

Guatemala at a crossroads

by **James A. Rodríguez**
PBI volunteer, Guatemala Project

“When I was six years old, as my father and I walked one morning, we were ambushed by the army. He was taken away. I don’t know why I wasn’t taken as well; in those days, even children were disappeared,” recalls ‘Maria’ as we eat beans with hand-made tortillas and drink watered-down sweet coffee.

“He was very outspoken and wanted to help improve the situation of the people in town. That small ravine, right in front of my house, was a clandestine cemetery,” she continues.

“Every morning before 5, army trucks would pull up and dump dozens of bodies. I spent the next couple of years searching for my father’s body. I would get up and browse through the corpses. The soldiers began to recognize me, and would even greet me! [laughs] They probably thought I was a crazy little girl.”

Today, at 29 years old and a single mother of two, Maria herself is a highly threatened community leader. (Earlier on the day of our talk she had received two death threats over the phone.) Like many others struggling to find justice and improve living situations here in Guatemala, Maria has found it difficult to develop her work.

The safe political space human rights defenders need to operate seems to have shrunk in recent years. Hence, PBI decided to reopen the Guatemala Project in April 2003. PBI previously had a team in Guatemala for 16 years throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Since my arrival three months ago, things in general have been inspiring, difficult, and educational. Having grown up in Mexico City, I expected to find myself in a familiar environment here in Guatemala. I was surprised



Photo by Ingvild Daasvand (PBI volunteer, Norway)

James and Maria on their way to the exhumation of a mass grave in the Quiché highlands.

to find Guatemalan society generally more reserved and shy than other Latin American societies.

The indigenous factor cannot be ignored. Over 60 percent of Guatemalans belong to one of more than 20 indigenous groups. They have suffered the brunt of inequalities and atrocities these beautiful lands have witnessed over the centuries, and consequently there is a long tradition of distrust and reserved behavior towards foreigners and local ladinos.

More recently, the 36-year internal conflict has left people obviously weary. I perceive a general sense of fear and insecurity. It is not clear how much longer the gen-

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Travels in Arauca: USA Volunteer in Colombia Reports on Human Rights Abuses

by **Eric Schwartz**
Recently Returned PBI Volunteer,
Colombia Project

Arauca province, in north-eastern Colombia, has more than a few similarities to parts of the U.S. Endless plains interrupted by clumps of low trees; cattle herds alternating with farm crops; small towns connected by miles of empty roads. I saw Arauca's landscapes up close this July, accompanying the Bogota-based human rights group "Minga" as part of a commission of human rights NGOs.

Early on the morning of our trip to Arauca, a British volunteer and I met up with other members of the commission at the Bogota airport. We were surprised to see that the airport code for "Arauca," scrawled across our luggage tags, happens to be "AUC"—the same initials of Colombia's biggest paramilitary group. Colombia's 40-year civil war now pits left-wing guerrilla armies against the military and allied right-wing "paramilitary" groups.¹

In Arauca, like all of Colombia, civilians have been hardest-hit by the war. The AUC paramilitaries often target unionists, teachers and human rights workers. That's why Minga had requested accompaniment from PBI during the commission, which set out to investigate human rights abuses against children. The situa-



Photo by Sebastian Roeters

Volunteers from PBI Colombia's four teams gathered for a retreat in September.



Photo by Aaron Walburg

Eric Schwartz visits Berkeley, California as part of a national speaking tour.

tion in the region for human rights workers was especially delicate, because a similar commission had just released their report on a recent 36-hour long massacre by paramilitaries. The report roundly criticized both the paramilitaries, for the torture and killing of eleven civilians, and the Colombian military for doing nothing to stop them, in spite of having an army base only 20 miles away.²

After arriving at Arauca's tiny airport—and getting our first taste of the region's scorching heat—the commission rented a pickup truck and set out across Arauca's plains. Over the next three days, we saw the physical and psychological scars of years of political violence, alongside powerful evidence of communities' refusal to be silenced by that violence.

Where a U.S.-made rocket, dropped out of a U.S.-funded helicopter, killed 17 civilians—including six

children—in 1998³, we saw the monuments that the community had built to remember their dead. Later, we visited a tiny school where paramilitaries had left the beheaded bodies of two civilians during the recent massacre. The parent's association told the commission about the effects on their children who found the bodies the following day. In front of the school, the parents had raised a brightly-painted sign: "We want to live in peace." And in community after community, groups of people overcame their fear of reprisals and gathered to tell their stories to the commission.

Their reports of human rights abuses echoed countless similar stories from across Colombia. The commission's work to make those stories public was especially important now, given that the paramilitary group responsible for the massacre is supposedly in cease-fire and negotiating with the government.

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Guatemala

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eral population will wait for the now eight year-old peace accords to be fully implemented. Many believe the current presidency, which just took office in January, is under enormous pressure that could make or break stability.

Our work is highly stimulating. We have the unique opportunity to interact with some of the most involved and interesting people in Guatemalan society. In a week's work, it is not uncommon for a volunteer to meet with an ambassador in order to try to gain their support for our work, a syndicate leader to receive a petition for accompaniment, a small town mayor in a highland town to introduce our work regarding a local case, and spend a couple days accompanying an environmental activist in a remote region near the Caribbean. These are all invaluable experiences that come with the work. But unfortunately, the limited funds with which the PBI Guatemala project operates translates into many hectic days for volunteers in the field. Twelve, 14- and even 16- hour days are common.

Despite the highs and lows, I feel proud and extremely lucky to be working here. The daily interaction with such amazingly courageous people is something that will undoubtedly change my life. To think that my work and presence in this country helps local leaders like Maria gain a bit of working space gives me strength. I'm positive my year here will end without ever feeling there is nothing more to learn from people like Maria. ■

Photos from the Guatemala Project

by James A. Rodríguez



The family of an activist accompanied by PBI prepares breakfast.



The last battles of the internal conflict were fought in the misty hilltops in the background. Nebaj, Ixil region, Quiché Department.

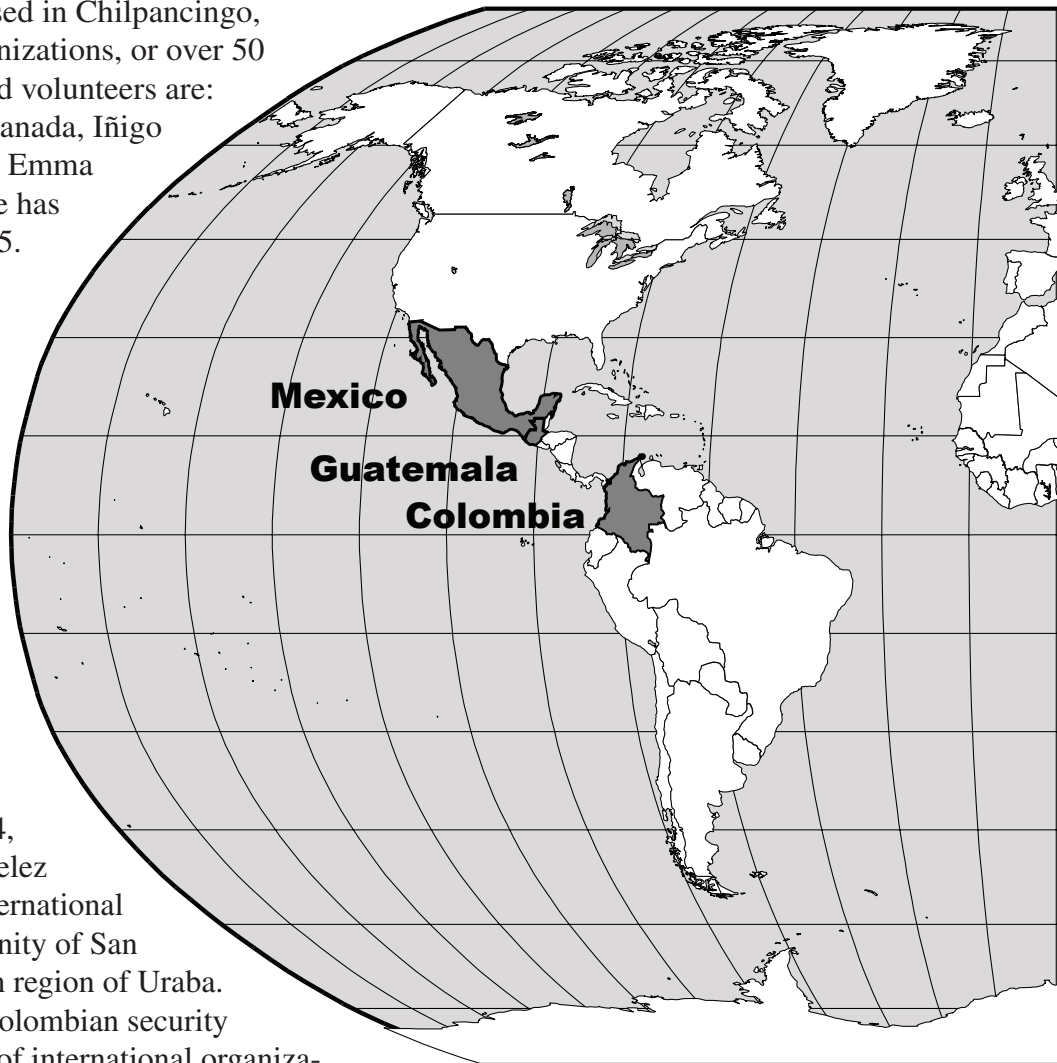
PBI Field Project Updates

Mexico Project: Our field team, based in Chilpancingo, Guerrero, protects six Mexican organizations, or over 50 human rights workers. Our four field volunteers are: Mona from Germany; Steve from Canada, Iñigo from Catalunya (Spanish State); and Emma from Italy. PBI's Mexico City office has closed. We hope to reopen it in 2005.

Guatemala Project: PBI re-established a six person team in Guatemala over a year ago at the request of local human rights groups (PBI had served there 16 years previously). An external evaluation and 37 interviews with PBI beneficiaries in March and April 2004 found a great need for Peace Brigades' presence, accompaniment work and information dissemination. The team is based in Guatemala City.

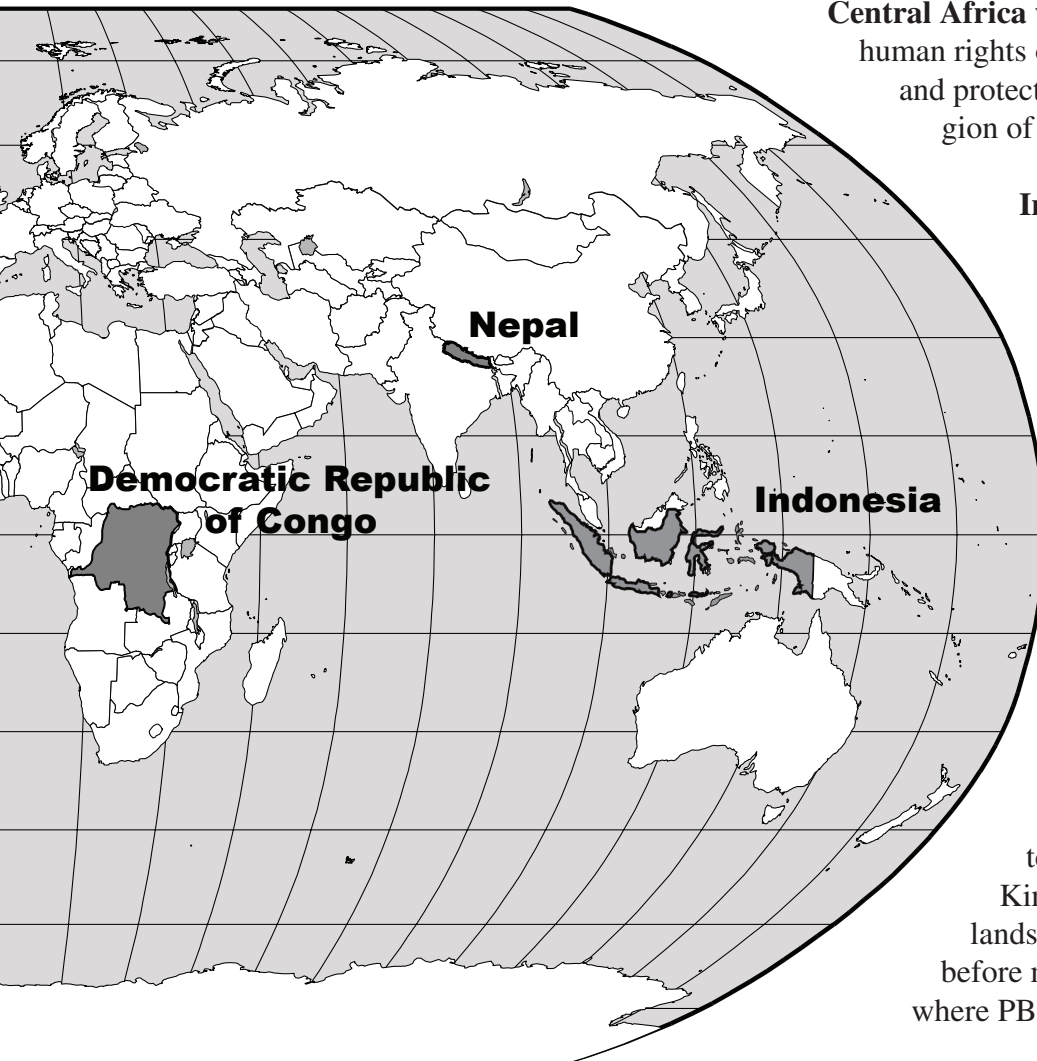
Colombia Project: In late May, 2004, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Velez publicly threatened PBI and other international groups working in the Peace Community of San José de Apartado, in the northwestern region of Uraba. Uribe stated that he had authorized Colombian security forces to detain and deport members of international organizations if they continue to allegedly encourage illegal activities and

“obstruct justice” in the Peace Community. Responding to this threat against our peace presence in Colombia, PBI activated our global networks of political support. The objective of activation was to catalyze international concern to prevent any possible hostile act carried out by Colombian State forces or paramilitary groups against PBI, other international organizations, or the Peace Community. Thanks to the impressive response from our supporters, the Colombian Vice President wrote a letter to PBI, with copies to embassies and the UN Office in Colombia, stating that PBI and other international NGOs will continue to enjoy the necessary guarantees for our work in Colombia.



Peace Brigades International (PBI) is a civil society organization (CSO) which protects human rights and promotes nonviolent transformation of conflicts. When invited, we send teams of volunteers into areas of repression and conflict. The volunteers accompany human rights defenders, their organizations and others threatened by political violence. Perpetrators of human rights abuses usually do not want the world to witness their actions. The presence of volunteers backed by a support network helps to deter violence. We create space for local activists to work for social justice and human rights.

PBI Field Project Updates



Central Africa workshops: PBI and other affiliated human rights organizations conducted two security and protection workshops in the Great Lakes Region of Africa. See the full article on page 6.

Indonesia Project: PBI Indonesia has 3 sub-teams. The Medan (North Sumatra) sub-team, consisting of volunteers from Poland, France, and the United Kingdom, is working to protect three women's groups, two legal groups and a humanitarian organization of a medical nature all based in Aceh. Our team in Jakarta is conducting conflict transformation trainings, supporting our field teams, meeting with embassies, and networking with other international civil society groups. Finally, in Jayapura, our team from the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands is establishing a strong presence before moving into rural areas of Papua, where PBI's accompaniment is needed.

Nepal Exploration: "PBI accompaniment may be useful to Human Rights Organization of Nepal members and field workers as they continue their work. The political climate in Nepal is risky, and any added security we can get is important." Based on this statement taken from a report by the Human Rights Organization of Nepal in early 2004 and other requests, PBI sent a multi-national fact-finding mission to Nepal in August 2004. The group spent most of their time in Kathmandu, but also visited the western city of Nepalgunj, which has been greatly affected by the country's eight year old civil conflict. The mission confirmed what Amnesty International, the U.N. and others had reported – that violence has taken over 9,000 lives and both the government's Royal Nepalese Army and Maoist insurgents are responsible for political violence and human rights atrocities. Nepalese human rights organizations and other civil society groups are working to alleviate the suffering and hold human rights abusers accountable. Their efforts are met with threats and direct violence. Nepalese civil society is desperate for international solidarity and PBI is actively looking for ways to help. Adequate funding will play a key role in PBI's ability to open a project in Nepal. Your support and suggestions are welcome.

PBI Meets with African Human Rights Defenders

by Lucho van Isschot

Member, Executive Committee, PBI, International Council

The Mai-Mai militia left Gégé Katana's house completely stripped. For months it sat unoccupied on the northern shore of Lake Tanganyika. It was not the first attack. Gégé has already been threatened, isolated, even detained. In spite of everything, she continues to coordinate a community-based network to end widespread violence against women in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

African activists like Gégé Katana are changing the way we think about human rights, peace and social justice. How do you protect human rights when there is no clear political authority? How do you build an international peace process from the ground-up? What does social justice mean to people who have suffered so much, for so long? How do you overcome the legacy of genocide?

Earlier this spring, PBI participated in an exploratory mission to Rwanda, the DRC and Burundi. It was PBI's first field experience in Africa, and a unique collaboration between different parts of PBI (PBI-Germany and the European Office) and other human rights organizations (Front Line and Privaterra).

Over a period of three weeks, three PBI representatives met with 40 Rwandan, Congolese and Burundian groups that focus on child soldiers, sexual violence, prison conditions, and many others. Our main goal was to assess the needs and concerns of locally-based human rights organizations, and the strategies they employ to defend themselves.

Africa's World War

The Great Lakes region of Africa – consisting of Burundi, the DRC, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda – has endured the most devastating armed conflict anywhere in the world since World War II. Between three and four million people have been killed in the DRC since 1998. In Burundi, war has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives in as many years. Meanwhile, in

Great Lakes Region of Africa



post-genocide Rwanda, civil society groups are struggling hard to establish an independent voice in favor of democracy and social justice.

After spending four days in Kigali, Rwanda, we traveled to the eastern Congolese province of South Kivu. The eastern DRC is an area where rebel armies challenge the Congolese government for military supremacy, and access to valuable natural resources such as copper, uranium, gold and diamonds. The human rights activists with whom we met are struggling to survive in a war fought on multiple fronts. Traveling in eastern DRC across neighboring rebel-controlled territories leaves activists vulnerable to threats from all sides.

Our host explained to us that his group's work to demobilize child soldiers is extremely difficult due to a lack

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Colombia

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These accounts resonated all the more strongly for me since the U.S. gave \$98 million in training and equipment to the Colombian army in Arauca last year, to protect the Los Angeles-based Occidental oil company's infrastructure.³

After returning to the U.S., I read that three Arauca union leaders had been killed by Colombian soldiers. The army and the Defense Minister claimed that the unionists were actually leftist guerrilla soldiers killed in combat. It could have very easily stayed at that. But two days later, a commission of Colombian human rights organizations, accompanied by PBI, went to investigate the deaths. They found that the three unarmed unionists had been dragged out of their houses and executed. The next day, thousands of people joined an enormous funeral procession to bury one the leaders in his rural hometown, a town I had visited. Local organizations and the United Nations urged the government to investigate.

Last week, the attorney general's office confirmed the commission's account and ordered three soldiers arrested for the murder of the unionists. It's a light of hope from the beautiful yet terrible landscape of northeastern Colombia.

¹ "The Sixth Division: Military-Paramilitary Ties and U.S. Policy in Colombia." Human Rights Watch, October 2001.

² Informe de la Comision de Verificacion de la Masacre de Tame (Arauca), June 2004.

³ "Colombia, A Laboratory of War: Repression and Violence in Arauca." Amnesty International, April 2004. ■



Photo by Lucho van Isschot

Gégé Katana and her group in the Democratic Republic of Congo, with PBI representatives.

Africa *Continued from page 6*

of basic resources that most international aid groups in the region take for granted (e.g. telephones, transportation, paid staff).

Accessing rural communities is another challenge facing local activists. But that isn't to say that the cities are trouble-free. One city-based activist said that for months he had been changing where he sleeps every single night.

We used every interview as an opportunity to discuss the role of the international community in supporting the work of local activists. The groups with whom we met noted many gaps and shortcomings particularly in the eastern DRC, where communication is made difficult by the fact that embassies are located more than 2,000 kilometers, or 1000 miles, away in Kinshasa. All groups seek greater support and attention

from international organizations, on the condition that they do not substitute or otherwise undermine local initiatives.

Security and Protection Workshops

The interviews were designed to provide insight into local conditions in preparation for two PBI-led security and protection workshops. Representatives from the Irish NGO Front Line and the Canadian security group Privaterra, along with Marie Caraj of the European Office and long-time PBI collaborator Quique Eguren presented to more than 40 activists in Bukavu and Goma.

After our trip we all met with our respective governments and shared our observations about the difficulties faced by human rights defenders in the Great Lakes region. PBI is in the process of deciding if we can undertake future work in the Great Lakes region. ■



PBI/USA Staff

Staff: Andrew Miller, Barbara Wien

Interns: Jennifer Chiodo, Lisa Franko,
Nicky Parkes

Board (NCC) Members:

Gina Amatangelo, Randy Divinski,
Angie Garling, Brenda Humphrey,
Carl Kline, Joe Morton, and
Paul Paz y Miño.

Newsletter Design/Layout:

Aaron Walburg

Printing Press: Paul Pearce,

Syracuse Peace Council Press

PBI OFFICE

(202) 544-3765

info@pbiousa.org

<http://www.peacebrigades.org>



(Left) Michael Fruhling, Director of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights in Colombia, speaks at the 10th Year Anniversary, a public event attended by 400 people.

(Top) A community leader from the Community for Self Determination, Life, and Dignity of Ca-carica (CAVIDA).

(Bottom) A view of the photo exposition showing ten years of Peace Brigades International in Colombia.

photos by Jorge Mata

PBI Marks 10 Years of Service in Colombia

This month marks 10 years of Peace Brigades working side-by-side with hundreds of peace and human rights activists in Colombia. More than 40 PBI volunteers serve on four sub-teams in Bogotá, Medellín, Barranca, and Uraba protecting 11 organizations and two peace communities (hundreds of residents). The greatest challenge facing the Colombia Project during this period is the judicial legal campaign to silence human rights defenders. The space for civil society groups is shrinking and the government's criticism of political organizing is growing. PBI, on the other hand, is gaining more and more support from Europe and the United States in favor of human rights defenders.

PEACE BRIGADES INTERNATIONAL

428 8th Street SE, 2nd Floor

Washington, DC 20003

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