

COLOMBIA

Justapaz thanks people of the U.S. for their solidarit

RRN letter July 14, 2007

The Mennonite Church of Colombia and
Justapaz, the Christian Center for a Just Peace and Nonviolent Action

March 2008

Sisters and Brothers,

Greetings from Justapaz and the Mennonite Church of Colombia. Last fall thousands of people and churches committed to prayer and communication with their Congresspeople on behalf of the Colombian Mennonite Church justice and peace ministry, Justapaz, which along with other civil society organizations, suffered break-ins and theft of information, putting people and their ministry at risk. **We want to express our heartfelt gratitude and tell you that we believe that your outpouring of political and spiritual support created the grace Justapaz staff has experienced since then in being able to continue its work without suffering additional harassment.**

Delegates from Mennonite Church USA sent a letter to Congress, and Justapaz received an emergency accompaniment delegation organized by Witness for Peace. With your encouragement, the United States Congress sent a letter to Colombian President Uribe and high-level US State Department officials spoke with the Colombian government on behalf of affected churches and organizations. Your intervention was critical in positioning the issue here in Colombia and securing ongoing meetings at a high level.

Colombian peace churches have denied fear its victory and feel your support; they continue their work undeterred by these acts.

We would like to give you further update on developments in recent months. Sembrandopaz, a sister organization led by former Justapaz director, Ricardo Esquivia, as well as a Christian indigenous development and peace organization, both of which work closely with the Peace Commission of the Evangelical Council of Churches of Colombia, CEDECOL, have suffered break-ins and information theft, respectively, since June of last year. Also, staff members from two civil society organizations earlier affected by information thefts have suffered persistent, personal death threats.

We have not seen evidence that the government of Colombia has advanced in identifying the material or intellectual authors, nor has it taken steps to make highly visible its rejection of these actions or to implement campaigns to put an end to political crimes such as these.

By failing to fully address these political crimes, the government of Colombia implicitly permits impunity. The lack of effective action by the government to investigate, to publicly disavow and to promote respect of human rights work sends a message to the perpetrators that speaks louder than the formal "guarantees" the government offers. In this way there is no effective deterrence of this violent intimidation. The perpetrating persons and organizations are neither confronted with the wrongness of their actions nor invited to repent and repair the damage committed.

In July of 2007 the affected churches and organizations made a number of recommendations to the government of Colombia that, we believe, would help strengthen respect for human dignity and citizen participation in democracy in Colombia. Steps taken to date by the government of Colombia demonstrate only a superficial compliance and do not approach the spirit of our recommendations. We

interpret the inadequate political and judicial response to demonstrate a lack of genuine interest in collaboration and an absence of political will to promote transparency, human rights and participatory democracy.

We have at times felt worn down by unfulfilled governmental promises and postponed meetings, by the lack of visible progress in the investigations, by the continued death threats to colleagues, and all in the context of years of armed conflict. We identify with the words of the apostle in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, "We often suffer, but we are never crushed. Even when we don't know what to do, we never give up. In times of trouble, God is with us, and when we are knocked down, we get up again."

We want to share with you some of the questions we are asking ourselves as we consider next steps:

- What should we expect from a democratic government?
- To what extent should we trust the government?
- What methods should we in the church employ as we witness to human dignity before the State and seek authentic transformation to Christ's nonviolent way of peace in this situation?
- What are the implications of ongoing US military support of the Colombian government in light of these systematic violations and impunity?
- In what ways can Christian citizens of the US confront and seek to transform these policies?
- What message would Canada and the US send to Colombia should they approve Free Trade Agreements with Colombia?

We invite you to consider the following actions:

PUBLIC WITNESS

- Engage the Colombian government in pursuit of justice and transformation. If you feel so called, draft a letter based on the sample letter below. Please send copies to those members of your governments listed below and Justapaz.
- Learn about the reality of Colombian peace churches through the four-part study guide of the "A Prophetic Call, Colombian Churches Document Their Suffering and Their Hope, Edition 2."

PRAYERS

- For Colombia's churches—May they know wisdom, clarity and determination as they seek to be faithful in witnessing to the Way that leads to true peace in an uncertain and tumultuous environment;
- For the Colombian government and other armed groups—May they repent of their warring ways, seek a negotiated solution to the armed conflict, and commit to a genuine process of justice and reparation.
- For US and Canadian governments—May they prioritize justice and wellbeing of all of God's children over perceived military and economic national interests.
- For the victims—May they know protection from those who persecute them, justice in the face of the wrongdoing they have suffered, and healing of their physical, emotional and spiritual wounds.
- For all Colombian, US and Canadian citizens—May they experience transformation from greed, resentment and faith in military solutions.

The above actions and prayers are meaningful ways to participate with Colombian, US and Canadian Churches in Days of Prayer and Action for Peace in Colombia. Additional resources and materials are available at the Mennonite Central Committee website at <http://mcc.org/us/washington/days/>

Justapaz and the Mennonite Church of Colombia understand seeking justice and building peace to be integral parts of following Christ. We invite you to be a part of the Colombian church testimony through sharing this letter with others, joining in witness and praying for messengers of reconciliation throughout the world.