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STOP the war in Colombia! STOP US military intervention! STOP biological warfare!

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U.S. Fuelling the Fires in Colombia

by Héctor Mondragón

Congress has allocated \$1.3 billion to the government of my country for Plan Colombia whose ostensible purpose is to destroy illegal crops. Eighty four percent of the money is destined for military aid, primarily Huey and Black Hawk helicopters. Both Democrats. and Republicans supported the plan and their districts will reap the profits from the sales.

The alleged aim of Plan Colombia is the spraying of the illegal crops. But in reality, the spraying not only hasn't reduced the area in which illegal crops are grown in Colombia, but has actually increased it. In 1999, spraying destroyed 16,000 hectares of coca and poppies, but the cultivated area increased .to 22,000 hectares. So 38,000 more hectares of illegal crops are newly being cultivated.

The reason is simple. It's the only way out for thousands of peasants and day labourers. The liberalisation of the Colombian economy, under the direction of the WTO, has meant that crops previously grown in Colombia are now imported. This has ruined the farmers. The area devoted to legal crops diminished by 1,500,000 hectares, while agricultural imports increased by 700 percent. Colombia today imports coffee because its harvest declined from sixteen to nine million sacks. The people who planted and harvested the seven million sacks of coffee that are no longer cultivated are planting and harvesting heroin poppies instead.

Plan Colombia's explicit goal is the strengthening of free trade through the WTO, which turns out to be the best way to ensure the continued existence of illegal crops. The peasants whose lands have been sprayed need to subsist, so what they do is sell their sprayed farms to a landowner or a narcotic traffickers who converts them to cattle ranches. The peasants meanwhile head off into the wilderness to cut down more of the rainforest. In order to subsist, the peasant has to plant more coca than before because the cost of producing it is higher on his new lands into the forest.

The spraying only serves to do what has always been done in Colombia - to take the land away from the peasants, the indigenous peoples and the Afro Colombian communities so it can be given to the large landowners. The violence in Colombia is closely linked to the concentration of land ownership. During La Violencia between 1948 and 1958, the conservative government tried to exterminate liberals, communists, and protestants too. But this led to the massive displacement of the rural population. 400 thousand families, in other word 2 million peasants.

The abandoned lands were snatched up by several political gamonales. In the Cauca Valley -the region with the greatest number of displaced families: a total of 100 thousand - and in the upper Magdalena Valley, large landowners took over peasant lands to establish sugar cane plantations and mills, and large-scale cotton cultivation. For example, in Tolima, cotton production increased from 4 to 16 million kilograms from 1950 until 1955, all of this through violence. This Violence left 200 thousand dead (158,000 deaths occurred between ,1946 and 1953).

A similar process is at work today. With the worsening of violence in Colombia over the past 17 years, there is an accelerated process of land concentration in the hands of large owners. But simultaneously with this aggregation of land, was a dramatic reduction in the area of land that is cultivate. Many large properties are dedicated to extensive cattle ranching (rather than crop production).

National farming survey and cadastre (or land census data) captured this reality: latifundia had 32% of registered land in 1984; 36% in 1988; 43 % in 1996 and 45% in 1997. Large estates are again coming into existence at alarming rates. In 1986 I already had data to track the beginning of this process of concentration: The average land area of estates larger than 1,000 Hectares increased; Land concentration increased in the Cauca Valley and in Barrancabermeja, Middle Magdalena.

Today, the concentration is accelerated in Bolivar, Cauca Valley, Quindio, Caquetá, Putumayo, Meta, Casanare and Chocó. The latifundium re-expansion took place due to the following factors:

- the expansion of the armed groups, massacres and war have caused the displacement of populations and have supported processes of concentration of the land property in the hands of the leading drug traffickers, cattle dealers and speculators;
- the economy of the narcotic traffickers produced a new level of land buyers and large estate owners that, in turn, elevated the interest rates producing more speculation;
- the free trade or open economy increased the importation of foods by 700%. This open economy also caused a drastic reduction in cultivated land area, especially in cereals. Inclusive, Colombia now imports coffee !

All of these produce a massive exodus of peasants and day labourers. A part of this exodus goes to illegal coca and poppy crops in colonisation zones.

The distribution of the cultivated area according to the size of the property is extremely skewed in Colombia; head over heels. Small properties had 44% of cultivated area in only 15% of total area. Large properties had only 9% of cultivated area in 43% of total ground. More land, less cultivation.

The slow process of Colombian agricultural modernisation has not produced a reduction in the rural population in absolute terms, nor in the number of peasants. Although the rural population has been reduced in relative terms, it has continued increasing in absolute terms from 6 million people in 1938 to 12 million people at present time. The same has happened with the economically active population of the farming sector. It was 1.9 million people in 1938, and by 1993, it had grown to 2.7 million. Even more, the "independent" rural workers (peasants or farmers) increased from 600 thousand in 1938 to 700 thousand in 1964 and to 800 thousand in 1993.

Dogmatic economists have argued that Colombian development requires the end of peasant cultivation. For example Lauchlin Currie, who was the adviser of four Colombian Presidents, including the father of the current President Pastrana.

The Lauchlin Currie development vision has been guiding the Colombian official plans for 50 years. Currie considered an historical mission to break the peasant economy. "There are too many people dedicated to agriculture," he wrote, and the Government repeats at present time. Currie wrote that, for development, "probably violence and kidnapping are most serious deterrents and, of course, the competition of primitive type farming".

Currie planned to eliminate the "inefficient traditional farmers" who cultivate "marginal lands in uneconomic-sized holdings" and exterminate their "unrestrained competition". Currie named his theory "the breakthrough".

But few considered an alternative solution that would place the peasantry at the centre of the economic and social development. This could happen if they were equipped with means of suitable production and allowed to develop their own associative forms and their own enterprise initiatives.

A result of the open economy is the globalisation of the agrarian problem. Lauchlin Currie knew that the moment would arrive at which the high agricultural and cattle productivity of the United States, Europe and their enclaves would face the peasant economies. Soon this result cannot be considered unexpected.

The peasantry not only faces problems of the "landlord system", but also comes up against transnational capital and its model of globalisation. Both of which seek "to cleanse" the territory of "inefficient and "not viable" peoples and is trying to do so by means of war. Now, it would seem that the moment has arrived to break the peasant economy. The open economy, and the New Violence with the great mass of 1.8 million displaced people, announces it.

The oil, mining, electrical and road building sectors are pushing people off the land, resulting in an agrarian counter-reform. Legal and illegal measures are used to expropriate peasant, Indigenous, and African Colombian communities who live around the megaprojects and near biological and genetic exploration areas in different sites of the country. For example, in this moment Occidental Petroleum is expropriating U'wa people lands.

Such as Lauchlin Currie would say: "the war took the place of a deliberate program of accelerated mobility...not by natural economic forces but by a crash program. This is truly a breakthrough". Or as the Governor in the Colombian novel "The Vortex": they killed "in order to suppress competition"; the peasant competition.

This is the Social Genocide that Colombia suffers, the worst genocide: Not only that people have been displaced by war, but also more importantly, this war is being made specifically to displace people.

The displacement of peasants, Indians and Afro-Colombians that is happening today is an enormous social genocide. There were 425 massacres last year. This year, for example, the area near Chevron's oil explorations in the Caribbean Coast region has been cleansed of peasants and Afro Colombian communities.

In 1999, half the union leaders assassinated in the world were Colombians. Since 1987, five presidential candidates have been assassinated, as have 3500 opposition activists. The violence is consistently directed against every attempt to construct effective alternatives.

When there were not guerrillas this method was disguised about preventive counter-insurgent programs according to the School of Americas doctrine, but that programs caused the guerrilla's insurgence. At present time the counter-insurgency doctrine advice to kill and continue the massacres. But the real effect is the increase of guerrilla forces and the liquidation of all legal opposition.

This explains why the regime still continues today. The liquidation of all political alternatives different from bossism has been an essential characteristic of the Colombian contemporary history, inclusively before

Guerrilla's insurgence . For example, Jorge Eliécer Gaitan was the most important alternative popular leader of Colombia in the Twentieth century. He was murdered on April 9th, 1948, when he went to win the presidential elections. This murder began the period known as La Violencia and is related to the armed conflict that the country still undergoes today.

The establishment of the "National Front" - formed in 1957 by the two traditional parties (the liberals and conservatives) to settle the war between them - ought to have opened the way for real multi-party democracy.

But the reality of continuing violence and assassinations has demonstrated that bossism can tolerate neither multi-party politics nor grassroots opposition. An example is the political genocide against the Patriotic Union U.P. since its creation in 1985. But this also had antecedents in the liquidation of the councilmen of the National Union of Opposition, named UNO in the 1970s. .

The Colombian priest Javier Giraldo calls this, "Genocidal Democracy", or as the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano refers to it as the "democratorship". Instead of U.S. Government and Congress named this "the oldest democracy of Latin America".

But, why do U.S. authorities support Plan Colombia? It has much grander objectives than selling helicopters. The principal one is oil, whose prices are on the rise on the world market.

Since 1999 Colombia has greatly increased its contracts with U.S. Canadian and British oil companies: Occidental Petroleum, BP-Amoco, Chevron-Exxon, Shell, Canadian Oxy, Talisman and Alberta Energy. The main area targeted, by Plan Colombia, in the Putumayo, has been delivered millimeter by millimeter to the oil companies.

In October 1999, Colombian President Andrés Pastrana met in Houston with executives of the principal oil and electric energy companies and with Governor George W. Bush. He promised them major concessions for oil and gas exploration and the privatisation of electrical companies, some of which already belong to Reliant Energy.

In addition, Occidental Petroleum (Oxy), in which Vice President Gore's family is a major shareholder, lobbied Congress in support of Plan Colombia. Oxy is expropriating the lands of the U'wa nation in north-east Colombia in order to dig exploratory wells there. The region was militarised on the day Plan Colombia was inaugurated in order to guarantee the expropriation and disregard the Uwa's titles to the area and their constitutional rights.

Canadian Oxy is a co-signer of the largest oil contract in Colombian history, in the Sumapaz region, near Bogota, which was declared a war zone the same week that Plan Colombia went into effect. It also has a contract in Putumayo.

During Congress discussion of Plan Colombia, Senators Dewine, Grasseley and Coverdell urged the US Congress to give priority to oil investment. In an April 2000 Washington Post article, Coverdell wrote that the necessity of protecting oil interests in Venezuela (!) justified U.S. intervention in Colombia! .

The Venezuelan government, under Hugo Chavez, has recently directed OPEC to regulate the market in favour of the exporters. Venezuela's new administration, with a huge electoral majority, has put forward important social and political reforms. These reforms, in addition to Chavez recent visit to Iraq, and Cuba have caused Washington and the oil interests to look with disfavour on him.

On October 17, the Colombian press began to report alleged border incidents with and military attacks from Venezuela. This press offensive is preparing public opinion for a fabricated Colombian-Venezuelan conflict that would convert the U.S. intervention in Colombia into an intervention against the Venezuelan government.

Oxy vice President Lerry Mariage demanded that Plan Colombia be executed on the Colombia-Venezuela border in the area of Oxy's contract - U'wa territory -.and in Catatumbo, which is the area of a new BP-Amoco contract that the paramilitaries are "cleaning up."

Ecuador too is threatened. The U.S. is constructing the Manta Military Base there. Manta, along with another NATO base in the Dutch Antilles, will fill the role that the bases in Panama previously filled.

Ecuador is also a big producer of oil. Its indigenous movement is strong and aspires. to rule the country, something which is seen as a danger by the transnationals. Plan Colombia is gasoline poured on a fire that can ignite a huge war in South America.

In fact, there's a lot of popular activity in the region, and the powerful are getting scared. In Brazil, the Labor Party has just won the mayoral elections in one-third of the municipalities, including Sao Paulo, the largest city in the country. In Peru, Fujimori's dictatorship is collapsing, and the peasants and indigenous people are beginning to create independent movements. In Bolivia, the peasants toppled the Banzer government, which wanted to privatise water. Another reason for the confrontation in Bolivia was the spraying of the illegal coca crops. The Bolivian government was forced to accept negotiation.

Instead of trying to destroy rural communitarian dynamics, we could treat it as an enormous economic and political power able to cause transformations from the base of the society. It is necessary that the peasant be considered a strategic element when defining the function of the peasant economy and native cultures (indigenous and black).

Real support of Colombia would entail changing the commercial treaties so that the U.S. buys, at a fair price, agricultural products rather than cocaine and heroin, it would entail supporting a program of agricultural reform that gives the peasants six million agricultural hectares, which now lie idle. It would entail a respect for the land and rights of the

indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples. And finally, it would mean creating programs that allow rural communities to preserve the forest and defend the environment according to the terms of the World Biodiversity Convention.

Supporting Colombia means refusing military aid to a corrupt political class, an oligarchy that controls the land and political power and sustains itself through a political machine controlled by special interests, the continuous robbery of State money and especially through assassinations and massacres, hypocritically executed through paramilitary groups. What Colombia needs is a democratic peace agreement based on social and political reforms.

The alternative to war is to allow and to promote the massive participation of the peasantry in the development model, not only the marginal participation of a few farmers favoured by patronage, clientage or related programs as part of the war policy. The real problem of participation is access to power and the distribution of wealth.

As long as peasants cannot participate directly of decisions, including those that are taken on international trade treaties and which affect their lives, participation will not be real.

'The goal is not " to conserve" what exists; this means to conserve the poverty and years of domination over the peasants, African-Colombian and indigenous peoples. Instead the goal is to change from the model of domination to one of democratic and direct participation that will promote farmer development and native cultures as part of a new national economy. This is worthy of our own lives!

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