

Columbia and Human Rights

by NINA ENGLANDER - The Nation

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"We will not raise our children for war," is the oft-repeated statement of the Popular Women's Organization (OFP), a group in Barrancabermeja, Colombia, that works with displaced communities to defend human rights. Yet an outspoken commitment to protect one's children can be enough to become a target of Colombia's violent political war.

On October 16, Esperanza Amaris Miranda, a leading member of the OFP, was abducted from her home in Barrancabermeja and murdered. The attack came after Miranda denounced paramilitary threats before the federal prosecutor. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights office, she was killed by three members of the paramilitary group Bloque Central Bolvar, an organization with close ties to the Colombian military.

Murder and abduction of social activists in Colombia is not uncommon. In the town of Barrancabermeja alone, there have been ninety-four assassinations and fifty-six kidnappings this year. Throughout the country, there were 6,067 murders, disappearances or combat deaths as a result of political violence between October 1, 1999 and September 30, 2000. Amnesty International reports that the number of deaths due to political violence has increased from 14 per day, in 2000, to 20 per day in 2003. In 2002, 172 trade unionists were killed, 164 received death threats and 132 were arbitrarily detained by authorities. Paramilitary groups, with the support of the Colombian armed forces, carried out many of these attacks.

Despite the extremely dangerous climate for social activism, the Colombian government continues to blatantly disregard human rights. Recent inflammatory statements by President Alvaro Uribe drive this point home. Speaking on September 8 before leaders of the armed forces at the inauguration of the new head of the air force, Uribe condemned human rights

workers in Colombia as "terrorist spokespeople." He derided unspecified human rights groups for hiding "their political ideas behind human rights," and he challenged activists to "take off their masks."

The inauguration ceremony of the new air force chief, Gen. Edgar Lesmez, was a particularly charged environment in which to make these accusations--the United States had pressured Lesmez's predecessor, Gen. Fabio Velasco, to step down because of his role in the 1998 Santo Domingo massacre, in which seventeen people were killed and twenty-five injured. Velasco is the first high-ranking Colombian military official to be pressured out of office by the US government, thus Uribe's choice of venue in which to challenge human rights concerns was symbolically significant.

Human rights groups and a few members of Congress have reacted strongly to Uribe's statements. Lisa Haugaard, executive director of the Latin America Working Group, notes that Uribe's "vague accusations could give the green light to those who would attack legitimate opposition politicians, union activists, human rights defenders and community leaders in the name of fighting insurgency." A September 22 letter from Representative Jan Schakowsky to Secretary of State Colin Powell (signed by nineteen members of the House) condemns Uribe's statements and urges Powell to make a "strong public statement dissociating the United States from President Uribe's remarks, indicating strong US concern with these statements, and asking him to protect, by his words and actions, human rights defenders and the broader non-governmental community in Colombia." Senators Dodd, Feingold, Leahy and Kerry sent a similar letter to the Secretary of State asking for a public statement from the US ambassador to Colombia and calling for a meeting between Powell and Colombian human rights groups. Neither the State Department nor the US Embassy in Colombia has made any public denouncement.

The failure of the US government to address Uribe's statements is especially disturbing in light of the extensive aid package to Colombia that passed in the Senate on October 30. The Senate version of the Foreign Operations Appropriations bill allocates more than \$550 million to Colombia. While the Senate Foreign Relations Committee did sponsor an October 29 hearing, in which Senator Feingold and others expressed concerns about human rights violations, the aid package passed without major debate. Lack of deliberation over foreign aid to Colombia, one of the largest recipients of US material support, is not a new phenomenon--the Senate has not discussed Colombia policy since Senator Bob Graham offered an amendment to increase aid in 2001. Of the \$2.04 billion the United States gave to Colombia between 1999 and 2002, 83 percent has gone to Colombia's military and police.

The foreign aid bill does pay significant lip service to human rights concerns. The Senate version of the bill mandates that the US government must withhold up to 50 percent of military aid if the Colombian government refuses to comply with specified human rights conditions. The conditions state that the government must suspend, investigate and prosecute any member of the armed forces alleged to have committed gross violations of human rights; the military must make "substantial progress" in cooperating with civilian prosecutors and judicial authorities, and in severing ties with paramilitary groups.

Human rights groups, the UN High Commissioner and even State Department reports extensively document the Colombian government's continued violations of the conditions specified in the foreign aid bill. The 2002 State Department Human Rights report notes that the Colombian government's "human rights record remained poor," and the UN High Commissioner cited an increase in abuses by government security forces in his February 2003 report on human rights in Colombia. Both reports identified continuing collaboration between the military and paramilitary groups.

Yet the State Department, ignoring some of its own human rights reports, continues to assert in its annual Memorandum of Justification that the Colombian government is complying with all conditions necessary for aid. The department has certified positively every year except once, when President Clinton waived the conditions "in the interest of national security." The waiver provision was later dropped. According to Kimberly Stanton, deputy director of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), the State Department validates its certification by using narrowly defined criteria and interpreting the law in the strictest possible manner.

A joint report by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and WOLA outlines, condition by condition, how the Colombian government is failing to comply with its obligations, citing copious examples of collaboration between the military and paramilitary groups. Stanton acknowledges that while providing an important framework for analysis, the conditions have had little to no impact on the amount of aid provided. Adam Isaacson, senior associate at the Center for International Policy, goes even further, calling the conditions a "fig leaf."

Despite President Uribe's outward disdain for the human rights conditions purportedly necessary for his government's funding, US aid continues to flow. While the September 29 Senate hearing on Colombia is a step in the right direction, it provides little solace to the family of Esperanza Amaris Miranda and other social activists who continue to work in a climate of terror.

