

Inter Pares

BULLETIN

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The Crucible of Peace

Our dugout canoe inches forward through the shallow brown water of the Cacarica River, a tributary of the Río Atrato in the Urubá region of Colombia, on the border with Panama.

If nature intended peace to reign in any tiny corner of this green earth, we should find it here. The gently creaking poles that are used to push the canoe create a soothing rhythm that seems to make us one with the river. The air is calm and fresh, the silence deepened by the murmur of insects and the chatter

of monkeys playing in the vines that decorate the dense jungle passage of the river. Now and again the laughter of parrots echoes through the trees, and a miracle of colour sweeps down toward the dugout and then away, its rainbow-dipped plumage softening the shadows.

It is indeed peaceful – but it is a haunted peace. We are here to accompany and protect 200 families attempting to return to their lands after having been driven out of their homes by men with guns and chainsaws who left terror and carnage in their wake. Caught up in a cruel war of attrition between a 30-year guerrilla insurgency and the relentless counter-attack of paramilitary forces hired by wealthy landowners and co-sponsored by the Colombian military, thousands of families have languished for three long years in the port town of Turbo.

But they have not been alone. They have been accompanied closely by Colombian and international organizations working together to assure that the displaced people of the Cacarica are able to retain and strengthen their strong community and social solidarity, and are able one day to return in peace and safety to their river settlements and livelihoods.

There is a cruel irony in the way that this reality is presented to the world. Colombia is constantly presented as a “culture of violence”, where life is cheap and death is casual. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our experience of Colombia is of a remarkable “culture of peace”. For decades the vast majority of Colombians have lived peace, have promoted peace, have died for peace – resisting daily, without arms, the violence perpetrated by a tiny minority that commands a criminal state and entrepreneurial class, and the guerrilla armies that oppose them. Their commitment to peace is an inspi-

ration for all of us who wish to build peace through justice, not only in Colombia but throughout the world.

Colombia is only one of too many places in the world where Inter Pares stands with people trying to build peace from the ashes of war. In countries as diverse as Guatemala and Guinea Bissau, Peru and Rwanda, Burundi or Burma, the struggle for peace with justice is a common thread of people’s lives and dreams. In the midst of the most horrific conflict, the majority are working to create peace, while demanding the justice and democracy for which they have so long dreamed. A terrible dilemma for them is that while they try to create the basis for peace, the international community often refuses to make the sacrifices – in profit and power – that could help bring the conflict to an end. There is much talk about peace; there is rarely talk about the local, and ultimately global, justice that is absolutely essential if peace is to be possible and permanent. Peace without justice and opportunity is impossible.

War has a cost, for those who endure it daily, and for the wider global community. Ultimately the “cost” of war is also the “price” of peace. The local peacemakers live this cost, and pay this price, every day. International cooperation that promises to promote peacebuilding must be willing to pay the price as well.

Our work is to support the peacemakers, those trying to restore the elements of community and trust that have been lost, and to create the elements of economic opportunity, justice and good governance that often weren’t there in the first place. This *Bulletin* offers just a few examples of the courage of those who dedicate their lives to creating – from the shards of war – the will for peace.



Illustration: Suzanne Labelle

Consolidating Peace and Justice in Guatemala

In 1996, the Guatemalan government and the URNG guerilla forces signed a Peace Accord, bringing to an end a civil war that had lasted almost 40 years. For the last decade of the war Inter Pares had supported social justice organizations in Guatemala in their courageous efforts to promote peace by confronting the underlying causes of the war and the poverty that affects the majority of the population. Today, five years after the formal peace agreements, we continue to support our Guatemalan colleagues as they negotiate the delicate and dangerous post-conflict process.

Throughout the war in Guatemala, virtually all aspects of governance – municipal, district, national – were part of the “counterinsurgency” strategy of the military, and under its control. Democratic opposition was forced underground by death-squads. Unarmed social justice organizations

were constantly under direct, violent threat, and had to organize themselves to survive. They had to give priority to providing protection for the people working within the organization, sharing information on a “need-to-know” basis, isolating members one from the other for their own protection, and allowing the organization to respond rapidly to always-dangerous outside threats. People within these organizations had highly-honed skills in this regard. In effect, for almost 40 years the entire society was mobilized for “combat”, with or without weapons. Guatemalans developed a culture of secrecy to protect themselves, their colleagues and their loved ones.

This history has left its marks on the society as a whole, including social justice organizations. Once the Peace Accords were signed, social justice organizations began to take on different kinds of work, in a different context: long-term development, political negotiation, consultations, and representation to influence public policy and the equitable development of the country. And they found that organizational norms and structures that were necessary during the war, were increasingly problematic for peacetime.

Our Guatemalan colleagues note that vertical structures, in which orders are given and followed without consultation, are often perceived as normal. Team-work, cooperation, and transparency among different parts of the same organization are difficult to achieve. Residual social fragmentation, individual isolation, wide-spread alienation and lack of trust are reflected to varying degrees in relations within and among organizations. While organizations in non-war situations suffer similar problems, they are exacerbated and extreme in militarized societies. All these characteristics stifle creative capacity, efficiency, effectiveness and collective action.

Guatemalan social justice organizations are conscious of these dynamics, and are making impressive advances in dealing with them. Over the last three years, the Project Counselling Service and Inter Pares have intensified our work with counterparts to support the

establishment of new administrative and accounting systems, and new communications norms and structures. Systems such as these require transparency, openness, and accountability, and a willingness to share information among as many people as possible to obtain input and advice.

As our Guatemalan friends point out, these are not merely “technical” issues. In a context in which people are trying to overcome all the ravages of war – spiritual as well as material – they are also profoundly “human” issues. Now, people are learning to trust again, and slowly laying aside the effects of old fears. We will continue to work with our Guatemalan colleagues as they struggle through the difficult transition from war to post-conflict, and dream of a durable peace founded on justice.

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Waging Peace

In Latin America, Inter Pares acts through the Project Counselling Service. Based in Peru, with offices in Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Colombia, the mission of the PCS is to support the “victims” of war and political repression by supporting their efforts to promote their own interests during conflict, and participate actively in the transition to peace and democracy in the period after the end of formal hostilities and the transition toward political accountability. The international agencies that make up PCS – Inter Pares and sister agencies from Norway, Denmark, Switzerland and The Netherlands – see the people and communities with whom PCS works as legitimate protagonists in the political processes that underlie civil conflict, and ultimately in the formal negotiations to establish a transition to peace. Rather than carry out programs for others, our approach is to assist in developing local capacity for social solidarity and mutual support, and to protect the lives and human rights of those who engage in this often very dangerous work. PCS staff provide professional assistance to local groups for organizational and institutional development, and carry out international advocacy on their behalf. In addition, PCS provides material support to refugees and internally displaced people, and supports the activities of local organizations carrying out community-based programs in post-conflict situations.

The Triumph of Ideals

In the summer of 1988, millions of Burmese took to the streets to demand democracy. Burma’s military dictatorship, in power since 1962, met these massive demonstrations with violence. Thousands were killed on the streets; hundreds were rounded up and summarily executed; hundreds of thousands more fled the country.

The internationally-recognized symbol of Burma’s democratic struggle is Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy, who was placed under house arrest in 1989. Despite being prevented from campaigning, the charismatic Aung San Suu Kyi won a stunning electoral victory in a snap election in 1990. The military junta quickly annulled the results of the election and imprisoned thousands of democracy activists. Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her persistent, non-violent efforts to restore peace and democracy in her country.

Today, the war against the ethnic peoples living in the remote regions of the country

Canada's Human Security Agenda

In recent years, the Canadian government has made the pursuit of “human security” a cornerstone of Canada's contribution to international affairs. Giving this priority to human security assumes that economic justice, democratic governance, the rule of law, and respect for human rights are as crucial to global peace and security as more traditional military issues concerning inter-state conflict. Canada's human security agenda has translated into an active Canadian role in promoting an international treaty to ban anti-personnel mines, support for a new International Criminal Court, greater monitoring and control of small arms, measures to stop the exploitation of children, support to the development of national police forces and institutions of justice, and a number of peacekeeping and peacebuilding initiatives.

However, there are many aspects of Canada's foreign policy that run counter to this human security agenda.

Canada remains a leading global arms trader – in 1997, Canada was the world's ninth largest arms trader, and the seventh largest exporter of arms to the Third World. When trade interests and corporate interests are at stake, Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade has difficulty taking concrete and prompt action. This was shown in the case of Talisman Energy Inc., a Canadian corporation operating in southern Sudan, whose resources and infrastructure are implicated in a vicious civil war. Similarly, Canada has refused to act against Canadian mining companies operating in Burma where an authoritarian regime has institutionalized state terror and trampled the rights of its citizens, while forcing the displacement of more than one million ethnic Burmese. Budget priorities also contradict the Canadian government's declared commitment to its human security agenda – defence spending remains five times



John Flanders – CIDA

greater than allocations to international development and the promotion of basic human needs in the poorest and most vulnerable countries.

Canadians who support the human security vision of the Canadian government need to push for greater coherence between the Canadian government's public discourse about an inclusive and empowering notion of human security, and its countervailing interest in promoting trade, investment, and exports. Human security policies need to be developed with the long-term vision of building peaceful communities on the basis of social justice, economic equity and democratic governance. It is essential to monitor and challenge policies that undermine long-term visions of human security for short-term commercial interests and political pragmatism.

Expediency has no place in building peace. Human security, human development and human rights are interlinked, as is the future of Canadians with the future of all other citizens of the world. In the final analysis, only when the security of none is threatened, is the security of all guaranteed.

This is the true meaning of common security, and it is the only possible road to building a common global future of peace and prosperity.

continues. The military junta fears the people of Burma – universities are closed, public gatherings banned, political dissidents in prison. An estimated one million people have fled into neighbouring countries; perhaps another million are displaced from their homes inside the country.

Yet, in the midst of this grim scenario, the people of Burma continue to work for a free and democratic Burma, both inside and outside the country. A national coalition government in exile has been established, comprised of members of parliament who won seats in the 1990 election but who have fled the country. Radio stations have been developed to broadcast uncensored news and information into the country. Distance education programs have been created for students who fled the country and who have been unable to continue their education. Human rights information groups have been organized to document abuses inside the country. Mobile health programs have been established to travel into remote regions of Burma to minister to the needs of displaced communities. Training programs have been arranged to train refugee medical workers to deal with people who have been victims

of trauma and torture. Women's groups are promoting the role of women in the democratic struggle.

The international movement to support democracy in Burma is growing. In addition to longstanding support for many of the actions described above, Inter Pares is an active member of a coalition of Canadian organizations involved in advocating a progressive role for Canada in helping to resolve the Burmese crisis, to promote democracy and the values of participation and inclusion, and to support the development of a just and peaceful society.

In the long run, those who work for peace and justice in Burma will see their dream come true. Military dictatorships cannot prevail forever in the face of determined and organized popular opposition. Thousands of Burmese people – students, monks, teachers, writers, doctors, intellectuals, ordinary men and women – continue to defy the regime, risking arrest, imprisonment and summary execution, to organize and work for a democratic future. It is upon the ideals of these people that a new, democratic Burma will be built.

Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives

The following is a reflection by Inter Pares Executive Director, Molly Kane, after a recent visit to Guinea Bissau.

In February 1998, I visited Guinea Bissau for the first time. While there, I spent a day in the urban community of Quelele with our colleagues in the Guinean organization, Action for Development. At that time, the Quelele youth organization had just completed building a youth centre. They were proud of the new building, which was already in constant use. They were also proud of their radio station, *Radio Voz de Quelele*, a vital means of communication and education for the entire community. Tragically, war broke out in Guinea Bissau just a few months after my visit, and continued well into the summer of 1999.

In February of this year I returned to Guinea Bissau and visited Quelele again with the staff of Action for Development. Among the visible casualties of the war is the Quelele youth centre, all but destroyed in one of the battles. So today the site is once again under construction. Undaunted by the setback and the terror of the war, the members of the youth association have resumed their activities and are preparing radio programs on voter education and citizenship. The offices of the Quelele community association, also a source of pride and a vital locus of local

organizing in the past, were looted by soldiers during the war. The furniture, typewriters, filing cabinets and supplies are gone, but the work of the association continues.

The staff of Action for Development, who have supported the efforts of the people of Quelele for many years, are rebuilding their own organization as well. They are coordinating housing reconstruction and participating in national and international fora pushing for democratic reforms. They told me that even with all the political will being mobilized toward peace and reconstruction, constraints on the national government are serious. As a result of the war, there is an increased need for social and economic infrastructure, yet a severely reduced capacity to generate the resources needed through taxation.

As I walked through Quelele in February and listened to the stories of my hosts, I was struck by a truth that I suppose I have always known. The battlefields of war are not merely the places where armies collide and soldiers die. And the trauma of war continues long after armies have surrendered and treaties have been signed. The war lingers on in the land mines that remain in cashew



Molly Kane

Radio Voz de Quelele back on the air.

orchards and along paths that children take to school. The effects of war continue to waste the promise of the young and the dignity of the old in burned-out markets and ports and in destroyed sewage systems and clinics.

It is commonplace that the most numerous victims of war are civilians. But the term “civilian” is one of many euphemisms in the absurd lexicon of war. Civilians are people, people who work, earn a salary and pay taxes. They are women who give birth, regardless of the plans of generals to shell hospitals. Young people who have one more year of high school and dreams of university and earning a wage. Farmers who anticipate an abundant harvest. Children who play soccer in the school yard and alleys. Grandmothers who deserve the time to sit for the first time in years and enjoy the company of life-long friends.

These are the people who lived through war in Guinea Bissau, a war that never made the headlines of any newspaper in Canada. These are the people who sustained life by feeding, sheltering and caring for each other in crisis. These are the people who stretched modest financial assistance to assist hundreds of refugees and displaced families. And these are the people who, in spite of the great waste and stupidity of war, are rebuilding their lives – their schools, their clinics, their youth centres, their community organizations, and their country.

As I spent time in this place that is so far from my home, listening to stories about destruction and violence that I have never experienced, I was struck as much by the similarities in our lives as by the differences. War shatters the lives of very ordinary people. And very ordinary people make heroic efforts not only to survive, but to continue living in peace.

Children as Peacebuilders

Children are particularly vulnerable to the brutal disruption that war makes in the daily life of families and communities. The Children as Peacebuilders initiative is investigating possibilities for children to contribute their talents, knowledge and energy in local peacebuilding initiatives. Based on intensive on-site consultations with children in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the project is documenting creative approaches to peacebuilding which respect and work with children's experience of war and their hopes for peace.

The Children as Peacebuilders project is being coordinated by Linda Dale, one of Canada's most innovative curator/educators, and a long-time friend and collaborator of Inter Pares.

Linda's work over twenty years has been informed by a profound empathy and respect for children's insight, wisdom and capacity for social engagement. The Children as Peacebuilders project follows up the profound experience of *Children of the Wind*, an exhibit curated by Linda, made up of drawings and words created by children to express how violence has influenced their lives, as well as the hope and dreams that they sustain for a world that is different, for themselves and their families. The exhibit has been touring Canada, and can be visited this fall at the Prince of Wales Heritage Centre in Yellowknife.

Further information can be requested by contacting Linda Dale at ldale@web.ca, or fax 1-613-237-4333.

