

Colombia's Political Prisoners

By James Jordan

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Colombian President Álvaro Uribe says there are no political prisoners in his country—but I visited at least ten. On three different occasions I went to Pavilion Six of the Buen Pastor Women's Prison in Bogotá in July and August, once alone and twice as part of a delegation. I was representing the Campaign for Labor Rights/Alliance for Global Justice (CLR/AfGJ) and the International Network in Solidarity with Colombia's Political Prisoners (INSCPP).

Particularly, we were there to visit Lilianny Obando, who was the first person arrested and will be the first to stand trial as a part of the “farc-politica” process—a process of accusing human rights activists of ties to the guerrillas that has opened up a new wave of repression against the Colombian opposition and has fueled accusations regionally against the governments of Venezuela and Ecuador. We also visited with the family of Miguel Angel Beltran, who was the second person arrested under this process. Some 12 or more persons have been or are being



Sociologist Lilianny Obando, who worked for FENSUAGRO, is a political prisoner at Buen Pastor Prison.

investigated, including elected officials, academics, and labor rights advocates.

Obando is a professor of sociology and a documentary film maker, and, at the time of her arrest, was acting as a consultant for FENSUAGRO, Colombia's largest union of farmers and rural workers. She was arrested the very week she released a study detailing the murders of over 1,500 FENSUAGRO members

and leaders by the military and paramilitaries. Beltran is also a sociologist who was pursuing post-doctoral studies at the Autonomous National University of Mexico (UNAM).

One of the main reasons for the “farc-politica” is to divert attention from the “para-politica,” which has linked some 80 members of Congress and allies of the Uribe Administration to the paramilitaries, including 42 Representatives sent to jail for participating in events that led directly to assassinations by the paramilitaries. Over 200 persons elected to non-Congressional offices are also under investigation. The paramilitaries are responsible for the great majority of violence in Colombia. During our delegation, we often heard reports that those who wear military uniforms by day wear paramilitary garb by night.

The “farc-politica” really is a farce-politica. To see what a sham it is, we have to go back to March 1, 2008, when the Colombian military invaded Ecuador to bomb a Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP) camp. This was the camp working out details for the unilateral release of captives. Raul Reyes, the FARC second-in-command was killed in that raid. He was responsible for peace and prisoner release negotiations. This air raid constituted an attack on the peace process itself and should be seen as part of a series of measures the Colombian government has taken to derail any negotiations.

At the heart of this conflict is the removal of *campesino*, indigenous, and Afro-Colombian populations in order to clear land for transnational corporations. Peace negotiations, with the FARC's focus on demanding agrarian reform, would put an end to the ongoing land grab—so the current Colombian government really has no interest in pursuing a peace process. Under Uribe,

an additional 1.5 million rural people out of a total of 4.5 million internal refugees have been displaced. Meanwhile, between 2.66 and 6.8 million hectares of land have been seized and handed over to mining, oil, biofuel, and agribusiness interests, much of it in the hands of paramilitary leaders. What is happening now in Colombia is land reform in reverse.

Allegedly recovered from this air raid were two apparently “magical” computers said to have belonged to Reyes. According to Colombia’s investigative police, the computers contained some 39 million Word Files, which the international police agency, INTERPOL, said would take 1,000 years to read at the rate of 100 pages per day. If this evidence is credible, Reyes must have spent every waking moment typing away at a computer keyboard and creating file after file after file! The only thing more amazing is how quickly the Colombian authorities were able to sort through this staggering number of documents to come up with so many charges and investigations against so many in such a short amount of time!

INTERPOL also said that files on the computer could not be authenticated and that “Access to the data contained in the eight FARC computer exhibits did not conform to internationally recognized principles for handling electronic evidence by law enforcement....” Indeed, the computers were in the hands of the Colombian authorities from March 1st until March 10th before they were handed over for examination.

Most the investigations and charges made as a part of this farce-politica have been based on the existence of supposed emails between Reyes and others. However, according to the testimony of Investigative Police Captain Ronald Hayden Coy Ortiz, who first accessed the computers and oversaw the investigation, the computers contained *no emails*...only Word documents.

Charges against Obando are based on the alleged emails. She is charged with raising money for the FARC through international visits on behalf of FENSUAGRO. Her second charge is that



Academic Miguel Angel Beltrán, center in white, is being transferred to a penitentiary.

of rebellion. However, the money she raised is traceable and the so-called evidence against her is not credible. If she loses her case, we can expect to see more charges against others based on these computers. If she wins, the whole farce-politica falls like a house of cards in a hurricane. Also, her case is being used to try to shut down FENSUAGRO and paint it as a front for the FARC. As a strong advocate for agrarian reform, FENSUAGRO is the most targeted union in Colombia.

The basis for Miguel Angel Beltran’s arrest has not yet been fully revealed, except to say that charges stem from “evidence” found on the

computers and, perhaps more ominous, from his own academic writings and studies. Canadian academic, unionist, and International Network member, James Brittain, writes “The basis of this tremendous threat has been that as an academic some of Beltrán Villegas’ work has been to evaluate the role of the state and the FARC-EP amidst the country’s half-century of civil war. While several of his peer-refereed publications raise questions about the classification of belligerent forces and armed ideologically-led political movements being inappropriately categorized as terroristic, it is highly disturbing that such critique is considered to be a revolutionary act. Beyond that, state authorities claimed Beltrán Villegas promoted the FARC-EP internationally and had articles published on what the state deems to be “pro-rebel Web sites” (CCTV, 2009). Is this really what it takes to arrest and incarcerate someone in Colombia?”

Directly behind all this repression in Colombia is the US government, which funds and directs the Colombian military. The US government has supplied over \$7 billion in military aid through Plan Colombia – a program Clinton sold to Congress as an anti-drug program and which the Bush and Uribe regimes converted into an anti-insurgency offensive, greatly increasing forced

displacements and military/paramilitary human rights abuses in rural Colombia. Even under the “hope and change” promised by the Obama Administration, the aid goes on. Indeed, the State Department recently gave approval for the release of millions of dollars in aid based on the Colombian government’s “improvement” in human rights, despite rises in political assassinations, displacements, and arbitrary detentions. Under a recent agreement with the Obama Administration, Uribe would permit the United States long-term access to three air bases, two army installations and two naval ports.

The Obama Administration has committed itself to passage of a US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement, which would in effect seal the theft of land that has been taking place. The silence of the Obama Administration and the US government regarding the farc-politica and the existence and condition of Colombia’s political prisoners is the silence of complicity.

Unfortunately, much of the US Colombia solidarity movement echoes Uribe’s logic that guerrillas are not political prisoners, only terrorists, and unwittingly gives credibility to the “military solution” rather than peace negotiations. We of the CLR/AfGJ and INSCPP have been directly challenged over our inclusion of known FARC members among the number of political prisoners. Let’s accept that some members of the FARC have committed excesses and abuses. This still doesn’t erase the political root of the conflict, the reason for the formation of the guerrilla movement, and thus the need for a political solution.

Every time the guerrillas have tried to lay down their arms and enter into negotiations for peace, the process has been sabotaged by the Colombian military and paramilitary alliance. A case in point is the genocide of the 1980s against the Patriotic Union, a Left wing political alliance that included both guerrillas and non-guerrillas. During the period of this alliance, two of its presidential candidates were assassinated, and over 5,000 Patriotic Union elected officials and candidates were systematically murdered. Only by recognizing the legitimate historic and political roots of the insurgency—which does not mean endorsing it—can we move toward dialogue for a just peace. There is no better way to begin this dialogue than with a humanitarian exchange of prisoners.

Our delegation not only visited prisoners and their families, but also *campesino*, indigenous, and Afro-Colombian populations. There was literally no one among the many people we met who had not lost sons or daughters, husbands, wives, girlfriends or boyfriends, fathers or mothers, friends, uncles, aunts, cousins due to military/paramilitary violence or arbitrary detentions. The Colombian military and paramilitaries are responsible for 80% of political violence. Thus, it is the Colombian and US governments, which direct and fund this war, which must be directly challenged to enter into meaningful negotiations for peace.



FENSUAGRO is Colombia’s largest union of farm workers. Over 1,500 of its members have been murdered by the military or paramilitaries.

Right now in Colombia there are more than 7,200 political prisoners. Some 1,000 to 2,000 political prisoners are members of the FARC or other guerrilla groups. Most political prisoners in Colombia have been arrested on the basis of fabricated and false evidence, distortions, and/or the testimonies of paid informers. (Colombia has the highest percentage of paid informers among its people than any other country in the Western Hemisphere.)

Perhaps the saddest result of these arbitrary, political detentions and the political violence that accompanies them is the toll it takes on families. While we did not get to meet personally with Beltran, we did meet members of his family and

colleagues. We were told how he is the heart and soul of his family. Saddest has been his sudden separation from his children and inability to care for them from behind bars.

In Obando's case, we did get to meet her mother, sister, 15 year old son, and six year old daughter. Obando's mother, Marta, has proven to be a pillar of support, taking in both children and, with daughter Lorena, looking after Obando's needs and carefully watching her case. Both Obando's mother and sister were quick to offer support to our delegation. Obando's son, Camilo, has borne this difficult time like a badge of honor. He expresses a great deal of pride in his mother and is developing into quite a young activist in his own right.

What amazes me most of all is the ability of the Colombian people to not lose hope and to keep organizing and mobilizing under the most adverse conditions. Obando herself has continued her organizing behind prison walls, collecting testimonies from her fellow political prisoners. It has been my pleasure to translate a number of these—so visiting the prison was a special experience, getting to meet in person women whose names and stories I already knew (available at www.clrlabor.org).

I hope the experience of our delegation inspires all of us not only to remember the political prisoners of Colombia—but to take up this fight to end the US sponsorship of this repressive government, to fight these US bases, to kill the US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement, and to demand a prisoner exchange, liberation of all political prisoners, and agrarian reform as fundamental components of a just peace in Colombia.