvious indicators of the danger there. Of the 130 community activists killed in the city of Barrancabermeja since the human rights group was founded in 1987, five have been its own members. A member of Peace Brigades International, a non-governmental organization whose unarmed volunteers accompany threatened civilians in war zones, is on hand to make sure no one walks the streets below alone. A military troop transport rumbles through the intersection, with half a dozen heavily armed men riding in the back. And off in the distance, rising above the street scene with mute indifference, are the smokestacks and gas flares of the state's Ecopetrol refinery, whose entrance is 500 yards and a world away from the bulletproof doors of CREDHOS.

While union workers and the human rights advocates who defend them live under constant threat of death with little or no protection from the state, Ecopetrol has not one, but two full battalions of the Colombian Armed Forces dedicated to ensuring the safety of its operations. In this regard, the Colombian state oil company is an appropriate symbol for the country as a whole – protection for profitable businesses while the domestic population suffers. German Plata is a Project Director for the Program for Peace and Development of the Middle Magdalena Region, named after the river that runs through Barrancabermeja. He lists off the enormous natural wealth that his homeland possesses, including Ecopetrol's oil, and poses a rhetorical question. "For an area with so many natural resources, there is great poverty. Seventy percent of the people have unsatisfied basic needs. Why?" With little hesitation, he provides the answer. "Because this is an extractive and exclusive economy. They extract our resources and the benefits stay in the hands of a few." Of the US \$2 billion in oil wealth that Barrancabermeja generates each year, only US \$90 million stays in the local economy through Ecopetrol. The rest goes to U.S. com-

panies such as Occidental Petroleum and Chevron/Texaco or England's British Petroleum. Few realize that Colombia today is the 10th largest supplier of petroleum to the U.S. The numbers are similar for the cattle ranching and cultivation of African Palm trees that comprise most of the rest of the local economy – the overwhelming majority of the money generated leaves Colombia.

The leaders of the oil workers union believe that one of the goals of the global economic system, at least as far as the corporations are concerned, is the elimination of organized labor. "A death penalty has been declared against union workers here," said Mendoza. "When you kill a union leader, you destroy the union." As international scrutiny has intensified, paramilitaries have been forced to focus more on union leaders, as opposed to indiscriminate mass executions of workers. "Globalization is trying to deny us our human rights," said one of USO's national-level leaders, whose life has been threatened and who also asked that his name not be published. "We have a very revolutionary history, and our union, especially, has been very hard hit by the state and the groups that operate outside 'the law.'" He made sure that the translation from Spanish reflected his belief that the paramilitaries that threaten him and his colleagues do so with the blessing of the Colombian government. "The political project being carried out here by the ultra-right is a state policy. This is why you see so much complicity on the part of the state with those who carry out the assassinations." He referred to the high level of paramilitary violence in the region, which fell under the control of the right-wing squads just over a year ago. In addition to the presence in Barrancabermeja of the military battalions that protect Ecopetrol, there are two police stations, and an attorney general's office. Yet the paramilitaries "control the life of this place," according to the Executive Director of CREDHOS, Regulo Modero.

"They have a permanent presence, permanent road-blocks," Modero explained. "But the public forces haven't done anything about it. There's no logical explanation for the fact that the most militarized region of the country is controlled by the paramilitaries." And they control it ruthlessly. The most infamous example in recent history occurred on May 16, 1998, when seven people were massacred

by the paramilitaries on a soccer field. Another 25 were "disappeared," meaning taken away and never heard from again. According to Modero, they, too, were executed, cut into pieces with electric chainsaws, and thrown into the Magdalena river that flows through the barrios on the outskirts of town. Modero insisted that state forces were involved in the massacre, and that the paramilitaries entered and exited the neighborhood where they committed the atrocities through a military checkpoint.

Military leaders deny any involvement between their forces and the paramilitaries, insisting that U.S. taxpayer dollars are funding drug eradication, not the murder of trade unionists. Colonel Gilberto Ibarra, of Barrancabermeja's Nueva Granada Battalion, said that "in terms of the paramilitaries, the Army commanders created a law to sanction the AUC sympathizers in the Armed Forces. They're kicked out of the Army." U.S. Embassy officials are less emphatic in their denials, indicating that while there are no links "at the command level," there are still instances of collusion. However, said the Labor and Human Rights attache, who spoke on condition of anonymity, "there is a dedication to root these people out."

Colombian economist Hector Mondragon, whose life is threatened because of his criticism of his government's policies, believes that "the farce of the 'War on Drugs' is reaching its conclusion." He agrees with Mendoza that U.S. backing of the Colombian military is driven much more by economic interests than by a desire to stop drugs. "They no longer need it," he said. "After September 11, the 'War on Terrorism' is enough." As the Bush administration considers expanding its anti-terror campaign to Latin America, there are already signs that the U.S. role in Colombia will expand from one of counter-narcotics to counter-insurgency, with more funds available to fight the guerrillas of the FARC and ELN and, according to the White House, the AUC. On January 23, 2002, President Andres Pastrana of Colombia told the Associated Press that the U.S. "should widen its involvement in Colombia's war to assure a continued flow of oil" from his country's pipelines. Should that happen, things will only get worse for the working men and women of Colombia..

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About anti-union violence in Colombia: <http://www.icemna.org/ecmpcolom.htm>

About violence in Colombia generally: <http://www.mapinc.org/drugnews/v00/n599/a01.html>

MIT Prof. Jean Jackson's report on "Plan Colombia": <http://web.mit.edu/hemisphere/events/planc.shtml>

Amnesty International's view of Colombia: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/countries/colombia>