

## BATTERED BUT UNBOWED, COLOMBIA'S SOCIAL ORGANISATIONS FIGHT ON

Marina Martinez was busy getting her daughters ready for school one morning in August 2004 and so she missed the radio news report that the Colombian Army had killed three guerrillas in her home province of Arauca. One of those named was her husband Alirio, the popular regional president of ANUC, the peasants' union. Then Isaias Jaimes, a family friend and human rights campaigner, came to tell her the horrible facts. Isaias had been with Alirio, staying the night at a house following a meeting of local leaders of the CUT, the trade union confederation. Then soldiers came and seized five of their group. They shot dead three of their captives – Alirio, Lionel Goyeneche and Jorge Eduardo Prieto - and planted guns and wires on their bodies.

After a campaign the Attorney General's office held an enquiry which conceded that the three murdered men had been unarmed. Marina gave evidence about her husband. "I told them that he had never carried a gun and was a man of peace" she said. But despite this victory for the truth the brutal persecution of Arauca's social organisations continues.

The key reason is that potent three-letter word: oil. Arauca is home to the Caño-Limón oilfield from which oil is pumped to the Caribbean and then shipped out to the USA. The pipeline was bombed many times by left wing guerrillas and the Colombian government massively increased its military presence, which is reinforced by US special forces. Now any trade unionist or community leader can be targeted as a 'guerrilla'.

Last week I visited Saravena for a preliminary hearing of the *Tribunal Permanente de Los Pueblos* (TPP) hosted by Arauca's social organisations to indict the transnational corporations, such as Occidental Petroleum, Repsol and BP, which exploit Colombia's oil without regard for the lives and liberty of its people. Tanks were stationed on the road outside the town, there were armed troops and bunkers on every main street and the central plaza was deserted.

The tribunal commemorated the eighth anniversary of the bombardment of the Araucan village of Santo Domingo, when a Colombian military helicopter, flown by a crew employed by Occidental Petroleum, dropped a US cluster bomb killing 11 adults and 7 children.

I spoke to Isaias Jaimes at the ANUC regional headquarters. The entrance to the building proudly bears a large portrait of his murdered friend. Isaias explained that Arauca's social organisations first developed in the 1970's through peasant *paracivicos* (strikes and blockades) demanding better education, health provision and roads. The discovery of oil in the 1980's led to the displacement of communities, environmental degradation, increased guerrilla activity and intensified repression by the state and supporting right wing paramilitaries. This worsened in 2002, with newly-elected President Uribe's 'democratic security' policy. In November that year soldiers surrounded Saravena and took 2000 people to the local stadium for interrogation. Isaias was among 50 people charged after what the army called its 'Heroic Operation' and he spent 18 months in jail.

In 2006 soldiers have carried out four mass detentions in the province, rounding up trade unionists and a variety of community organisers, including street sellers and bull fighters.

The two trade unionists who survived the August 2004 army raid are still in jail after their trial for 'rebellion'. Samuel Morales is a teacher and the regional president of the CUT and Raquel Castro is an organiser for ASEDAR, the teachers union.

Colombia is the most dangerous place in the world to be a trade unionist and in Arauca it can be particularly dangerous to be a member of the teachers' union. 19 members of ASEDAR been murdered by paramilitaries in the past five years. Juan Luis Granados, the union's regional president, spends much time evaluating death threats issued against his members. 150 have had to flee the region. Juan explained that teachers are often leaders of their local *juntas de acción comunales* (neighbourhood committees).

"The local governor says that it is our own fault when we get murdered and that we should just teach. But we have an ethical and moral responsibility to also be community leaders. The situation is very bleak. In Arauca we have a paramilitary group called *Los Mellizos* (The Twins) which doesn't even pretend to support the government's so-called paramilitary demobilisation process. International support is very important for us. Without it we would not be alive".

Organising amongst oil workers is also perilous. 105 members of USO, the oil workers union, have been assassinated in Colombia since 1988 and many more have been driven into exile. The USO is resisting Uribe's neo-liberal plan to partly privatise Ecopetrol, the state oil company. USO national committee member Edgar Majica told me that, despite the death squads, the union has some members in the private oil sector. However, the one oil transnational where it has zero membership is British-owned BP, which operates two oil fields in Casanare. Conveniently for BP, union organisers dare not enter the province. Earlier this year BP reached a multi-million pound out-of-court settlement with a group of Colombian farmers after they brought a legal action against the company in Britain. They alleged that BP Exploration Company (Colombia) "benefited from harassment and intimidation meted out by Colombian paramilitaries employed by the government". Adding to the misery of Arauca's people, this year has seen a uniquely bitter fight for territory between the two guerrilla armies - the ELN, which was formed in the province in the 1960's and the FARC, which is the stronger force nationally. Isaias was forthright about this conflict.

"I never thought it would reach this point. It is down to the stubbornness of both sides. 400 people – guerrillas and civilians - have been killed. It has affected the social organisations as it is often unsafe for us to go into the countryside. Many people have been displaced and have gone across the border to Venezuela or to other parts of Colombia. The only beneficiary is the state which plans to deploy even more soldiers here to give 'security' to the people. So we are expecting more arrests and human rights violations".

A glimmer of hope for the country was offered in May when Carlos Gaviria, the Alternative Democratic Pole candidate, won 22 per cent of the vote in the presidential elections. It was the first time that a left wing candidate came second. Although Uribe was re-elected by a big margin, 55 per cent of the electorate abstained. A majority of those who didn't vote or aren't registered to vote will be from the two-thirds of the population living below the poverty line. As in Venezuela and Bolivia they can be mobilised to fight for a better life. However, international solidarity is needed to prevent a re-run of the 1980's scenario when the FARC declared a ceasefire and the paramilitaries responded by exterminating thousands of members of the left wing Patriotic Union party.

Deyanira Saldarriaga is an organiser for the Araucan women's association. Its role includes supporting women who have been raped and abused by the military. She feels optimistic about the prospects for Colombia's battered but unbowed social organisations.

"I feel there is hope because there are so many people with knowledge and leadership skills" she said. "We have to work together".

John Hunt