



Witness for Peace
Solidarity Collective

COLOMBIA PROGRAM ANNUAL REPORT 2023





Who Are We

The Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective

(WFPSC) is an independent U.S. organization founded in 1983 by U.S. activists to respond to the devastating effects of U.S. funding for the Contras in Nicaragua. Since then, the organization has developed its activities to amplify the impacts of U.S. foreign policy in several Latin American countries. Currently, Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective works in Honduras, Cuba, and Colombia.

WFPSC believes that social transformation is built from the ground up and seeks to build transnational solidarity to resist corporate and U.S. government policies that contribute to violence, poverty and oppression in the Americas.

In Colombia, the Solidarity Collective has been working since the implementation of Plan Colombia in 2000, in order to make visible the impacts of the U.S. military funding of the "War on Drugs" on communities and the intrusions of transnational corporations backed by the Free Trade Agreement that was signed in 2011.



OUR WORK METHODS

Political education- We provide educational resources and training on the impacts of U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America and the processes of social movement resistance to those policies. We seek to mobilize our U.S. base in favor of change and in support of the grassroots processes of nonviolent resistance.



Advocacy- Through concrete legislative campaigns and urgent actions in the United States we engage our networks to promote peace and justice policies towards Latin America and the Caribbean.



Physical and political accompaniment- Our programs in Colombia and Honduras support communities and social leaders that are 'at risk' by providing physical accompaniment and organizing to amplify their voices and garner decision-makers' response to their demands.





COLOMBIA CONTEXT

On August 7, 2022, for the first time in its contemporary history, Colombia made a government shift to the center-left, giving way to the "Government of the People, the Government of the Nobody, the Government of Life", in the words of President Gustavo Petro and Vice President Francia Márquez.

Since its arrival to the office in Casa de Nariño, the new government has announced that its priority would be to achieve peace. The first thing it did upon taking office was to reopen the dialogues with the National Liberation Army (ELN) in Havana, Cuba. In November 2022 the government managed to approve a law that allows the opening of dialogues with all armed actors in the country, known as **"Total Peace."**

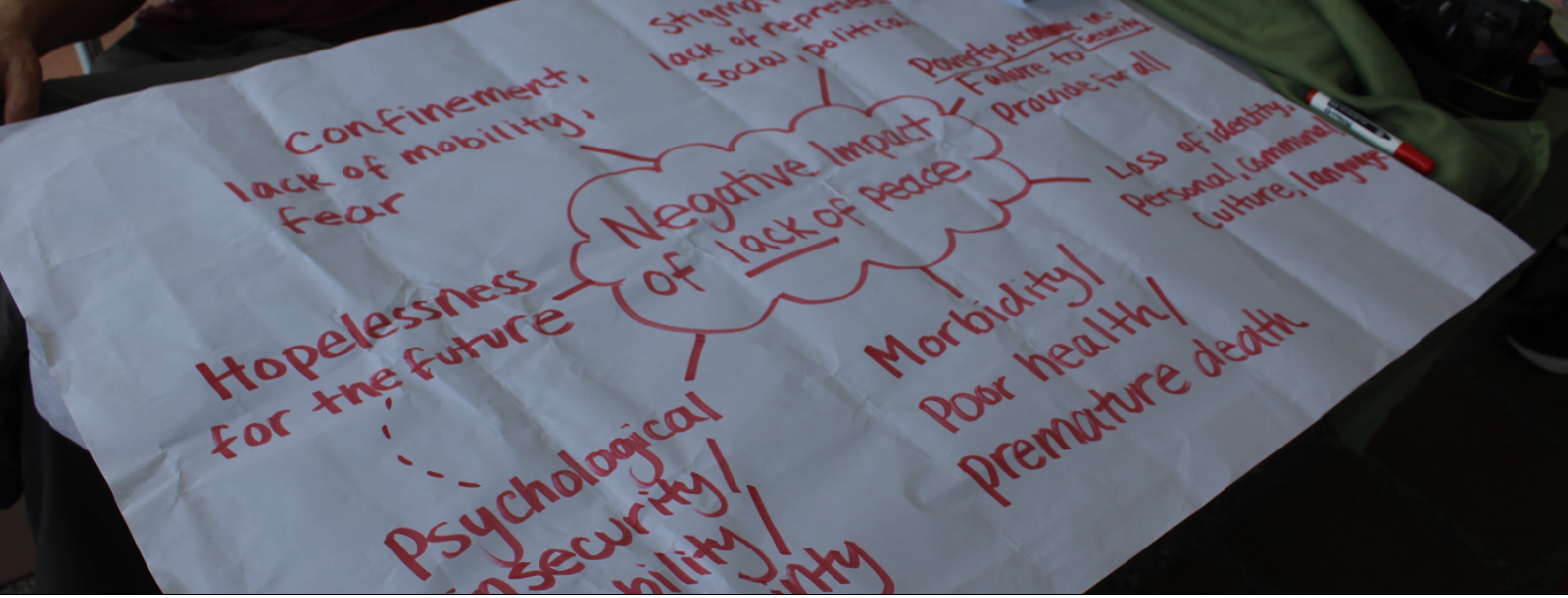
TOTAL PEACE

This new peace proposal intends to resolve all existing armed conflicts in Colombian territory. To this end, it foresees two types of negotiations:

Negotiations with organized armed groups that operate outside the law through which dialogues of a political nature advance and peace agreements are reached.

Approaches and talks with organized armed groups or organized armed structures of high impact crime in order to prosecute and dismantle them.





In relation to the first point, two negotiation processes are currently underway, one with the **National Liberation Army (ELN)** and the other with the **Central Staff (EMC)** of former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP) dissident groups. In both cases the negotiations are progressing slowly and with difficulties as both groups are asking for structural reforms. However, both have agreed to a temporary ceasefire with the Colombian security forces but not with each other. More recently, the opening of dialogues with the Second Marquetalia, another dissident group of former FARC-EP members, has been announced.

Although the communities historically affected by the violence of these armed conflicts have high expectations that peace will be achieved, it is still too early to visualize the effects of these dialogues in the territories.

In addition to this situation, there is the need to advance the implementation of the Peace Agreement signed in 2016 with the FARC-EP, a demand that continues to be present on the part of the Indigenous, Black and Campesina communities that are the most affected by the violence resulting from the armed conflict. In response, Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective organized an advocacy tour in the United States to amplify the voices and make visible the struggle of campesina communities.



NATIONAL DRUG POLICY

"By Cultivating Life, We Banish Drug Trafficking" (2023-2033)

The new drug policy goes hand in hand with the Total Peace plan, since the war on drugs has been one of the factors leading to the increase of violence whose impacts fell mainly on impoverished Indigenous, Black and Campesina communities.

The new drug policy has been summed up in two words: oxygen and asphyxiation. The first aims to end the dependence of populations on the drug economy, as well as to avoid the criminalization of coca growers. Asphyxiation will be used against "strategic and high-value elements of the drug trafficking system", including production infrastructure and chemical precursors, illegal finances and money laundering.

The new plan represents a huge shift in strategy from the measures that previous governments, with the support and leadership of the United States, adopted to tackle drug trafficking. Instead of cracking down on coca growers, the new initiative aims to directly confront Colombia's drug trafficking networks. However, the exact implementation mechanisms are not yet known. It will be necessary to await their application in order to know the results of this new public policy proposed for the next ten years.



HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION

Although the proposal of total peace and the new drug policy attempt to respond to the promises made by the current government and to the demands of the communities historically most affected by the dynamics of the armed conflict, **the human rights situation continues to be of great concern**, especially in most regions where the Solidarity Collective provides accompaniment and where communities and organizations continue to struggle and work for peace in their territories.

Ending the persecution of those who work to defend and build peace in their communities continues to be one of the main challenges facing the Colombian government and one of the urgent demands of the communities and organizations accompanied by the Solidarity Collective in Colombia. In this context, the Collective carried out **accompaniments and visits to Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Putumayo and Chocó with our partners.**

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS



According to INDEPAZ that monitors violence in the context of the armed conflict in Colombia, in 2023:

188

Social leaders and human rights defenders were killed

Signatories of 2016 Peace Accord were killed

44

93

Massacres with 300 victims

<https://indepaz.org.co/lideres-sociales-defensores-de-dd-hh-y-firmantes-de-acuerdo-asesinados-en-2023/>

UNITED STATES AND COLOMBIA



ETHNIC CHAPTER OF 2016 PEACE ACCORD

In October 2022, the **United States** became the **first International Accompanier to the Ethnic Chapter** of the 2016 Colombia Peace Agreement, following arduous advocacy by Colombian and international human rights organizations.

U.S. civil society organizations accompanying ethnic communities in Colombia call on the international community and the U.S. government, particularly as the accompanier of the Ethnic Chapter, to **ensure that the Special High Level Instance with Ethnic Peoples (IEANPE) is strengthened** and has the financial and political resources to act quickly and effectively.

THE WAR ON DRUGS AND MILITARIZATION

In view of the announcement of the new drug policy, planned for the next 10 years, the Colombian government stated that **"The Government of the United States of America maintains its certification to Colombia** for its fight and adequate confrontation to the phenomenon of illicit drugs".

Through an official memorandum, President Joe Biden pointed out the importance of Colombia as a strategic partner in South America in the fight against drug trafficking. In his statement, he urged the Colombian government to prioritize its efforts in the coca-producing regions and to achieve sustainable progress for the communities.

However, at the same time that a new drug and peace policy is being announced, **U.S. cooperation with Colombia in military defense and security matters continues.** A new bilateral action plan "focused on the development of Colombian Special Forces capabilities" for the period 2025-2029 was signed, and described as "historic" by the U.S. Embassy in Colombia.

Likewise, **the decision to militarize Gorgona Island continues** despite the denouncements and protests by various civil society organizations.

Finally, last December the largest arms fair in Latin America, **Expodefensa, was held again in Bogota, where more than 200 companies, among them 51 from the U.S., that profit from war were present.** As a Collective we joined the No More Expodefensa campaign together with other Colombian and international anti war organizations.

WORK OF THE WFPSC COLOMBIA TEAM IN 2023





ACCOMPANIMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS



The inauguration of the Mother's house (Casa madre) - a shared inter-ethnic space for the construction of peace between Campesina, Black and Indigenous communities, among whom also the signatories of peace live, in the regions of La Blanquita-Murri, in north-western Antioquia; one of the regions that has been historically impacted by the dynamics of armed conflict and paramilitary presence.



A humanitarian mission led by Justapaz to Istmina, Novita, and several veredas of Sipí river, in the Department of Choco, to Christian communities that were experiencing the situation of confinement and forced displacement due to the clashes between the paramilitary and guerilla groups over the control of territory and resources.



A commemoration of the 40 years of forced disappearance and the persistent struggle of families for justice and truth in the municipality of Palestina, Huila





Visit of CONPAZCOL to meetings with the leaders and youth of La Blanquita-Murri



Throughout 2023 the Colombia team accompanied partners in the departments of Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Putumayo, Choco, Antioquia, Huila, and in Bogota.

AMPLIFYING VOICES OF GRASS-ROOTS INDIGENOUS, BLACK AND CAMPESINA COMMUNITIES RESISTING VIOLENCE IN THE CAPITAL AND COLOMBIA'S SOUTH-WEST REGIONS



In January, the team led a delegation of 10 US citizens, among whom were faith community leaders, environmental and justice activists, and journalists.

The delegates came to learn firsthand about the nonviolent resistance of communities and grassroots organizations that defend their territory and pursue peacebuilding in the Cauca and Valle del Cauca regions.



ASPROZONAC and La Elvira farm, in Miranda, North of Cauca.



PCN (Process of Black Communities) in Buenaventura, Valle del Cauca



Renacer Siglo XXI in Timba, Northern Cauca



Puente Nayero Humanitarian Zone in Buenaventura, Valle del Cauca



Gallery of Memory of Fundacion Guagua in Cali, Valle del Cauca



Indigenous Wounaan Nonam displaced community in Buenaventura, Valle del Cauca



In March, the team published an article on the ongoing struggle for dignifying living conditions of the displaced Indigenous communities in Bogota.

Today the communities continue to demand to be heard and to respond to the Agreement assumed by the State in May 2022. This means that there should be humanitarian assistance for those who are housed in the UPI La Rioja and that the return to the territories should be voluntary and in safe conditions for those who decide to return. At the same time, a relocation plan should be offered for those who are not able to return because there are no conditions to do so.

In March, the team published another article about the resistance of Black, Indigenous and Campesina women against violence in the Colombian Pacific region.

Although attempts have been made to invisibilize the non-violent resistance led by women, particularly in this region of Colombia, they continue to raise their voices to remind us again and again of the role that women have played in protecting their families and communities, and how they have had to put their bodies on the line in order to resist. As Deyanira says, the bodies of women and, in particular, the bodies of Black women have been instrumentalized as spoils of war.



In October, the team published an article on the ongoing struggle for justice of campesina families whose loved ones were forcibly disappeared.

Among the demands of families that are present is not only to learn the truth about what happened to their loved ones, for their memory to be kept alive, and for just reparations. Their call is that no other family suffers from such crimes ever again. In the lives and actions of many, the souls of Tulio Enrique Chimonja and all the disappeared continue to live on.





**ADVOCACY AND SOLIDARITY
FOR THE END OF HARMFUL U.S.
INTERVENTIONS IN COLOMBIA
AND FOR INCREASED
SUPPORT FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION
OF 2016 PEACE ACCORD**

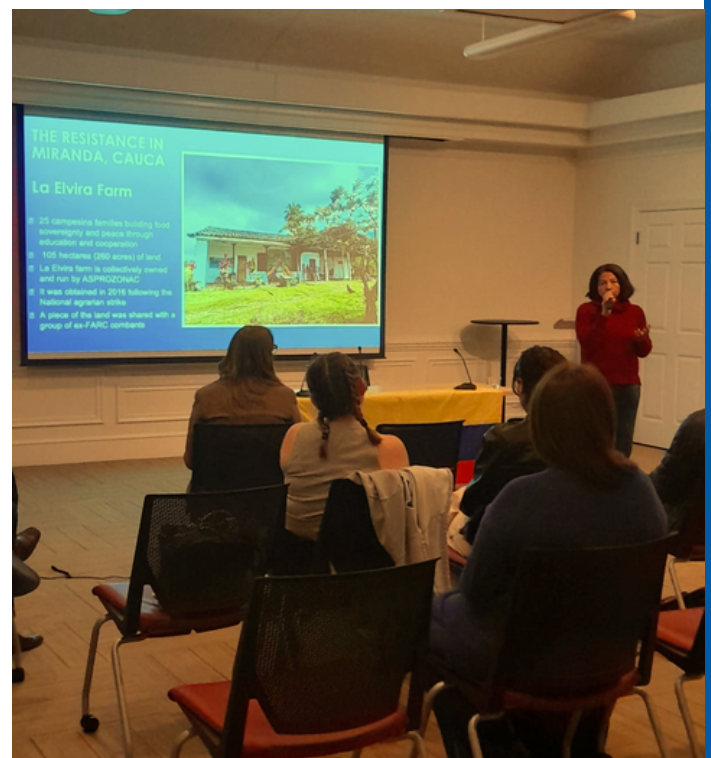
Speaker tour with Briceida Lemos

In November, WFP organized a US advocacy tour with Briceida Lemos, a campesina social leader from Miranda, Northern Cauca, in North Carolina and Washington DC. The learnings of the tour as well as a list of the organizations, universities, collectives, faith groups and congressional offices that Briceida spoke to about the defense of land, food sovereignty and need for the strengthening of the support for the implementation of peace accords can be found in [this report](#).

Urgent action

In June, the team published an urgent action request for the protection of people in Miranda who were under threat of displacement due to clashes between armed groups present in the territory.

We would like to express our gratitude to all who took action in signing the petition and shared the urgent action with others.





No More Expodefensa

In September, the team joined a “No more Expodefensa” campaign against one the largest arms fairs that is held every two years in Bogota. US companies selling weapons and military systems maintain by far the biggest foreign companies presence at the fair.

WFPSC joined a group of national and international anti war organizations, some of who have kept on calling for more than six years on the Colombian governments to put an end to the realization of the arms fair.

Because we believe that peace is not possible with an ongoing militarization, we speak out against Expodefensa and the business of war that only brings death and destruction for the communities that we have accompanied since our arrival in Colombia.



IN THE MEMORY OF ACTIVISTS WHO INSPIRED MANY: PRESENTE! PRESENTE! PRESENTE!

In 2023, we have lost two people that we accompanied and admired for their commitment to nonviolent resistance and work for justice. We would like to share their stories. Their memory lives on. May the seeds they became grow to be many.

PHANOR GUAZAQUILLO PEÑA

Phanor was 45 years old when his life was abruptly and violently ended in front of his partner and friends by an unknown assailant on 3 December 2023. Phanor dedicated his life to the defense of the rights of Indigenous peoples, to the construction of peace among ethnic peoples of Colombia and to the defense of land from oil corporations and extractivist projects. A leader of the Nasa Kwesx Kiwe in Puerto Asis, Putumayo, he supported the strengthening of other Indigenous, as well as Black and Campesina, communities in their nonviolent struggles. Phanor's work was known throughout Colombia and beyond. He was a national spokesperson for the Special High Level Instance with Ethnic Peoples (IEANPE) and participated in the construction of the Ethnic Chapter of the 2016 Peace Accord in Havana, Cuba.

WFPSC team met Phanor, just three months before his assassination, while accompanying one of the events organized by our close partners from Communities Building Peace in Colombia (CONPAZCOL), who had Phanor serving on their board of directors. His death was a tragic loss for the processes of resistance that he accompanied. Instead, we accompanied the ceremony of Phanor's "planting" (in his tradition people's bodies and lives are planted, not buried). May the seed of life and transformation that Phanor had become grow powerful and strong and multiply not only through his sons and leaders of his community who assumed the continuation of his work but across Colombia, and beyond.



IN THE MEMORY OF ACTIVISTS WHO INSPIRED MANY: PRESENTE! PRESENTE! PRESENTE!

OLGA CASTILLO

"Here I am and here I will stay," Olga Lucía Castillo Campo told us when we met her at the end of 2022. She had been standing in front of the U.S. Embassy in Bogota for a month. There, next to several banners demanding justice for her daughter and her family, she remained for several months. Faced with the lack of response, she moved to stand in front of the Colombian Foreign Ministry. Olga had demanded for 16 years that the two men responsible for sexual assault against her daughter, who in 2007 was only 12 years old, at the military base in Melgar, Department of Tolima, Colombia, be brought to justice. The perpetrators are two U.S. citizens, Michael J. Coen and César Ruiz, who were both in the service of Plan Colombia at the aforementioned military base. Olga died without seeing the justice she fought so hard for. Olga not only died fighting for the right to justice but also for the right to health.

In the face of the pain that her departure still causes us, we remember that her struggle is not over, that her death is not the end. We remember that her death is not the death of her struggle, that she is still alive in each one of us who listened to her story and learned from her. Her struggle for justice and for an end to impunity for U.S. soldiers and military contractors who rape girls and women in Colombia continues. The search for justice will continue, her resistance will not be in vain, her memory is alive. Olga is alive in each one of us.





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective wishes to express profound gratitude:

- **to all our partners in Colombia** who have been on the frontlines and shared their struggles with us and our WFPSC community in the USA.
- **for the solidarity that the people of the United States have shown** in multiple ways and to all those who in one way or another have taken action to change U.S. policies that negatively impact Latin American countries.

WE WOULD ESPECIALLY LIKE TO THANK:



All our donors who continue to support this important and critical work. We could not do it, and can't continue, without you.

All those who made Briceida's tour in North Carolina and Washington DC possible so that people in the United States could learn about the struggle for peace of the campesina communities on their territories in Colombia.

The delegates who came to Colombia to experience the reality of Black, Indigenous and Campesina communities and who have continued to provide support since their return home.

Gail Phares, founder of Witness for Peace, for so many years of solidarity, good work, and love for the Americas, to John Walsh and David Pegg for their experience, continued support and presence in Colombia.

Bárbara Orozco Díaz for her commitment to this work and for having been part of the team in Colombia during a period of reconstruction and consolidation of the Collective in the country. Thank you, compañera, for always being willing to accompany resistance, large or small.