

# Human Rights Defenders Under Attack

25 Years of safeguarding the  
right to defend human rights



**P**ace Brigades International (PBI) celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2006. In 1981 a small group gathered at Grindstone Island in Canada to found an organisation able to apply active nonviolence in conflict situations around the world. Dan Clarke, a founder member observed: *'PBI has both inspired other efforts and developed into an action organisation able to sustain multiple projects in a variety of countries.'*

The idea of an unarmed peace force draws on the traditions of the Quakers and of Mahatma Gandhi. The Quaker belief in personal service and the Gandhian philosophy and practice of nonviolence come together in the notion of accompaniment. Drawing on the principles of nonviolence, non-partisanship and non-interference, highly trained teams of volunteers are deployed to areas of conflict and repression, upon request from local communities and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) working towards nonviolent social transformation. PBI is a nonhierarchical, grassroots organisation with a broad international network of supporters to ensure the effectiveness of its work. In addition to the field projects, 16 country groups play an integral part in international presence as a means of deterring violence and promoting active nonviolence. Using methods such as protective accompaniment, peace

education and security workshops, PBI works to increase the protection for those local people it works alongside. PBI demonstrates that civil society can and will act boldly to stop war and human rights violations when their governments cannot or will not. It challenges the belief that injustice, violence and warfare are inevitable in human affairs.

Since the first PBI team was deployed to Guatemala in 1983, PBI has worked in El Salvador, Haiti, East Timor, and Native American communities in North America, the Balkans, and Sri Lanka. PBI currently provides nonviolent protective accompaniment in Colombia, Guatemala, Indonesia, Mexico and Nepal. This intensive, hands-on human rights protection contributes to enabling those threatened by violence to carry out their work.

That PBI is still working after 25 years is a bittersweet anniversary. While PBI should celebrate its past and ongoing work as well as all those who have worked with and supported the organisation, the fact that PBI continues to receive ever greater numbers of petitions for accompaniment, both in those countries where it currently works and in others, is a testament to the huge challenges for community and human rights work in many parts of the world, and to the need for continued vigilance, and support of this work, by the international community at large.

## Table of contents

International Protective Accompaniment	3-4
Protection: deterring attacks against civil society leaders, groups and communities	5
Accompaniment protection and the line of command	6-7
Moral support for civil society in the face of repression	8-11
Peace Education	12
PBI's Mainstreaming Protection Programme (MPP)	13
Moral support, protection and political space	13-15
Non Violence and nonpartisanship	16
Field Volunteers	16
Contributing to a global movement for peace and human rights	18
Expanding the impact-within and outside PBI	18
Conclusion	19

## PBI's Global presence

	Period
Guatemala	1983 – 1999, 2003 – present
El Salvador	1987 – 1992
Sri Lanka	1989 – 1998
North America	1991 – 1999
Haiti	1995 – 2000
Colombia	1994 – present
Indonesia	1999 – present
Mexico	2001 – present
Nepal	2005 – present

*By leaving responsibility and ownership for the course of the conflict in the hands of local people, non-violent conflict accompaniment encourages and empowers concerned actors to engage in a peaceful conflict transformation.*

**Jurgen Stork, former member of PBI's International Council.**

# International Protective Accompaniment

International protective accompaniment is the physical accompaniment, by international personnel, of activists; organisations and communities threatened with politically motivated attacks. PBI has been developing this tactic since the mid-1980s, sending hundreds of volunteers into conflict situations around the world. Accompaniment can take many forms. Some threatened activists receive round the clock accompaniment. For others the presence is more sporadic. Sometimes team members spend all day in the office of a threatened organisation. At other times they live in threatened rural villages in conflict zones.



**Night watch over the offices of Koalisi HAM (Coalition for Human Rights), Aceh, Indonesia. PBI has been working in Indonesia since 1999, starting in West Timor, then expanding to Aceh, where both separatist rebellions and state forces were repressing civil society groups. In 2005 PBI expanded to establish two teams in Papua.**

Accompaniment has three simultaneous and mutually reinforcing impacts. The international presence protects threatened activists by raising the stakes of any attacks against them. It provides moral support and international solidarity for civil society activism by opening space for threatened organisations thereby giving them the confidence to operate. In addition it strengthens the international

**I can say with certainty that the fact that we are alive today is mainly because of the work of Peace Brigades.**

**Luis Pérez Casas, Lawyers' Collective José Alvear Restrepo, (CAJAR) Bogotá, Colombia**

movement for peace and human rights by giving accompaniment volunteers a powerful first-hand experience that becomes a sustained source of inspiration to themselves and others upon their return to their home countries.

This section analyses how protective accompaniment works, based on the experience of PBI in Colombia, Indonesia, Mexico, Guatemala, Haiti, Sri Lanka and El Salvador. Since the 1990s, numerous other organisations have also provided international accompaniment in other settings, modifying the approach according to their particular identity and mission.

The accompaniment volunteer<sup>1</sup> is the embodiment of international human rights concern, a compelling and visible reminder to those using violence that it will not go unnoticed. The volunteers often spend twenty-four hours a day with indigenous organisations, human rights defenders, lawyers, trade union leaders, women's organisations, peasant groups, environmental organisations and peace communities that face threats from death squads, state forces or other abusers. The premise of accompaniment is that there will be an international response to whatever violence the volunteer witnesses. Behind such a response lies the implied threat of diplomatic and economic pressure—pressure that the sponsors of such violence prefer to avoid.

Victims of human rights abuses are

frequently those attempting to organise for social justice, nonviolence and respect for human rights thus challenging their society's powerful elites. An international presence can be a source of hope. It assures activists that they are not alone, that their work is important and that their suffering will not go unnoticed by the outside world. Thus the volunteer's presence not only protects, but also provides moral support for the growth of civil society activism in repressive situations.

Every accompaniment volunteer returns home inspired by the privilege of having been able to offer a modest contribution to protecting and providing moral support for the work of the human rights activists they have accompanied. These local activists are the ones building civil society from the ground up while facing deadly daily risks. Some of the people being protected are extraordinary leaders—courageous and charismatic activists, lawyers or NGO leaders. Others are people thrust into extraordinary circumstances by the trauma of events around them

Since PBI's first accompaniment in Guatemala in the early 1980s, thousands of people have been protected. Hundreds of organisations and activists have expanded their work and persevered despite risks



**Leaders of the organisation Guatemalan Families of the Disappeared (FAMDEGUA)**

# International Protective Accompaniment continued

because of the feeling of greater security and moral support provided by PBI volunteers from all over the world.

Accompaniment has proven to be very effective protection, even where the overall human rights situation was deteriorating and where death squads seemed impervious to external pressure. In 25 years PBI has successfully protected the lives of thousands of activists while never losing a volunteer.

PBI began its first accompaniment in Guatemala in 1983 with the organisation Mutual Support for Families of the disappeared. (GAM). Over two decades in Guatemala, PBI accompanied hundreds of civil society organisations helping the country to bring about a delicate democratic transition as it emerged from years of terror.

**Threatened human rights lawyer with Corporación Jurídica Libertad in Medellín, Colombia. PBI has been working in Colombia since 1994 and as of 2006 has 35 volunteers in Bogotá, Medellín, Barrancabermeja and Turbo.**



**Setting out on an accompaniment in Chilpancingo, Guerrero, Mexico. Tita Radilla vicepresident of AFADEM (organisation made up of families of the detained and disappeared).**

## **How does accompaniment work? Why is it effective?**

Accompaniment has three primary impacts:

- Protection of threatened activists and organisations
- Moral support for individuals and civil society movements
- Contributing to the building of a global movement for peace and human rights.

**Hundreds of organisations and activists have expanded their work and persevered despite risks because of the feeling of greater security and moral support provided by PBI volunteers from all over the world**

# Protection: deterring attacks against civil society leaders, groups and communities

International accompaniment can succeed in deterring attacks because the decision makers behind these attacks seldom want a bad international image. They do not want the world to know what they are doing. They do not want to be made to feel uncomfortable by diplomats discussing human rights problems in their meetings. They don't want to read in the international press that they are being called to account for human rights abuses.

The decision makers may be high-level government officials, high-level government or military officials, lower-level officials, private elite

businessmen (local or international) with influence or private enforcement capacity, or leaders of private armed groups. In every case, the accompaniment functions by increasing the perceived political costs of ordering an attack in front of international witnesses—witnesses whose organisations are committed to making such attacks as costly as possible for those responsible.

The direct perpetrators of attacks might be soldiers, police, paramilitary organisations, guerrillas or hired assassins, among others. In each case, the accompaniment strategy requires a thorough analysis of the chain of command between the

perpetrator and the higher-level decision maker. It should not be assumed that the thugs who pull the trigger are unaffected by international presence. No one wants an unexpected witness around when they are carrying out a crime. The volunteer's presence may also have a moral influence on individual perpetrators. It introduces an uncertainty factor—the attackers do not know what the consequences of the presence of this witness will be, so unless they have explicit orders that take the accompaniment into account, they are likely to restrain themselves rather than risk getting into trouble with their superiors.



PBI volunteers accompanying leaders of the community Cacarica (CAVIDA), Colombia.

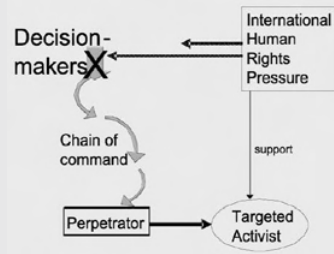
# Accompaniment protection and the line of command

To appreciate the added value of accompaniment, consider first the more traditional model of international human rights pressure (see figure 1). Although systemic human rights abuses require the collaboration of a variety of actors in the line of command, pressure is usually only directed at the decision

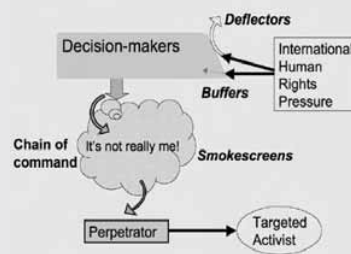
the case that the state not only recognises that abuses are occurring but is also taking all possible measures to prevent further occurrences. Smokescreens allow decision makers to argue that they are not responsible for the abuses, even though they admit they occur. A common and devastatingly effective smokescreen is

the use of paramilitary or death squad operations under secret military control. In other cases, explanations such as “lack of discipline,” or “loose cannons” distance the high-level decision makers from the abuses. Smokescreens give both the state and its international allies a level of plausible denial when faced with

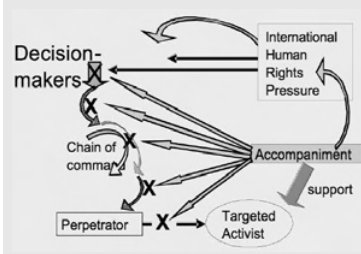
**Figure 1**  
Conventional International Pressure to Protect



**Figure 2**  
Conventional International Pressure to Protect



**Figure 3**  
Use of accompaniment to disrupt all levels in the abuse process



makers at the top, urging them to take action to stop abuses. In addition, the international community offers a variety of support to threatened activists themselves.

International human rights pressure is now a decades-old practice and states have developed very sophisticated countermeasures to deflect the pressure from having its desired impact (see figure 2). Deflectors include the use of propaganda to destroy the credibility of the accusing organisation or the targeted activist, such as labelling them ‘terrorists’. In this way states gain international support from allies for their policies and actions. Buffers include a variety of mechanisms by which states absorb and co-opt human rights pressure without having to make overt denials. These include the creation of state agencies to deal with the human rights community, making



**PBI volunteers inform the local police that they are accompanying members of Rehabilitation Action for Torture Victims (RATA), in Aceh, Indonesia**

# Accompaniment protection and the line of command continued

accusations.

A sound accompaniment strategy, as shown in figure 3, both complements and augments traditional human rights protection, in the following ways:

- The accompaniment volunteer is directly visible to potential direct perpetrators, a unique impact among international efforts.

- PBI, with its links to the international community, ensures that the “message” of international pressure is transmitted to the whole chain of command by meeting every echelon of the decision-making system of the military and civilian hierarchy, at both national and local levels. This process increases accountability, to some extent combating smokescreens.

The accompaniment vastly strengthens the international support felt by the threatened activists.

The “first-hand witness” effect strengthens the credibility of the local activists, their organisations and the overall international effort to protect them. It also counteracts buffer strategies; by acting as a constant reminder that there is still a problem it becomes harder for states to claim they are solving the problem themselves.

The presence of volunteers from many countries “in the line of fire” engages their embassies and home governments more forcefully in human rights protection, strengthening the overall pressure on top decision makers.

PBI’s global high level and grassroots emergency networks are alerted when an attack or harassment happens despite PBI’s presence; they in turn remind decision makers in the country where abuses are occurring that they cannot escape responsibility for such “mistakes.”

## CASE STUDY

### Lawyers’ Collective José Alvear Restrepo (CAJAR), Colombia

For ten years PBI has been accompanying lawyers from CAJAR one of the largest and most threatened professional human rights organisations in Colombia. This sometimes involves round-the-clock accompaniment, with volunteers

taking turns with individual lawyers.

Individual accompaniment involves being constantly ready to move at someone else’s schedule, staying discreetly “out of their affairs” while maintaining visibility. Threats and attacks against human rights defenders in Colombia have been so merciless that they can affect every aspect of daily life.



PBI provides daily protection for Alirio Uribe of Colombian lawyers collective and winner of the prestigious Martin Ennals award for human rights defenders in 2003. In his acceptance speech Alirio stated: “We receive this award in the name of so many sacrificed human rights activists, to affirm that terror has not, and will not, force us to yield in our efforts to defend the most precious values of humanity.”

**Wherever Alirio travels, be it from home to work, to court, or to meetings around the city, he moves in a bulletproof car, wears a bulletproof jacket and has a constant PBI presence at his side.... One day we parked in the underground car park of the 30-storey building in which his office is located. “Do you mind if we walk up rather than take the lift?” he asked. “It’s just that I never get any exercise these days – it’s simply too risky for me to go to the gym or the park.”**

**James Savage, PBI volunteer from the UK**

# Moral support for civil society in the face of repression

The moral support for civil society in the face of repression is an important part of the work of PBI. In situations of widespread political repression or terror, activists are not simply asking for accompaniment because of a personal fear or an immediate threat. They are confronting systemic policies of violence that can frighten whole populations into political paralysis. Deliberate use of political violence is as old as war itself. In this century, however, advances in weaponry, information control, mass media and psychology have facilitated the exercise of mass terror with a previously inconceivable efficiency. Social control is achieved by efficiently manipulating diverse individual responses to danger and fear.

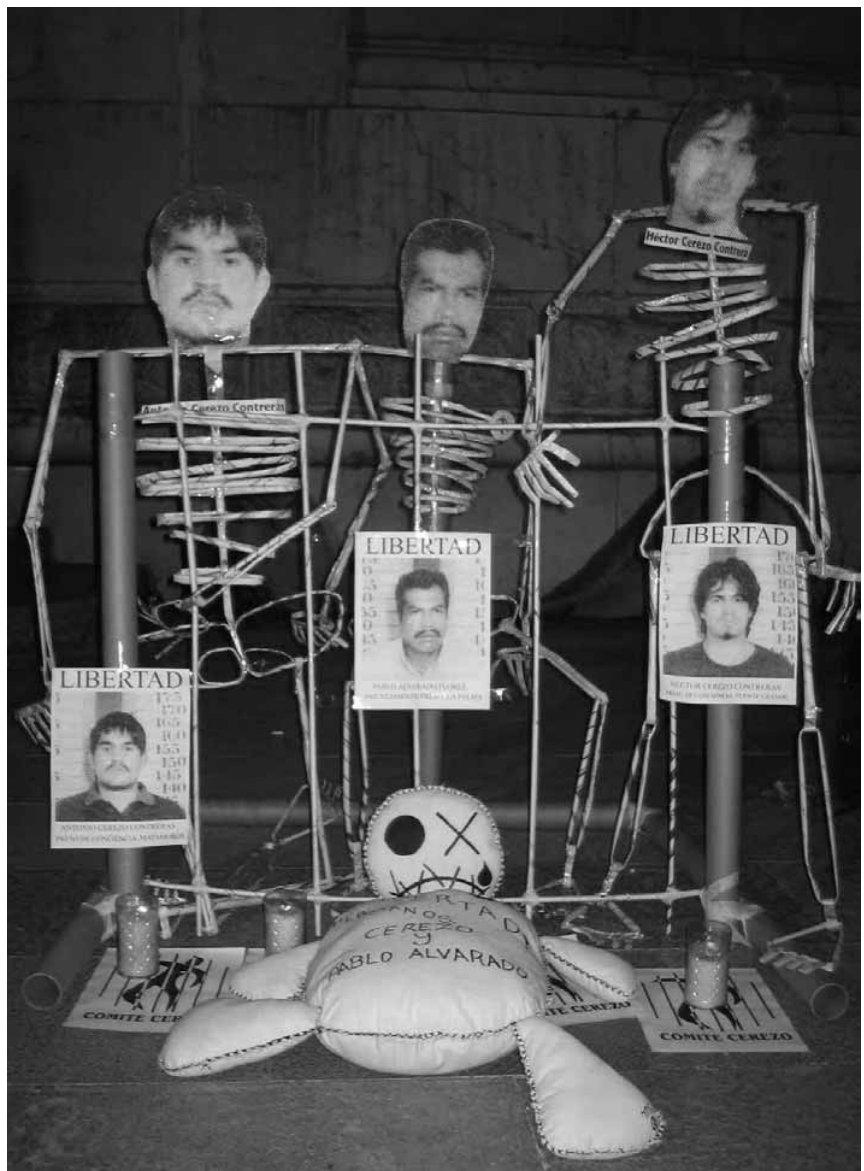
The goal of state terror is to keep people isolated from each other and society fragmented. Civilian organisations that empower people to overcome their isolation to confront and question state terror are perceived as a threat.

Terror is very efficient: you don't need to kill everyone if you can paralyse the majority by only directly attacking a minority. It is the audience that counts, with each victim warning others of the power of the state. Torture, short of death, is an especially effective tool for encouraging collective paralysis. Human rights abuses are thus often a rational choice made by strategic thinkers. The techniques have been developed through a long history of military psychological operations. To policy makers, terror may seem no more immoral than other strategic choices made in a war. And strategists study the successes and failures of others, so perfecting their tools.

Nevertheless, even the most organised system of state terror cannot watch everyone, nor kill anyone at any time it pleases. Surveillance is expensive and labour intensive. Processing and

There are always people on the street corners spying on us to watch our movements. So when they see that internationals are physically entering our offices, this helps us tremendously.

Aura Elena Farfan, Guatemalan Families of the Disappeared



Cerezo siblings, with photos of their incarcerated brothers being held in a Mexican prison. PBI has had a team in Mexico since 2001, accompanying human rights activists who are confronting deep injustice and corruption. The Mexican government has succeeded in sustaining a relatively positive international image, making it a challenge to focus international human rights attention on systemic abuses.



# Moral support for civil society in the face of repression continued



Abel Barrera from Centre for Human Rights of Montaña Tlachnollan Mountain Human Rights Centre, Guerrero, Mexico collecting testimonies on displacement and corruption.

UK volunteer James Savage discussing protective measures with a human rights activist in Bogotá, Colombia

interpreting all the data is even more demanding, and intelligence planners frequently have more data than they can effectively analyse. The state's omnipotence is never complete, but it wants to create the perception that it is, since this belief prompts a self-regulation of political activity.

The desired impact of repression, threats and intimidation is to diminish the range of action for civil society groups. People feel they have fewer choices for public action that won't result in retaliation. They may fear certain activities including travelling outside the major cities. Civil society organisations suffer diminished participation. And activists often suffer serious mental health problems resulting from the stress of constant insecurity.

By providing moral support to these activists and organisations, protective accompaniment helps to reduce fear and stress and promotes increased participation. Activists and groups begin to choose tactics and actions they would otherwise fear and attract more participants. They travel where they would otherwise fear to go.

Thank you for all this, thank you for these five years, thank you for assuming the risk of living in this country, thank you for the hope which you have made possible to build.  
Danilo Rueda,  
Justicia y Paz Colombia



PBI volunteer accompanying Panchita in Bogotá, Colombia from the Association of the Families of the Detained and the Disappeared (ASFADDES)

# Moral support for civil society in the face of repression continued

## CASE STUDY

### Communities resisting war in rural Colombia

The Colombian conflict has spawned the worst human rights situation in the western hemisphere, with thousands of political murders annually and over three million internally displaced people. In the rural regions of Urabá and Chocó communities of displaced peasants have initiated a daring and inspiring strategy in the face of armed conflict and repeated expulsions from their land. With the support and solidarity of national and international NGOs they are creating communities with a special commitment to resist collaboration with any of the armed parties that terrorise the region. These include the military, guerrilla organisations and the most brutal of all: paramilitary associations that collaborate with the army. Some communities are called "peace communities," others, "communities in resistance." One, along the Cacarica River calls itself a "community of self-determination, dignity and life."

The essence of their strategies is to create a sense of unity and a disciplined response to all the armed parties, and to back this up with national and international solidarity and pressure in order to defend their right to a space free from military, paramilitary or guerrilla harassment. PBI has provided accompaniment in two of these communities for the past eight years: San Jose de Apartadó and Cacarica. The communities have faced a barrage of attacks and harassment from across the armed spectrum, but mostly from paramilitary groups aligned with the army and the national economic elites. Paramilitaries have murdered 150 community members, and when terror has not deterred the community the paramilitaries have turned to economic strangulation by blockading access routes. This harassment has been backed up by a concerted smear



The PBI hut under flood

campaign by the army against the communities, labelling them "terrorists."

In Cacarica, PBI has a hut where volunteers stay for several days at a time. On a rotation basis they make the 12 hour boat journey from their base in the nearby city of Turbo. They stay abreast of all political developments in the region and in the community. Satellite phones are used to immediately alert the rest of PBI about any attack on the community. If a paramilitary incursion occurs PBI volunteers are able to alert the international community literally within

seconds. PBI's team in Bogotá can immediately contact key governmental and military officials as well as allies in the diplomatic community to generate a rapid response. They also immediately contact PBI's offices around the world, and generate a strategic response on an international level if necessary. On numerous occasions PBI has been able to put national and international pressure on the local military to react even while paramilitaries were still carrying out their attacks or harassment.



Accompanying a community member to fields abandoned since the last paramilitary incursion.

# Moral support for civil society in the face of repression continued

US volunteer Andrew Miller accompanying internally displaced communities in Chocó, 1999.



The war in this region has been intense. It is an area nearly completely controlled by right-wing paramilitaries who have not relented in their harassment of the communities. Therefore it is somewhat difficult to measure the protective impact of the presence. However, the fact that physical attacks against residents reduced after the first years and the paramilitaries turned to more subtle economic tactics could be a sign of the impact of the presence of PBI and local NGOs and the generally high level of international solidarity the communities receive,.

The harassment has also extended to PBI. In 2003 and 2004, high-level military officials and Colombian President Alvaro Uribe himself issued a series of statements alleging links between these communities, their national and international accompaniers and guerrilla "terrorists." President Uribe asserted, "I reiterate to the police, if these [foreign human rights observers] continue to obstruct justice, put them in prison. If they have to be deported, deport them."

PBI organised a massive international response (see box) demanding the retraction of these accusations and insisting that the government assure the security of our international presence.

PBI volunteers are considered almost members of the community. The residents feel a strong sense of solidarity

experience. They will never forget the dedication, the creativity, the humility and the courage of the communities that are standing up nonviolently to some of the most vicious paramilitary groups in the world. The volunteers bring this inspiration with them when they return home to pass on to others.

from and towards PBI, whom they see showing a steadfast commitment to their struggle for civil liberties. They have expressed on numerous occasions how much moral support they get from PBI's presence and how it strengthens them to carry on.

The volunteers who have had the opportunity to live in Cacarica and San José de Apartadó have been changed forever by the

## Leverage in action

Examples of international responses to support and protect the presence of PBI in the peace communities after governmental accusations in 2004:

- A letter of concern to President Uribe signed by 60 members of the US Congress
- A delegation to Urabá of officials from the US, British, Spanish, Canadian, and Dutch embassies and the United Nations
- Numerous press releases by national and international NGOs
- Supportive articles in Colombian

national newspapers

- A special meeting between the European diplomatic delegation and Vice President Santos
- Public statements of support for PBI from UK government minister William Rammell, as well as the French Ambassador
- A public communiqué by the European Union
- Public expression of concern by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights
- A motion of support before the Australian Senate.

# Peace education

PBI was not conceived as a human rights organisation focused solely on protection. Its mandate encompasses a variety of strategies for supporting nonviolent action and seeking nonviolent solutions, including peace education.

PBI began offering training in nonviolence and human rights in Central America in the 1980s and early 1990s, developing workshops on conflict resolution, negotiation methods, group process, political analysis, as well as specialised topics such as ‘community responses to fear and torture.’ These workshops, based on popular education techniques developed by Paolo Freire and others, focused on sharing techniques and methods and on developing the participants’ abilities to address their own problems. This area of work has been developed to ensure that PBI does not substitute for local expertise, but rather fulfils roles that are too dangerous for local people to take on. From 1995 – 2000 at the request of local activists, PBI worked in Haiti on a project almost entirely devoted to workshops in nonviolent conflict resolution. The team facilitated workshops with the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church and with rural communities where local land disputes threatened to lead to bloodshed. In collaboration with the UN human rights monitoring mission, PBI also facilitated workshops with Haitian judges. The aim of PBI’s work was to help build a network of local nonviolence trainers so that PBI’s work would become redundant.

Peace building continues to be key to the work of PBI, and denotes a series of activities that strive to achieve a society that is not only free from war (negative peace) but in which social justice and human rights prevail (positive peace). This is carried out through participatory peace education workshops, and the provision of relevant library resources.

PBI’s Indonesia project has a dedicated Peace Education team of Indonesians and

international volunteers with a peace education background. The team has co-facilitated training for trainers along with Aceh-based organisations, with the objective of establishing a pool of local people trained in peace building, gender issues, and reconciliation. A cycle of workshops entitled ‘Alternatives to Violence’ focused on developing nonviolence as a tool for transforming power. In a needs analysis process, local people in Papua identified peace education as a significant gap, and PBI began organising workshops to strengthen social cohesion. The team has also carried out conflict transformation workshops with representatives of local religious communities bringing together Muslims, Protestants, Catholics, Buddhists and Hindus.

PBI Indonesia also facilitates monthly discussions, ‘Diskusi Bulanan’ where participants propose a discussion theme and invitations are issued to local organisations and members of civil society. These sometimes include a guest speaker, and have proved to be an effective tool for community building. While PBI offers a safe space to meet and talk, local facilitators lead discussions, and facilitate debates. Some of the themes the Diskusi Bulanan cover are horizontal conflict and traditional methods of conflict resolution, women’s empowerment, and regional development and its impact on the environment.

In Wamena, Indonesia there are many different actors and traditional, church and government legal systems. The local population is trying to find its orientation and balance among these systems, but this often results in tensions and conflicts. PBI plays a unique role in gathering various actors together so they can exchange views on sensitive issues. The subjects covered include human rights law, gender issues, respect for traditional practices, access to resources and domestic violence.

PBI-Indonesia has also opened public resource libraries in its field offices with collections of peace building materials. Visitors are typically students, NGO workers, community leaders and interested citizens.

In Colombia, one key area of PBI’s work since 1994 has been the reconstruction of the social fabric; capacity building in psychosocial recovery and conflict resolution. This includes workshops for the Colombian NGOs that PBI accompanies and occasionally others NGOs.

By 2003 the project had employed a mental health worker to carry the work forward and to provide mental health support for PBI volunteers. The workshops for Colombian organisations are designed to enable participants to examine a chosen topic related to the political context and impact of violence on their work. Topics include stress, fear, grief, team dynamics, conflict resolution and psychosocial health. The workshops enable participants to share their experiences, analyse the problems that human rights defenders and displaced communities face, and consider tools that might assist them in carrying out their work. Occasionally, both project staff who work on information analysis, and the psychologist, participate in the workshops, to integrate analysis of the political situation with formulating ways of facing it.

Workshops are frequently tailored to the needs of specific groups. such as offering support to community leaders; or sharing the experiences of organisational processes (looking at resistance or the retention of historical memory) in Colombia or other countries. The NGOs which have participated in these workshops have stated that they consider them to be a valuable part of the support that PBI offers and that they respond in an effective way to the political situation they currently face.

Beyond the workshops, PBI offers support by holding frequent meetings with NGOs to find out how they are faring and offering support from the project’s mental health worker.

# PBI's Mainstreaming Protection Programme (MPP)

PBI's Brussels European office (BEO) coordinates an initiative to widen the organisation's protective impact by providing security training to civil society organisations in addition to those that are directly accompanied. Increasingly, local NGOs and international organisations are asking PBI to share information on protection tools. Workshops are conducted in collaboration with PBI field teams in Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala and Indonesia. In addition, the BEO has launched a major new initiative in security training in Nepal and in the Democratic

Republic of Congo. The fundamental objectives of the MPP are to help human rights defenders develop coherent and effective security strategies.

Workshop topics include: analysing the context and main actors, evaluating threats, vulnerability and capacities; analysing security and strategies in incidents of violent threats and armed attack; protocols and procedures, and dealing with fear and post-traumatic stress. Participants include local organisations facing the same challenges as those PBI

accompanies, such as human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists, as well as other international NGOs working in areas of conflict. As part of this mainstreaming process, the BEO team carries out advocacy work with European Union institutions and Geneva-based UN agencies aimed at instigating institutional policy change.

The Mainstreaming Protection Project has also launched a web page [www.protectiononline.org](http://www.protectiononline.org) to provide human rights defenders worldwide with tools and links for developing their own security strategies.

## Moral support, protection and political space<sup>3</sup>

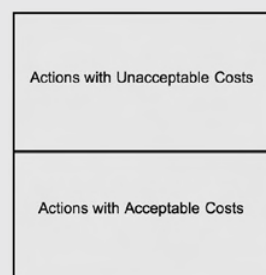
The concept of political space is crucial to understanding how the incremental protection and moral support provided by the PBI presence interact with each other. Each actor in a complex conflict situation, whether a soldier or a human rights activist, perceives a broad array of possible political actions and associates a certain cost/benefit or set of consequences with each action. The actor perceives some consequences as acceptable, some unacceptable, thereby defining the limits of a distinct political space (see figure 4).

PBI accompaniment alters this mapping of political space by shifting the boundary upwards, expanding the space available to the activist to pursue political action. The middle ground is made up of actions which will no longer be attacked in an unbearable fashion. There are still actions which will provoke unacceptable consequences, even with accompaniment.

The notion of 'acceptable' consequences can be fluid over time and will vary greatly among individuals and organisations. For some, the torture

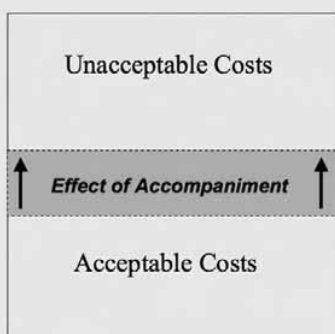
or death of a family member might be the most unbearable consequence. For others, a threshold might be crossed at the first threats. An organisation might be willing to risk the death of a member, but not the annihilation of the whole group.

**Figure 4**  
Each Actor's Political Space



**Effect of Accompaniment on Each Actor's Political Space**

**Figure 5**  
Accompanied Actor's Political Space



**Figure 6**  
Addressors' Space for Repressive Action



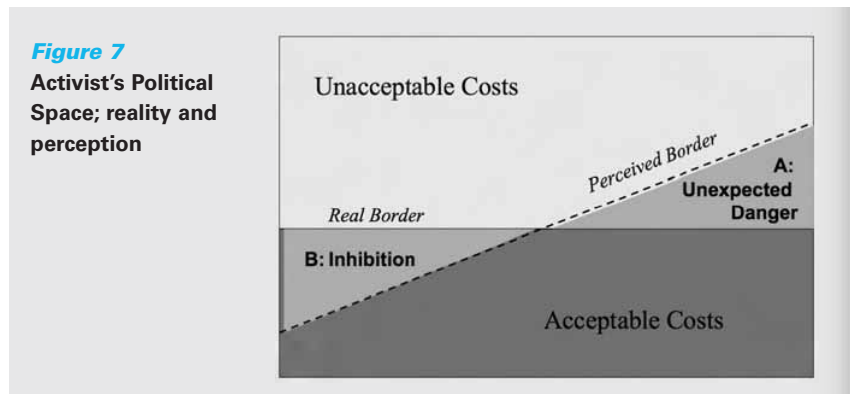
# Moral support, protection and political space<sup>3</sup> continued

Accompaniment limits, or shrinks, the aggressor's options for violent or repressive action—which is called 'impunity space' (see figure 6). As with the activist so with the aggressor: there will still be actions whose consequences are acceptable. One government official might be extremely savvy and sensitive to international criticism, while an independent death-squad leader might be more immune.

PBI presence is effective in the grey zone (figures 5 and 6). If the aggressor's ability to attack has been significantly limited, the presence means real protection. If the activists can carry out significant political activities that otherwise they would have avoided, then that accompaniment has encouraged the strengthening and growth of a nonviolent civil society.

But no one knows where the borders are! This is the critical complication, which requires an expansion of this analysis. All actors are guessing about the possible repercussions of their actions, and they all make mistakes. A dictator might not have attacked a certain organisation if he had known that this would attract greater diplomatic support to the organisation increasing its international profile and credibility. Meanwhile, the activists are also making mistakes: A young factory worker may think it would be dangerous to be an outspoken union leader and figures the odds are more in her favour if she is just a quiet rank-and-file member. Then she's killed. At the factory next door, everyone is too scared to even talk about unionising. Yet maybe there would be no repercussions at all. They don't know. Nobody knows. Everyone learns by trial and error, and, unfortunately, the errors can be costly.

People base their decisions on their own perceptions and projections of what consequences they might suffer. These projections might be based on substantial historical or political analysis, on simple



prejudices, on an emotional reaction to a past trauma, or on any number of other psychological factors. This uncertainty and the consequences on the impact of accompaniment is shown graphically in figures 7 through 10.

In space A, (figure 7) the activist unknowingly walks into danger and suffers the consequences. In space B, fear has been instilled so effectively that the activist is inhibited from taking actions that are in fact relatively safe. In situations of state terrorism, this space can be huge: Nearly all political or social action is feared; only passivity appears to have acceptable consequences. The darker grey area, then, is really the only political space that is truly 'available' to the activist. Space A is too dangerous, and space B has been eliminated in the activist's own mind.

PBI accompaniment expands available space by pushing both the 'real' and 'perceived' borders upwards (see figure 8). For a variety of reasons the actions in the dark grey shaded area are now available to the activist. Actions in B2, for instance, were not dangerous in the first place: the activist has simply overcome internalised inhibitions.

Accompaniment in this case functions as moral support and not protection. Actions in A3 are now safer, but since the activists never

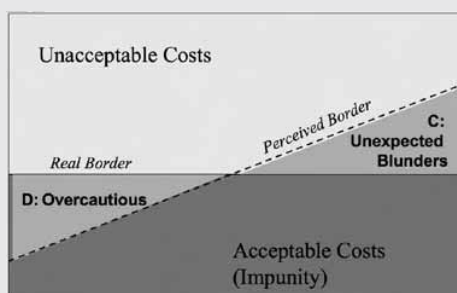
saw them as unacceptably dangerous the accompaniment serves as pure protection, not moral support. In area F both moral support and protection act together: the activist is encouraged to take new action that was previously too dangerous and is now protected.

There is still fear: Area B still exists with accompaniment. In fact, area B3 consists of additional actions that are now relatively safe, but the activist still does not trust in this safety. Finally, area A2 represents the accompaniment volunteer's nightmare: the activist believes these actions to be safer but in fact they are not. The activist may walk confidently into danger because of the moral support of international presence.

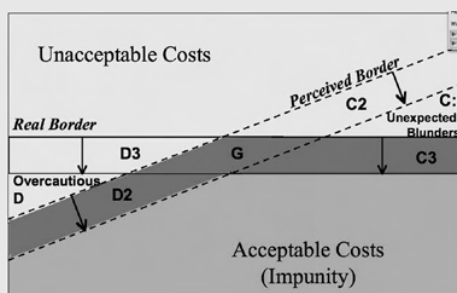
The aggressor faces many different types of consequences for repressive action. Some are local, such as increased unrest if the aggressor is a state, or increased group loyalty or solidarity among the victims. International pressure is just one factor. Other perceived benefits might outweigh the costs. Getting rid of a 'troublesome' activist, for instance, might seem worth short-term embarrassment. Thus, 'unacceptable costs,' refers to the net effect of all these factors. Again in figure 9, only the actions in the darker grey area are truly available 'impunity space.'

# Moral support, protection and political space<sup>3</sup> continued

**Figure 9**  
**Activist's Political Space;**  
**reality and perception**



**Figure 10**  
**Aggressor's Repressive**  
**Space & Effect of**  
**Accompaniment**



Protective accompaniment attempts to deter violence and shrink this space (see figure 10) by moving both lines downward, eliminating the dark grey zone from the available space for repressive action. In the case of the activist, accompaniment distinguishes between protection and moral support; with the aggressor it speaks of discouragement and deterrence. The aggressor is discouraged from acting in area D2, even though the real costs are acceptable. They overvalue the power of accompaniment and become even more cautious. Area G comes the closest to real deterrence: the accompaniment has raised the costs of repression; the aggressor recognises this and holds back.

Sometimes, accompaniment helps the aggressor avoid mistakes. Thus, actions in area C2 are blunders with or without

accompaniment, but the aggressor did not recognise them as such until the accompaniment was present. While discouraging the aggressor's 'mistake,' accompaniment is protecting the intended target. From the standpoint of the activist, after all, repression by mistake is no less damaging.

Finally, returning to figure 10, the aggressor might commit a repressive act (area C3), and suffer unacceptable consequences because of accompaniment. In the immediate event, accompaniment has failed to deter, but over the course of time, such events should change the aggressor's perception of the available space. If aggressors learn from their mistakes, the 'perceived' line should move closer to the real line. The accompaniment thus discourages future aggression. And the more severe the political cost, the greater the credibility and success of future accompaniment.

The armed protection is there to protect you against a similar armed force but PBI is there to protect you against the order to use armed force.

Dr Saravanamuttu  
 mother of murdered  
 Sri Lankan journalist  
 Richard De Zoysa

We accompanied the human rights organisation on their drive... We had the mayor of the town in our car and he showed us where the ELN [guerrillas] had kidnapped him. We were stopped by paramilitaries on the way back, but because we were there they didn't check committee members' ID cards. If we hadn't been there I think that something bad would have happened. The funny part is that after they said we could go our bus overheated and we couldn't leave. The paramilitaries helped us push the bus.

Kelli Corrigan,  
 Canadian volunteer  
 in Colombia

# Nonviolence and nonpartisanship

PBI is committed to the promotion of active nonviolence, as is reflected in the founding statement (1981):

*We are forming an organisation with the capacity to mobilise and provide trained Volunteers in areas of high tension, to avert violent outbreaks. Peace brigades, fashioned to respond to specific needs and appeals, will undertake nonpartisan missions, which may include peacemaking initiatives, peacekeeping under a discipline of nonviolence, and humanitarian service. ... We are building on a rich and extensive heritage of nonviolent action. We are convinced that this commitment of mind, heart, and dedicated will can make a significant difference in human affairs. (ref.)*

Nonpartisanship is key to PBI's philosophy and approach. PBI is independent of the organisations it accompanies, and plays no role in their internal affairs.

**Frankly, we feel more comfortable if there is accompaniment from PBI. We really need PBI on these trips.**

**Khairani Arifin, Koordinator Umum from RPuK, Aceh, Indonesia**

## Consensus and decision making in PBI

PBI's structure is as horizontal as possible, with consensus being the basis for decisions. Consensus strives to be a nonhierarchical process in which participants have an equal voice in the final decision. Given the global scale of the organisation, this participation is achieved through a representative process with, when necessary, multiple feedback rounds to achieve consensus. The International Council, made up of representatives of country groups, field projects and at-large members, has ultimate responsibility for the governance, financial and legal health of the organisation. Substantial operational responsibility is delegated to volunteer committees and staff, for the day-to-day running of International Secretariat, field projects and other programmes.

PBI's supporters are organised into 16 national organisations called 'country groups' in Europe, North America and Asia-Pacific. They provide support to the international programme and project work. Country groups are responsible for fundraising, volunteer recruitment and training and building political support networks. Some groups also initiate domestic projects promoting peace and human rights. The strength of these groups varies: some have permanent offices and fulltime staff, others are loose associations of volunteers.

**This was one of the most difficult, challenging and rewarding experiences in my life – and this remains true still to this day.**

**Peter Leblanc, US volunteer in Sri Lanka and Indonesia.**

# Field Volunteers

PBI and other accompaniment organisations have been training volunteers for over 20 years, and a variety of models have been developed. PBI's training is highly participatory: Volunteers go through a series of exercises and role-playing to help them visualise the challenge they are considering and to help trainers gauge their preparedness. This training considers such criteria as commitment to nonviolence and human rights, capacity for intensive political analysis, understanding of the country of the project, cautious judgment, patience and humility, ability to work in a team under high stress.

More details on the criteria for selection of volunteers for PBI projects can be found on the website, [www.peacebrigades.org](http://www.peacebrigades.org).

Eighty or so people at any given time spend a year or more working on PBI teams in conflict zones in urban and rural areas. These volunteers are from many countries and of many ages.

On a given day in the life of a PBI accompaniment volunteer, he or she might spend time meeting with a human rights defender to discuss risks and plans for future accompaniment, or escorting them to a meeting or on a trip or patiently sitting and waiting outside an office while the activists are going through their daily routine. The volunteer might have a meeting with representatives from the military, the government, the diplomatic community, or local or international NGOs. He or she might be involved in an emergency activation of the PBI's international support network. Or it might be a day for writing reports, taking care of administrative duties or cleaning the house.



# Field Volunteers continued

For me it was enacting a dream or a vision. I had thought for a number of years that doing accompaniment work would be the highest expression of solidarity with other people. To potentially put yourself at risk so another person could continue to do their human rights work... doing that was enacting a dream and that's a pretty powerful thing to do. The whole time there was some part of me that was just incredibly content and happy about being there despite the challenges and difficulties I encountered.

John Krone,  
PBI volunteer in Mexico

The loneliness of a typical day's accompaniment.



Colombia Project Team, 2005.

The appreciation of the volunteers is unanimous, in particular their work capacity, their availability, their discretion and ability to adapt to difficult work and living conditions and their respectful attitude towards the organisations and communities they accompany.

PBI External evaluation 2004

I now have a more comprehensive worldview, an increased confidence in my ability to effect change at the local and global level, several long-term friendships and a much better awareness of what it means to be a human rights lawyer in a developing country. I have deep admiration for people who are putting their lives on the line for human rights in Colombia. As well, my time with PBI showed me what a grassroots human rights organisation can do to further the struggle for global human rights in a way that is not demeaning – by working with people instead of on their behalf.

Sean Arthurs, PBI volunteer  
in Colombia

# Contributing to a global movement for peace and human rights

**In general it was one of the best things I have ever done despite some of the trials and tribulations I faced. Doing PBI in Colombia was a turning point for me and helped me to decide to go to law school.**

**Kelli Corrigan, Canadian volunteer in Colombia.**

**One of the highlights was during those moments when I could chat and connect on a real human level with the people I was accompanying and send a strong statement by my presence that I respected them and their work. I respected them as human beings who were trying to make the world a better place.**

**John Krone, country volunteer in Mexico.**

**E**ach volunteer comes home with a story to tell and often with an intense drive to continue serving the cause of human rights. They may be driven to follow the situations of the groups they had the privilege to accompany. After doing accompaniment, participants can no longer see human rights abuses as far away statistics. Instead they became faces and friends who have given something deeply important to their life.

Returned volunteers often get more deeply involved in working in their own communities for justice, peace and human rights. Each of them is a resource, a person with a unique first-hand experience from which others can learn and be inspired. In fact, it is quite common for returned volunteers to make substantial changes in their life plans and careers in order to sustain greater life-long commitment to service.

The expansion of a global movement for peace and human rights is an explicit part of the accompaniment tactic. The protection and moral support local activists can get from accompaniment is directly correlated to the strength of the global network of solidarity that cares about them.

Accompaniment volunteers not only represent this network on the ground—they also strengthen it when they get home.

When US PBI volunteer Phil Pardi was arrested along with Salvadoran activists Gloria and Ernesto Zamora in August 1991, within a few hours he got a visit from the US Embassy. According to Phil: **Actually the first thing he said to me was, "Well, Phil, you're very popular, you ever think about running for the mayor of Cambridge, Massachusetts? I think half the town of Cambridge has probably called me." He was also asking me why the people who were calling him knew Ernesto and Gloria. That told me that the phone calls and the faxes were also about Ernesto and Gloria. This embassy guy just wanted to get me out of there. He kept saying, "Well, Phil, you're just in the wrong place at the wrong time." And I kept saying, "No, I was in the right place at the right time." But he just didn't get it.**

(Unarmed Bodyguards, page 181)

## Expanding the impact – within and outside PBI

**P**BI is constantly receiving and exploring new requests for accompaniment. Based on lessons learned from its many projects, PBI has developed explicit criteria and procedures for diagnosing

requests and deciding whether to set up new projects.

Protective accompaniment is now widely used by other NGOs. Each of these organisations has its own identity and mandate, and so adapts

accompaniment to their broader objectives. In addition, larger institutional presences, such as those managed by the UN, are beginning to apply some of the lessons of the PBI experience in order to protect civilians more effectively.

# Conclusion

New conflicts continue to erupt, and new requests for accompaniment arise all over the world. But despite the rapid growth of the human rights movement in recent decades, most new accompaniment requests go unanswered. The international community has thus far been unable to effectively mobilise the necessary resources and commitment to meet the needs.

PBI's accompaniment extends the boundaries of what is known as the international community beyond governments, beyond the UN, beyond the

established humanitarian agencies. Accompaniment has helped connect grassroots efforts for justice and human rights around the world with these larger international structures. PBI volunteers are a bridge between threatened local activists and the outside world and also between their own home communities and the reality of the global struggle for peace and human rights.

These links may help overcome the seemingly impossible challenge of human rights protection. In the final analysis, the international community's response to human rights abuses is not only a

question of resources but one of hope and empowerment. Accompaniment volunteers experience the rare privilege of standing at the side of some of the world's most courageous and committed activists. This courage injects immeasurable energy into the international community's efforts.

A request for human rights protection should never fall on deaf ears. The international community needs to redefine what is possible. Everyone can take the lead from these threatened activists who are asking for support. They do the impossible every day.

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for Change, Philadelphia, PA. [www.trainingforchange.org](http://www.trainingforchange.org).

*"Unarmed Monitoring and Human Rights Field Presences: Civilian Protection and Conflict Prevention"*, Liam Mahony, August, 2003, Journal of Humanitarian Assistance, at [www.jha.ac](http://www.jha.ac).

*"In Company of Fear"*, 60-minute video, produced by Ark Films, Vancouver, Canada. Available from PBI-USA.

*"Protection Manual for Human Rights Defenders"*, by Enrique Eguren. Frontline/PBI, Dublin, 2005.

## Organisational Websites

Peace Brigades International: [www.peacebrigades.org](http://www.peacebrigades.org).

Addresses for each national organisation can also be found on this website.

PBI's Mainstreaming Protection Project, managed by the Brussels European Office, has a website dedicated to protection resources for human rights defenders at [www.protectiononline.org](http://www.protectiononline.org)

## About the author:

### Liam Mahony

Liam Mahony is an activist for nonviolence and human rights who has worked with PBI since 1987. He has coordinated PBI's volunteer accompaniment in Guatemala, facilitated volunteer training for accompaniment in many countries, served on PBI's International Council and acted as an advisor on all of PBI's projects as well as other NGO accompaniment projects. Together with Luis Enrique Eguren, he co-

authored the book, *Unarmed Bodyguards: International Accompaniment for the Protection of Human Rights*, (Kumarian Press, 1997). Liam Mahony is also the author of *Risking Return: NGOs in the Guatemalan Refugee Return*, (Life and Peace Institute, Uppsala, 1999). He was lead editor and writer for the Independent International Commission on Kosovo (Kosovo Report, Oxford University Press, 2000). Mr. Mahony taught human rights at Princeton University (2000-2003) and was the series editor of 40 monographs on

innovations in the human rights movement – the *Tactical Notebook* series of the New Tactics in Human Rights Project ([www.newtactics.org](http://www.newtactics.org)). His consulting work includes the Rockefeller Foundation, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the World Food Programme and Amnesty International. He is currently Civilian Protection Analyst for the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and a member of PBI's International Council.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For simplicity, we use the short-hand term "volunteer" when referring to the personnel doing accompaniment, as the majority of organisations providing accompaniment do so with volunteers. The tactic could of course also be carried out by paid personnel, so this terminology should not be considered exclusive of that option.

<sup>2</sup> The analysis of this section is drawn from *Unarmed Bodyguards: International Accompaniment for the Protection of Human Rights*, Luis Enrique Eguren and Liam Mahony, Kumarian Press, 1997.

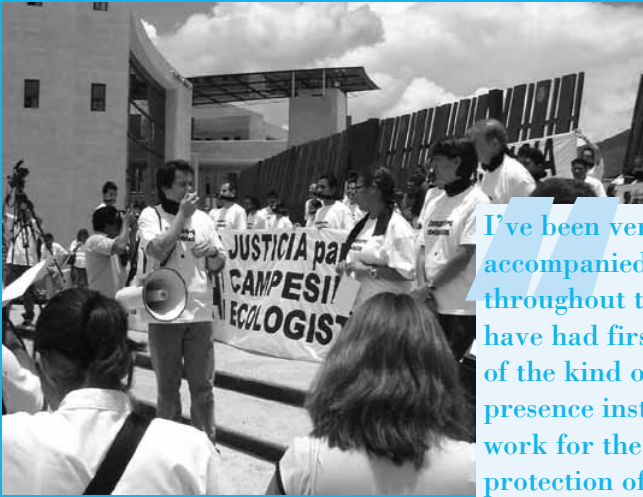
<sup>3</sup> From a 2001 external evaluation of PBI's Colombia Project by Cristine Iparraguirre and Javier Aguilar.

<sup>4</sup> Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) also managed long-term projects in Haiti, starting in 1993, and currently also sustains a presence in Colombia and Iraq. They have also implemented shorter-term projects and delegations in Chechnya and other conflicts.

<sup>5</sup> For more background on this idea, see Liam Mahony, "Unarmed Monitoring and Human Rights

Field Presences: Civilian Protection and Conflict Prevention," August 2003, in the Journal of Humanitarian Assistance, at [www.jha.ac](http://www.jha.ac), academic publications.

<sup>6</sup> The author is lead researcher for CHD's Unarmed Monitoring project and can be contacted at [liammahony@comcast.net](mailto:liammahony@comcast.net) for more information. More information about the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue can be found at [www.hdccentre.org](http://www.hdccentre.org).



Protest calling for environmental Justice, Mexico.

Participants in a PBI peace education workshop, Indonesia.



I've been very privileged to be accompanied by PBI... throughout the last two days I have had first-hand experience of the kind of security their presence instils in those who work for the promotion and protection of human rights in the most dangerous circumstances. As a human rights defender myself I'm well aware of the risks that defenders face...

Volunteer uses satellite phone to communicate in remote area, Colombia.



Accompaniment does not just mean protection, it means support to be able to continue the work that we do.

Hina Jilani, UN Special Representative for Human Rights Defenders after being accompanied by PBI in Colombia.



Dominga Vazquez, The Maya Foundation (Fundamaya), Guatemala and PBI UK volunteer winners of the International Service Human Rights Award 2006.



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