

How does Peace Brigades International work?

Peace Brigades International sends teams of volunteers into areas of conflict to 'make space for peace'.

We only go into countries where our international presence has been requested, and only then after a thorough study of the specific conflict and the political, social and economic context in which it is occurring. After that, we can assess whether PBI's presence would be effective in dissuading violence, or in persuading parties to a conflict to address their difficulties non-violently.

PBI's strength lies in its teams of volunteers who work at a grassroots level with communities and organisations experiencing violent conflict. PBI currently has projects in Colombia, East Timor and Mexico and is also part of a coalition working in Chiapas, Mexico.

The way PBI works to protect human rights defenders and/or transform conflict non-violently varies between its different projects according



PBI team member Gemma Planchart accompanies threatened trade union activist Debora Guzman, Guatemala, 1996. Photo: Piet van Lier

to the dynamics of the particular conflict and the kind of international support requested.

But in general, PBI uses three main tools:

- Protective Accompaniment
- Peace Education
- Observation, Analysis and Reporting

Everyday, PBI's field projects receive logistical support from a project office, and are managed by a project committee. There's also an international network of PBI country

group sections based in countries as far apart as Australia and Norway.

PBI UK is one such group. Our purpose is to support the PBI projects by:

- Recruiting and training volunteers
- Generating moral, political and financial support for the projects
- Raising awareness of human rights violations in the regions where PBI works
- Developing and activating a human rights alert network

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What is Protective Accompaniment?

PBI is widely recognised for its pioneering work in developing the use of protective accompaniment to safeguard human rights defenders who are under threat. It's an amazing system – and it really works.

Protective accompaniment is way of providing an escort to a threatened individual or organisation. This non-violent presence by an international volunteer acts as a deterrent to potential aggressor. It works on the premise that those threatening or carrying out violent acts are sensitive to international condemnation or pressure. The presence of an "unarmed bodyguard" is a deterrent to potential aggressors: they fear the inevitable political repercussions of their violence being witnessed by a foreign observer.

But to be most effective each volunteer is backed by an international network of concerned individuals, supporting organisations, government representatives and non-governmental bodies. With this support network behind it, PBI continuously informs potential aggressors of the international awareness of its presence with threatened individuals or organisations.

The network must also be ready to react to a human rights crisis situation and apply special pressure to prevent further acts of violence. In PBI this is co-ordinated through two emergency support networks - a grass-roots network called the Emergency Response Network (ERN) and a separate targeted network of high-level contacts known as the Red de Apoyo (RdA).

Protective accompaniment can take many forms. It can mean being with an individual 24 hours per day, being present in the offices of a threatened organisation, following a peaceful march or protest, or travelling with people in critical circumstances.

Understandably, people sometimes question whether this unusual method of human rights protection can really work, especially in the midst of violent conflicts such as those in Colombia where disappearances and murders are common. Although it can be difficult to demonstrate, after 17 years of working in the field, PBI's use of protective accompaniment shows that an international, non-violent presence can secure a peaceful space for activists struggling for peace, justice and the defence of human rights.



British volunteer Kerrie Howard accompanies Council of Ethnic Communities member Runujel Junam to an exhumation, Guatemala, 1991. Photo: PBI

"The work of PBI shows that the accompaniment of people who suffer from authoritarianism, intolerance and state violence is invaluable and necessary, making the struggle for human rights more effective and the dream of democracy into a reality. PBI leaves Guatemala with the satisfaction of a mission accomplished and with great challenges ahead in other places where its presence and accompaniment are needed as a moral force and support."

Rigoberta Menchú, Nobel peace laureate, goodwill ambassador for UNESCO, on PBI's closing of its Guatemala Project in 1999.

"More than 300 volunteers from many countries left their lives and comforts behind to accompany people whose lives had no value for other Guatemalans. Silently, daily, often through fatigue and stress they made good on the one thing necessary to achieve peace: 'to love thy neighbour as yourself'...thank you brothers and sisters for accompanying us for these 16 years. ... You made possible what to me in the darkest hours of our people seemed impossible: to save the lives of those destined for death by repressive forces."

Julia Esquivel, Guatemalan poet, 1999.

"I would like to pay tribute to the work of Peace Brigades International and to the bravery of their volunteers. Through their work, they are able to provide the sort of protection in Chocó Urabá and elsewhere [in Colombia] that armed forces cannot provide."

Tony Lloyd, Minister of State, in a statement to Parliament, 1999.

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Offering human rights defenders a measure of protection is one element of PBI's objective in providing an international presence. Encouraging people to handle conflict in peaceful ways by sharing knowledge and skills is another.

Over the years, PBI has learned a great deal about addressing conflicts non-violently. The organisation continues to model new ways of doing this through imparting what we know and learning how others do it. PBI projects that use peace education are generally responding to requests from local people for support in addressing a history of structural violence and finding new and more peaceful ways to deal with their conflicts.

PBI's teams of volunteers run conflict resolution workshops and other kinds of programmes with communities or groups of individuals, often in conjunction with local non-violence trainers. These sessions draw on local culture and the individual and collective experiences of the participants to explore alternative ways of managing conflict and to develop appropriate techniques that they can use in their communities and workplaces.

"These techniques of managing conflict through participatory methods - games, exercises, drama, case histories and discussion – allow everyone to excel, to grow, to discover themselves and to understand others."

Gracita Osias, Haitian participant in a conflict transformation workshop, 1998

By sharing knowledge and experiences, people can overcome fear and discover new self-confidence and dignity. They can also work on communication skills, and develop new methods of conflict resolution such as analysis, dialogue, mediation, negotiation and reconciliation. The kinds of people who attend these workshops include community leaders, social workers, members of grass roots organisations and individuals interested in non-violent social change.



Training for non-violence trainers in a PBI peace education workshop in Haiti. Photo: PBI

An essential part of the long-term success of PBI's peace education work depends on strengthening the capacity of local people to carry out non-violent conflict transformation work and pass these skills on to others. To this end, PBI runs "training for trainers" programmes, to build up a base of local non-violence trainers who can then take this work forward without the need for PBI's international presence. Themes that are explored include conflict analysis, non-violent action in the struggle against impunity, non-violent communication, participative ways to manage conflicts, and conflict prevention.

Evaluations of PBI's peace education programmes have indicated their effectiveness in mutual learning. These initiatives ensure that PBI's work has another dimension as well as the more immediate nature of its protective accompaniment programme; they help to create new hope in the communities where they are applied and provide lasting frameworks so that violent conflicts can be avoided in the future.

"As a result of the workshops we have greatly expanded our ways of dealing with conflict within our community so that people negotiate conflicts instead of picking up the machetes."

Haitian workshop participant, 1997

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Human rights violations occurring in another country are easily ignored and the people who try to defend themselves struggle to have their voices heard. PBI believes that a vital part of its work is to help those repressed voices reach out to people all over the world. Abuse thrives in silence, but by carrying out regular observation, analysis and reporting of conflicts and human rights situations, PBI can inform the world what is happening and encourage the international community to act.

PBI works at a grass roots level: a good position to monitor what is happening. In developing close contacts with local non-governmental organisations and local, regional and national authorities, and through working openly and objectively, PBI builds relationships that yield a great deal of valuable information.

PBI teams write regular reports reviewing socio-political developments and the changing state of human rights in a region, and these are disseminated throughout the national and international community.

These reports are politically non-partisan but promote the need for respect for human rights, adding a strong voice to local calls for the international community's support for justice and humanity. And they provide a valuable source of reliable information for other non-governmental organisations and diplomatic missions.

Consequently, PBI has had its work endorsed by a wide variety of governmental and non-governmental representatives.



Photo: PBI

"...I have worked closely with PBI's Colombia project since it began operations in 1994. I have no hesitation in vouching for the important contribution the project is making towards the improvement in the human rights situation in Colombia."

Susan Lee, Colombia Researcher
Amnesty International

"...the embassy, on behalf of the Government of Canada, appreciates and admires the work which you are carrying out, not only in Barrancabermeja but in the whole country. I have no doubt at all that you are saving lives and that you're giving critical support to Colombian NGOs who are fighting for a better and fairer Colombia. I think it is no exaggeration to say that the whole diplomatic community supports this work."

Nicholas Coghlan, Advisor
Canadian Embassy in Colombia.

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Below is a short list of publications produced by PBI.

For information on how you can obtain them, please contact the PBI UK office.

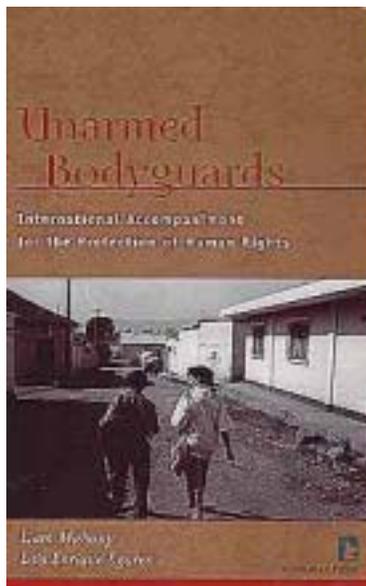
“Unarmed Bodyguards: International Accompaniment for the Protection of Human Rights”, Liam Mahony & Luis Enrique Eguren, £16.95 (1997, Kumarian Press)

PBI UK Newsletter, a quarterly newsletter providing updates on PBI's overseas projects and support work in the UK.

Peace Brigades International Annual Review, an annual account of PBI's work for peace and human rights.

Project Reports: various regular field reports available from PBI Project offices.

"In the Company of Fear", documentary video on threatened human rights defenders in Colombia and the work of Peace Brigades International in accompanying them, 1999.



“This book is a very touching testimony to the courage of the people who provided international protective presence for people in the extreme distress of terrorism, state terrorism, torture and death squads. With these profoundly humane acts of solidarity they not only saved lives but also shames many guns into silence. Read them, support them, join them!”

Johan Galtung, Professor of Peace Studies,
Director of TRANSCEND – A Peace Network

‘Unarmed bodyguards brings to life the stories of the persecuted and those who nobly stood with them’

Washington Post

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