

COLOMBIA - Human Rights Day: Peace Initiatives Abound in Conflict-Torn Colombia, Despite Risks (Constanza Vieira, IPS)

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BOGOTA, 12/09/2005 - (IPS) - A new book released in civil war-torn Colombia ahead of International Human Rights Day, celebrated Dec. 10, contains hundreds of pages of peace initiatives set forth since 1992 by a broad range of local and international civil society groups as well as the Red Cross, the Catholic Church and United Nations agencies.

"Humanitarian Demands by the Civilian Population" was published in Bogota as part of the "Humanitarian Accords and Commitments Now" campaign launched a year and a half ago by the Permanent Civil Society Assembly for Peace and more than 500 national and international peace groups and human rights organisations.

The Assembly for Peace is made up of human rights groups as well as organisations working on behalf of the rights of women, children, the elderly, peasant farmers, indigenous people and black communities, peace and environmental groups, trade unionists, academics, church groups, cooperatives and business associations from all over this South American country.

The 434-page book compiled by Álvaro Villarraga, an educator who heads the Democratic Culture Foundation, presents 60 specific humanitarian and peace proposals.

The book drives home the fact that although human rights, social and labour activists are frequent targets of human rights abuses in Colombia, they have not stopped suggesting alternatives for putting an end to the four-decade armed conflict, ensuring respect for civilians, and confronting violations by security forces, the leftist guerrillas and the extreme-rightwing paramilitary militias.

Violations of human rights and international humanitarian law "are committed by all of the actors in this conflict," former public prosecutor Jaime Bernal said at the release of the book.

Bernal is one of the most active promoters of a humanitarian accord with the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the largest rebel group, which wants to swap hostages it is holding for around 500 imprisoned insurgents.

The hostages offered by FARC for an eventual exchange are 34 members of the military, three U.S. military contractors, and 27 politicians, including former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, who was seized by the rebels in February 2002.

Despite local and international pressure to reach a humanitarian accord for the release of Betancourt and the other hostages, the right-wing government of President Alvaro Uribe has taken no significant steps in that direction.

"Agreements between the government and the guerrillas have been reached before and can be reached again," Villarraga told IPS, referring to previous hostages-for-prisoners swaps. "The people are mobilising and have set forth very concrete proposals, addressed to the State and the irregular armed groups, aimed at ensuring respect for civilians in the war."

Each of the 18 chapters of the book contains initiatives focusing on a specific aspect of the conflict.

One deals with the protection of minors, and contains sections by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Coalition Against the Involvement of Children and Youths in the Armed Conflict, and the Colombian NGO Humanidad Vigente.

"These three organisations are recognised for their work in conflict zones in the country, and have set forth proposals that are very much grounded in reality," said Villarraga.

The first humanitarian proposal included in the book came from the Colombian Red Cross Society in 1992, followed by three other initiatives from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

In 1996, indigenous governors in the northern province of Urabá, a war zone, said neutrality and independence were the only weapons left to civil society in the armed conflict. Indigenous groups like the National Organisation of Indigenous Peoples of Colombia (ONIC) provided five proposals of their own, including an open letter to the president.

In 1997, alongside an upsurge in armed combats and massacres of civilians, six demands were put forward, including two from the Peace Community of San José del Apartadó, in the banana-growing region of northwest Colombia.

The peace community was created that same year, when the residents of San José del Apartadó declared that they did not support any side in the armed conflict, and would not allow their territory to be used for waging war. Their example was subsequently followed by other towns and villages.

Three of the four human rights proclamations issued by peace communities came from San José del Apartadó itself, but judging by the number of deaths and verbal attacks from Uribe, the declaration of pacifism and neutrality made by the campesino community has fallen on deaf ears.

Villarraga stressed "their courageous resistance against the actors in the war, and the arbitrariness and responsibilities on the part of the state itself for failing to understand, as a concept and in practice, what it means to rise up as independent anti-war body in the face of the degradation inflicted by armed conflict."

The rules that govern the peace communities, drafted by the residents themselves, "while not exactly a humanitarian accord, are above all a sovereign decision" to avoid the abuses they are subjected to by the war, he added.

The book also includes two proposals for the regulation of the armed conflict put forth in 1998, three each in 1999 and 2000, and six in 2001, one of them from the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Altogether, the different U.N. agencies in Colombia or special rapporteurs sent by the world body presented five demands.

The humanitarian crisis in Colombia is the third most serious in the world, after Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Close to seven percent of the country's population of 43 million has been displaced as a result of the war.

"The United Nations advocates a global agenda of human rights and humanitarian issues that would promote prospects for peace but also urgently offer humanitarian solutions that can be immediately achieved," noted Villarraga.

In 2002, six different proposals were put forward, two of them by the families of hostages.

The government of the southwestern department (province) of Valle del Cauca put forward a proposal related to the hostage tragedy in 2003, one of the eight recorded during that year.

Regional or local governments have also initiated or participated alongside local communities in four calls for the regulation of the war submitted in the 13 years covered by the book, while the Ombudsman's

Office issued one in February.

In 2001 and 2003, three proposals were submitted for the protection of the medical mission, which is continually violated by all sides in the war. The armed forces have gone so far as to dismantle infirmaries and hospitals run by the rebels and present them as trophies of war.

In 2004, as the armed conflict that Uribe only grudgingly recognises as even existing - he prefers to talk about the leftist insurgents as "terrorists" - grew even more bloody, a new record was set with 12 proposals. That same year, a group of 12 politicians held hostage in Valle del Cauca sent an open letter to the president from captivity.

That was also the year that the first demands were issued by the National Anti-Landmine Campaign, which is fighting against the use of a weapon that is prohibited internationally but is of great strategic value to the rebels. The group's demand was endorsed by the international humanitarian organisation Geneva Call.

Nine proposals were registered as of September this year, but these do not include the last four open letters sent by organisations and communities in the northwestern department of Chocó to President Uribe, the paramilitaries, and the two rebel groups active in the region, the FARC and the National Liberation Army or ELN.

The "Humanitarian Agreements and Commitments Now" campaign is demanding an end to forced displacement and assistance for its victims; protection for vulnerable sectors of the population, including women and children, as well as the personnel in medical and educational facilities; the release of all individuals imprisoned as a result of the conflict; and a ban on landmines.

The campaign is aimed at raising public awareness on international humanitarian law, organising mobilisations, and lobbying the authorities and Congress.

Alexandra Bermúdez from the executive secretariat of the Permanent Civil Society Assembly for Peace told IPS that their demands have also been sent to the insurgents and paramilitaries.

Have they received any response? "Yes, but very ambiguous ones, especially on the part of the rebel groups. They tell us that if they are not granted the conditions they demand (the full withdrawal of the armed forces from two municipalities), they will not make any efforts to reach an agreement on a humanitarian exchange," she said.

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