



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



INFORMATION

Population:

36,444,000 million (1996 estimate)

Capital: Santa Fe de Bogotá D.C

Language: Spanish

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

Duration of conflict:

About 50 years

Main conflict participants:

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

Human rights violations:

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

Project website:

www.peacebrigades.org/colombia.html

Background

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

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

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

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The Project

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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Michael Beer, a member of the PBI Indonesia Project Committee, with East Timorese human rights activists, Indonesia, 1999. Photo: PBI

INFORMATION

Population: 200,453,000 (1996)

Capital: Jakarta

Language: Bahasa Indonesia

GNP per capita: £1,080 (1996)

Duration of conflict: Resistance to the incorporation of Papua (formerly Irian Jaya) into Indonesia from 1962 until the present day. An armed struggle for independence began in Aceh in 1976, with particularly serious levels of conflict since 1998, and continues today.

Main participants in conflict. Papua: Indonesian armed forces, police, paramilitary groups, OPM (Free Papua Organisation).

Aceh: Indonesian armed forces, police, paramilitary groups, GAM (Free Aceh Movement).

Human rights violations: Large numbers of internally displaced people, illegal detention, disappearances, extrajudicial killings and torture.

Project website:
www.peacebrigades.org/etp

Background

PBI was first invited to Indonesia in 1999 by human rights groups in East Timor where hundreds of thousands of people had been killed following the annexation of the area by Indonesia in 1975. Subsequently, PBI has sent teams of volunteers to Aceh and Papua (formerly Irian Jaya). Both are resource-rich provinces which have experienced violent conflict between armed independence movements and the Indonesian state.

The Project

The project was established in 1999 at the request of local non-governmental organisations in East Timor. PBI provided protection for Indonesian NGOs working in camps for internally displaced people around the border between West and East Timor. However, with the killing of three UNHCR workers in October 2000, the team, along with all other international organisations, were evacuated.

PBI then solidified their presence in Jakarta and continued communication with NGOs in West Timor. The Jakarta team continues to build and maintain our political support network with Indonesian authorities, foreign embassies and also meet regularly with local NGOs. In 2000, PBI received requests to work in Aceh and, following an assessment, set up an office in Banda Aceh.

PBI provided accompaniment to seven local NGOs in Aceh. These were a mixture of women's groups, legal aid and humanitarian organisations. In 2003, PBI set up a second office in Aceh in Lhokseumawe. However, martial law was declared in the province in May 2003 and all international organisations were ordered to leave in July.

In response, PBI set up an office in the nearby city of Medan to maintain close contacts with the NGOs in Aceh. This office is scheduled to close in November 2004 as the project focuses more closely on work in Jakarta to obtain permission to return to Aceh.

In March 2004, PBI opened an office in Jayapura, Papua, following requests from local NGOs. Work there is currently focused on building up relationships with local authorities and NGOs prior to carrying out protective accompaniment. The Indonesia project has also facilitated a number of peace education workshops, most notably in the island of Flores but also in Jakarta and North Sumatra. These have provided tools for participants to resolve conflicts in a nonviolent manner.

Current goals for the project involve re-establishing a presence in Aceh, beginning to carry out protective accompaniment in Papua and offering peace education workshops where there is a demand.

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INFORMATION

Population: 92,718,000 (1996 estimate)

Capital: Mexico City

Language: Spanish

GNP per capita: \$3,670 (1996)

Main participants in conflict: Human rights defenders and communities they defend under threat from Mexican security forces and paramilitaries.

Human rights violations: Forced dislocation, rape, torture, political imprisonment, death threats, extrajudicial killings, disappearances, illegal arrests.

Project website: www.peacebrigades.org/mexico.html

Background

In 1999, an exploratory PBI team evaluated the situation in Mexico, as they had received fifteen verbal and written invitations to initiate an accompaniment project in the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero.



They initiated a project whose aim is to work with organisations and individuals in these regions, distinct from the SIPAZ project work in Chiapas.

While the situation in Chiapas continues to be unstable, militarisation and human rights abuses in the Guerrero and Oaxaca have received far less attention both within and outside Mexico. Since 1996, two armed guerrilla groups (the Popular Revolutionary Army and the Revolutionary Army of Insurgent Peoples) have been active in these two impoverished states. Federal and state authorities have responded with joint military/police incursions into and occupation of hundreds of remote communities, in search of weapons and resistance.

The impact on civilians can be measured in the increased number of abuses reported by local human rights organisations, including incidences of forced dislocation, rape, illegal arrests and political imprisonments, death threats, extrajudicial killings, disappearances, torture, and a sense of terror expressed by victims' families.

The Project

It takes a great deal of time and energy to set up a new PBI project, and it's impossible to do without local help. But the Mexico Project has established a co-ordinating office in Washington DC, has raised funds, and is now fully functional.



PBI Mexico Project team members taking testimony from a human rights activist during the exploration period of the project, Mexico, 1999. Photo: PBI

Having received the first visas authorising them to carry out PBI activities, the Mexico Project volunteers began the accompaniment work in the state of Guerrero at the request of the human rights organisation "La Voz de los sin Voz" (Voice of the Voiceless). In order to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of PBI's accompaniment, the team met with government authorities, human rights commissions and security forces on the national and local level. Meetings with other organisations and human rights defenders were held on a regular basis in Mexico City, Guerrero and Oaxaca.

The team has grown to ten volunteers and a second office was opened in Acapulco, Guerrero, in March.

Production and distribution of our regular publications like the PIQ (Paquete de Información Quincenal) and the Project Bulletin continue and in addition a Project Brochure is published with general information about PBI in Mexico.

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