COLOMBIA - In the Shadow of Peace, Human Rights Defenders Face New Threats

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May 15th, 2018 - Americas Program - Dec. 29, 2017 began like most days in San Josecito, the central settlement of the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, in Urabá, Colombia. Community members fed their livestock, went to tend to their crops, or helped sort and sell cacao in their community store. A man arrived to ostensibly sell cacao. A few minutes later four more men arrived. Community members recognized some of them as members of the self-denominated Gaitanista Auto-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC), an illegal armed group with rising power in the zone.

That morning, the men suddenly pulled out their guns to murder Germán Graciano Posso, the leader of the Peace Community. Members of the community rushed the would-be assassins, successfully disarming and detaining two of the men and saving their leader's life. They turned the two men over to the Attorney General´s Investigative Unit, but the men were released from custody shortly after. Despite the range of witnesses, the judge cited the need to release the men because the Peace Community did not file official testimony, which they did not do because of their rupture with the Colombian justice system for the alarmingly high rate of impunity they have suffered. Just four days later, with the community still reeling from the attack, the governor Luis Peréz of Antioquia dismissed it as something done by "just a couple of kids," even going so far to claim the community was "crying wolf."

I lived in San José de Apartadó all of 2017 as an international human rights accompanier with the Fellowship of Reconciliation Peace Presence. Located close to the border with Panama and the Caribbean coast, the Peace Community lies deep in the heart of a valley known for its fertile soil and reserves of oil, coal, and other precious minerals.

Urabá suffered decades of bloodshed during Colombia's armed conflict. As a stronghold of the guerrilla Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) for many years, the Colombian armed forces and paramilitary groups clashed with the guerrilla and terrorized the civilian population in a constant violation of their rights under international humanitarian law. As the FARC entered the demobilization process and left this rural region, we witnessed the AGC gain territorial control and social influence. Threats against Peace Community members increased, from general complaints about the Peace Community presence escalating to targeted death threats against leaders, specifically Germán Graciano Posso and Gildardo Turberquia, and the threats came to fruition in the attack on December 29th.

In early 2017, we began to see groups patrolling the area that were more military in their behavior. They wore camouflage with AGC insignia and carried high-power weapons. We also witnessed them talk openly of their goal to submit the entire region to their control. They sought to oversee the local community councils and to bring development to the zone, in particular to build highways that the Community fears will be used to open the zone to large scale mining. Later, we witnessed a shift to more clandestine tactics- some of the same AGC members who had been seen in camouflage now walked around in civilian clothing, going to the houses of people resistant to their control to threaten them individually, especially civilians who lead community councils, refused to grow coca, denounced the group's presence, or aligned with the Peace Community, which the AGC frequently threatened to destroy. The Peace Community emitted various public communiques about this threat, and the government Human Rights Ombudsmen's office also sent out a public report about AGC's growing social and economic control in the zone.

In the report, the Ombudsmen named Germán Graciano Posso and another leader, Gildardo Tuberquia, as

particular targets of the AGC. Just a week before the attack took place, the Peace Community sent out a communique in which they detailed that the AGC had threatened to kill Mr. Graciano and make it appear like a robbery. This is exactly what took place on Dec. 29. Although there was indignation on the national level, with many articles, television and radio interviews, and letters to the government about the attack on Mr. Graciano, the silence on the local level cloaked the on-going threat posed by the hitmen of the AGC. The Peace Community continues to emit communiques about AGC members moving freely on the public road near their settlement and in the surrounding rural areas, but the military and police response has been minimal. Patrols are sporadic, and few attempts have been made to break up the paramilitary organization, leaving the 200 members of the Peace Community on edge for further attacks.

Targeting Human Rights Defenders

The systemic targeting of grassroots leaders has rapidly become a hallmark of the period since the Peace Accords were signed between the FARC and the Colombian government at the end of 2016. According to the United Nations, over 100 community leaders were killed in 2017. The evidence suggests that they are targeted specifically for their human rights work. A key part of the peace agreement was land restitution, and many experts have repeatedly insisted on the importance of addressing unequal land distribution and in order to build lasting peace. However, many of those targeted have been land claimants and activists for communities working towards gaining the legal titles to their land, often in regions that have large swaths of territory that lack any official records of ownership. Without protection for social leaders and land claimants, there cannot be a sustainable peace in Colombia.

While it is difficult to determine who is responsible for these killings, research by the Foundation Peace and Reconciliation shows that they are occurring in historically violent regions where the demobilization of the FARC left a power vacuum that the Colombian government has not filled. Illegal paramilitary groups, such as the AGC, born out of the failed demobilization of the United Auto-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) in 2006, have stepped in to take over social control, territorial occupation and exploitation of natural resources. We witnessed this in San José de Apartadó. In this tense political moment, as Colombia prepares to vote for a new President, the communities most affected by changing power dynamics after the Peace Accords are even more at risk of violence.

The Government’s Responsibility

The AGC’s shift to more clandestine operations makes it even more difficult for the casual observer to track the connections, but that is no excuse for the Colombian government to deny their presence. Rather than building strategies to combat the new dynamics in the post-peace accords period, many government officials continue to dismiss the systemic nature of the killings. In December of 2017, the Defense Minister Luis Carlos Villegas claimed that, in the cases of murder of social leaders not committed by guerrilla groups, “the immense majority have been the fruition of affairs over boundaries, over skirts, over revindication, over fights about illegal rents.” This suggestion, that it is just squabbles between neighbors, is unacceptable and should be challenged by the international community. The Observatory for Human Rights of the International Human Rights Federation denounced the Minister’s comments as trivializing the attacks, and stated that his comments call into question the military’s ability to carry out their responsibility of guaranteeing the security of human rights defenders.

The Colombian government has a responsibility to investigate and prosecute members of armed groups such as the AGC in the assassination of community leaders and other illegal activities. It must immediately reinforce public security to effectively dismantle illegal armed groups. Foreign governments who support the peace accords must pressure them to do so. The European Union recently issued a strong statement publicly calling on the Colombian government to protect the Peace Community and fully investigate the attempted assassination on Dec. 29. The U.S. government should make similar public statements in support of human rights defenders. Until these leaders are protected and the illegal groups brought under control, this new period in Colombia can at best be called a shadow of peace.

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