

# WHAT'S LAND GOT TO DO WITH IT?

## COLOMBIA:

Answers to the questions  
you've always wanted to ask







# FOR

**Fellowship of Reconciliation**

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**Demilitarizing life and land Series. #1**



## Why should I bother reading this booklet?

Because everything you've already done today is related to what this booklet is about: land and our relationship to it. Where did you sleep last night? Did you read the newspaper or a magazine this morning? Did you drink coffee or juice or maybe eat a banana? How did you get to school or work? Everything you have done so far today, right down to reading the paper this very booklet is printed on, is related to land: the land we live on, the land our food comes from, the resources we use to get around, to do work and to have fun. Land has everything to do with everything we do.

In this booklet we talk about Colombia as one example of a place deeply impacted by our relationship with land. Consider this: the flowers you bought for your sweetheart on Valentine's Day were probably grown in Colombia. The oil that drives your car or the bus you take may have been pumped in Colombia. The coffee you drank this morning likely was grown in Colombia, too.



Land has everything to do with everything we do.

These days we find ourselves talking more and more about our impact on the earth. We saw, for example, how the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico gravely impacted the waters of the gulf, the bayous and farmland surrounding it. It also directly affected many people's daily lives, not only destroying the livelihood of fishermen and

women, but also forcing many to leave their homes because of the destruction. Even for those of us who don't live in the Gulf region, we were deeply impacted by the dead birds covered in oil we saw on TV, a vivid representation of the destruction of an entire regional ecosystem.

And it's not only natural disasters that are cause for concern. It is also the rush of transnational companies to exploit natural resources in the interests of making cheap products and big money, and of governments to push for free trade agreements that prioritize the goals of big corporations over the protection that our planet deserves.





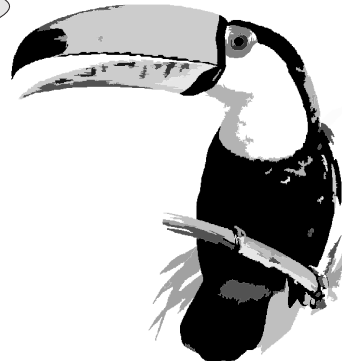


**It is important and relevant to look at Colombia because it's not just your consumer dollars that end up there when you buy flowers or bananas. So do many of your tax dollars; over \$7 billion since 2000, in fact.** So what happens in Colombia affects us both directly and indirectly. Likely, though, we have a few basic ideas about Colombia and a whole lot of questions. This booklet, therefore, will answer many of those questions—even the ones you might feel sheepish about asking.

**But all I've ever heard about Colombia is violence and drug trafficking!**

Colombia is way more than violence and drug trafficking. Colombia is one of the most biodiverse countries in the world. Bordered by two oceans and the home to three converging mountain ranges, Colombia boasts a rich array of deserts, rivers, Amazon rainforest, snow-capped mountains, and mangroves. Colombia has the second most diverse population of birds in the world, and has 80 different kinds of fruit. Colombia is also ethnically diverse, with 104 indigenous ethnicities and the 3rd largest Afro-descendent population in the Americas.

"Colombia's one of my favorite countries I've ever visited. The people are so gracious and welcoming and the landscape is beautiful."



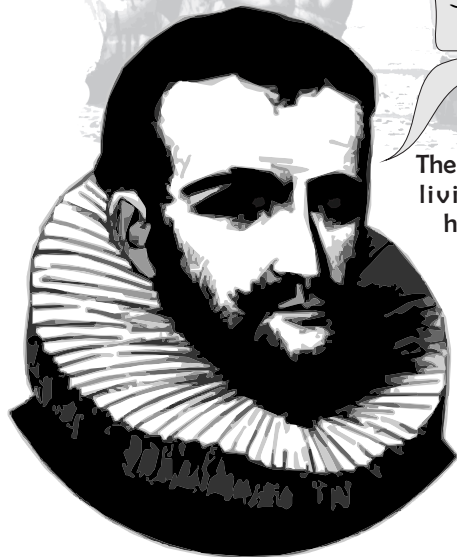


**Colombia does have a lot of violence. though... didn't it all start with drugs?**

The roots of violence in Colombia extend far beyond drugs. People have lived in the Americas for thousands of years, throughout what we now call the United States as well as in South American countries. Europeans arrived seeking the riches of these lands, like the gold found both in California and Colombia, to which they felt entitled.

What?? We came, we saw, we conquered!

The people who were already living in these places, however, weren't going to just hand over their land, and many conflicts arose. In other words, Colombia's violence today is rooted in 500 years of struggles over land and resources.



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**So did the people just let them have their lands?**

Many Colombians have struggled against giving up their lands for a very long time. Since colonization, big areas of land have been concentrated in the hands of very few people, and in response many communities have resisted. These struggles over land increased in the 1930s and 1940s due to a turbulent political situation in the country in the context of a nation-wide push for modernization.

By the 1950s, some of these land rights movements developed into armed guerrilla movements. In the early 1960s, the FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, declared themselves an active guerrilla army, with agrarian reform as a central goal of their struggle. Soon to follow were other guerrilla groups with similar goals.

No, we didn't just take it! We fought back! Started organizing!



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## Was everybody who resisted part of the guerrillas?



Ideas of social justice and equal distribution of land motivated lots of people, some who worked peacefully to fight for change and others who formed guerrilla armies. Nevertheless, all of them were lumped together as part of the "communist threat."

After the Cuban revolution in 1959, the U.S. feared any demand for social change in Latin America, whether armed or unarmed. As a result, the U.S. government intervened in Latin American countries in many violent and undemocratic ways. In March 1961, President Kennedy proposed a 10-year plan for the Americas called the Alliance for Progress, which included arming civilians to help their governments fight communism. A U.S. general specifically urged Colombia to organize these militias to "execute paramilitary sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known Communist proponents."

I just wanted a lil' land to feed my family!



## Why does it matter who controls the land?

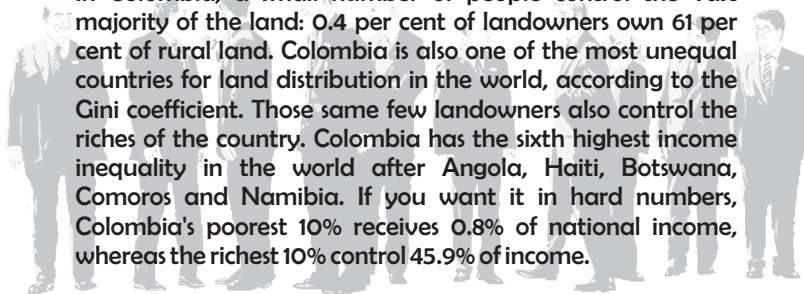


Now I can run the country!

Power and wealth rest in the hands of those who control the land, and therefore the natural resources on it and under it. This is true in Colombia just as it is in the U.S. In the

U.S., many of the rich built their wealth and power by usurping land from Native Americans. The transcontinental railroad, for example, would not have made a powerful millionaire out of Andrew Carnegie if settlers hadn't pushed Native Americans off their land violently, to make way for the railroad's construction.

In Colombia, a small number of people control the vast majority of the land: 0.4 per cent of landowners own 61 per cent of rural land. Colombia is also one of the most unequal countries for land distribution in the world, according to the Gini coefficient. Those same few landowners also control the riches of the country. Colombia has the sixth highest income inequality in the world after Angola, Haiti, Botswana, Comoros and Namibia. If you want it in hard numbers, Colombia's poorest 10% receives 0.8% of national income, whereas the richest 10% control 45.9% of income.





## So did the rich and powerful feel threatened?

Indeed, Colombia's elite felt very threatened by those demanding a more equal distribution of land and power, and thus supported the development of civilian militias to fight this perceived "communist threat." However, these militias, known as paramilitaries, only sometimes directly engaged the guerrillas.

*I got your back!*

Instead, they often focused their violence on killing, disappearing and threatening union members, peasant leaders, lawyers, journalists, Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities. The paramilitaries and militaries assumed that anyone who stood up to them must be part of the guerrillas, and so targeted civilian organizing under the assumption that doing so would help them retain their hold on power.



## Hasn't the military protected the people from all this violence?

The military has not only done little to protect civilians, they created alliances with the paramilitaries. That's because the military serves the interests of the same elites that created the paramilitaries to begin with, and so all three want to keep the status quo. With such an alliance, the paramilitaries can carry out the military's dirty work without the Colombian government getting blamed.

In 1997, for example, paramilitaries spent five days massacring at least 49 residents of the town of Mapiripán, whom they accused of collaborating with guerrillas. Colombian army soldiers maintained a ring around the area, preventing the civilians from escaping. The army-paramilitary collaboration is so well documented that the Inter-American Human Rights Court has ruled that the army both knew about and participated in the massacre.

*Seems like it was a marriage of convenience for the already-powerful to increase their control of land and therefore power. So now who can we regular people trust?*







### Where do the drugs come in?

Thousands of years before the "war on drugs" existed, indigenous communities throughout the Andes used coca, the plant from which cocaine is made. Indigenous peoples pick and dry coca leaves; later, they chew them during religious ceremonies or during a workday to reduce hunger and stay awake.

In the 1800s it was discovered that processing the coca leaf with petroleum and other chemicals increased its potency, and the resulting substance was named cocaine. Cocaine was first used to treat various medical conditions and later as a drug to get high. In the 1970s cocaine was outlawed in the U.S. As during Prohibition when the price of alcohol in the U.S. soared, the illegality of cocaine caused trafficking profits to multiply exponentially. In response to the growing demand from the U.S. and Europe for cocaine, Colombia became one of the major producers in the 1970s, and the industry exploded in the 80s.



Hmmm, a little of this, and a little of that...



### Hasn't the government tried to stop drug trafficking?

The government has done little to stem trafficking; in fact, it has often been part of the problem. In addition to forming alliances with the military, the paramilitaries also created alliances with drug traffickers. The drug traffickers provided the paramilitaries with money to buy weapons and pay foot soldiers; in return, the military-paramilitary alliance protected their trafficking routes. Before long, the line between drug trafficker and paramilitary began to blur, and in many cases the military was complicit. The famous drug kingpin Pablo Escobar, for example, made strong alliances with many politicians and even served as a Senator himself.

As the industry expanded and profits became so huge, the guerrillas also became involved in the drug trade. After all, for all these armed groups drug trafficking means enormous profits, that can be used to buy more weapons to control more land. Involvement in the drug trade has also provided a way for business people and politicians to increase their riches and power.



Yeah, I'll take a piece of the pie!

## So what do ordinary people do in the face of all this violence?

Sadly, many Colombians, particularly those in rural areas, had to flee their homes. Those who organized peacefully for social justice have been threatened, disappeared, and murdered. Though some have left their homes out of a general fear of the violence, many more rural Colombians have been forced from their homes by one or more armed groups wanting to control their land. One in four Colombian peasant farmers has been forced off his or her land. Here we see history repeating itself: hundreds of years ago, indigenous people and former slaves fled to the most remote areas, away from the violence of the conquistadors. Now, their descendants find themselves living on land highly coveted by armed groups and business interests, and are again driven from their homes. This massive displacement has amounted to a counter-agrarian reform in Colombia. Colombia has 4.9 million internal refugees, second in the world only to Sudan. Since 1981, more than 16 million acres (17% of Colombian land, an area larger than West Virginia) have been seized or been abandoned because of the violence.



## What's it like to be displaced? Who are these people? What does displacement even mean?

Displacement is like being a refugee, except that you don't cross an international border. Here are some voices from Colombia to tell you a bit more about what it's like:

"We were forcibly displaced because of the fight for land between armed groups. It's terrible to see how my children have suffered. My children have been destabilized because we've had to move from one place to another so much. Sometimes I don't sleep at night, or I have nightmares that I'm being persecuted."

Ana Gomez



Displaced Afro-Colombian leader



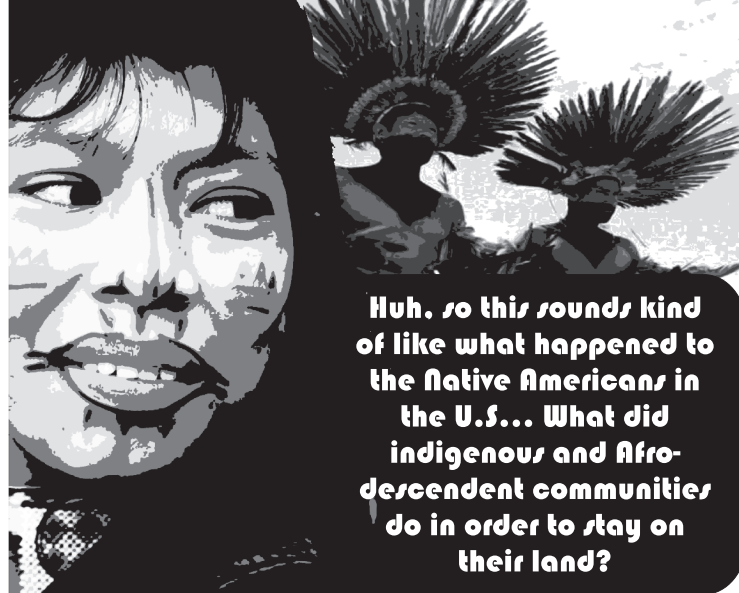


"Things became unbearable when our community council, of which I was a part, gained legal access to 182 hectares of land which other people with business interests wanted. I received threats like, 'Shut up or we will cut off your tongue and gouge out your eyes.' My mother was raped, murdered and her body was thrown into a well. I had to sleep in a different place each night until I finally had to flee. My dream was to stay there in the region; I still dream that someday I will be able to return."

Displaced Afro-Colombian leader from El Porvenir, Nariño.



**Daira Elsa Quiñones Preciado**



**Huh, so this sounds kind of like what happened to the Native Americans in the U.S... What did indigenous and Afro-descendent communities do in order to stay on their land?**

As in many countries, Afro-descendent, indigenous and poor peasant communities have been disproportionately affected by violence in Colombia. These communities have organized in different ways to protect or regain their land. This organizing led to laws in the early 1990s that granted collective land titles to Afro-descendent and indigenous communities, making it difficult to buy, sell, or divide their collectively-held land.

On paper, these new progressive laws protected the rights of the people. But in practice, the government and powerful elites used the military and paramilitary allies to push people off their lands. Not long after these laws were passed, massive forced displacement ensued at the hands of the military and paramilitaries.

Oil is the blood of Mother Earth ... to take the oil is, for us, worse than killing your own mother. If you kill the earth, then no one will live.

Member of the Uwa community



These communities have a deep, meaningful relationship with the land. In many cases it is land that has been passed down from the ancestors. Rather than merely a means of income, they see the land as a viable life force that sustains us all in ways we can't even comprehend.

### Once they got people's land. What did they do with it?

After so many peasants, indigenous people and Afro-Colombians were displaced, lots of companies stepped in, eager to exploit the bountiful natural resources like copper, oil, gold, coal, and fertile land. In fact, some of these companies paid paramilitaries to force people off land they wanted, or to keep them from coming back.

In the northwest Chocó department, for example, paramilitaries and the military carried out a joint operation in 1997, forcing Afro-Colombian communities off their land. Immediately afterwards, oil palm plantations were planted on that land.



"Our project with palm oil companies in Colombia is a strategic alliance and community driven!"



**Have I purchased anything produced by one of these companies?**

Woah, I didn't realize my breakfast fruit had anything to do with guns and violence in Colombia!



Cans of Coke and bunches of bananas at the grocery store or oil at the gas station may have come from Coca-Cola, Chiquita and Occidental Petroleum, all companies that have taken advantage of the conflict in Colombia for their own benefit.

For example, in March 2007 Chiquita pled guilty in a U.S. court to paying \$1.7 million from 1997 to 2004 to the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC). As one example of their collaboration with paramilitaries, in 2001, Chiquita allowed 3,000 AK-47 assault rifles and 5 million 7.62 mm rounds of ammunition to be unloaded and remain on their docks until 14 paramilitary trucks picked them up. At the time, the AUC was the umbrella paramilitary group, responsible for hundreds of massacres and murders of union leaders, peasant leaders, and ordinary people.

**Wait, so these companies are actually pushing people off their lands so that they can do business?**

Forced displacement and business interests have often gone hand in hand in Colombia, as these voices from Colombia explain:

**Jose Goyas**

Displaced indigenous leader from Cauca.



"I was denouncing abuses committed by a multinational corporation that owns a dam where my reservation is located. The dam has only brought destruction to our land. As a leader, I had received more than 50 direct threats for my efforts to organize my community against the corporation. On July 5, 2008, I left my office and hitmen fired 4 shots at me. If I wanted to live, I had no choice but to flee to Bogotá."

"When we were displaced, our land was robbed from us and filled with monoculture crops like oil palm and bananas. These mega-projects forcibly displaced us from our lands, placing us, the small-scale farmers, in the middle of a very violent conflict. We want to live in peace, we want our land returned to us, and we want justice."

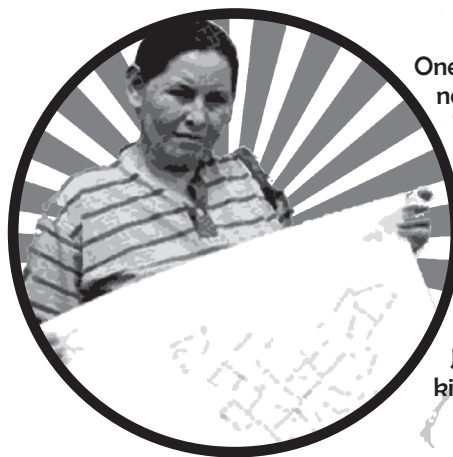
**Uriel Tuberquin**

Displaced family farmer.

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## What happens if people try to reclaim their lands?

Claiming land titles is also a dangerous business: many community leaders who have attempted to help their communities legally regain their land have been assassinated. Between 2007 and 2010, more than 46 community leaders working to return lands to displaced people were killed.



One example is of a woman named Yolanda Izquierdo. The mother of five kids and a victim of displacement herself, Yolanda represented hundreds of peasant farmers who were searching for truth and to return to their lands. In January 2007, she was killed at her front door.

Direct attacks like the one mentioned here are intended not just to silence the victim, but also to send a message to other organizers and community leaders that they will be punished for denouncing those in power.



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**But if the U.S. is winning the drug war, why is there still so much violence?**

Though the U.S. has sent \$7 billion dollars to Colombia for weapons, training and fumigation chemicals in an attempt to address the “supply side” of the drug problem, various analysts maintain that coca cultivation has remained stable over the years despite increases in eradication efforts. The drug war is not being won, in other words. Spending our precious tax dollars to eradicate drugs in a producing country is the least cost-effective way to fight the drug war. Investing in drug abuse prevention and rehabilitation is 23 times more cost-effective than eradicating drugs at the source.

According to the theory of supply and demand cocaine is just like anything on the market: if there weren't demand for it, no one would be producing it.



One of the ways the U.S. government has fought the war on drugs is by fumigating Colombia's small farmers in the countryside. These farmers, however, often find themselves faced with a choice between barely, if at all, scraping by growing legal crops, and earning enough to actually support their families by growing coca leaf. When they grow coca, traffickers come to their door to pick it up. If they grow potatoes, the expense of taking it into town negates any reasonable profit they might make.

Unfortunately, spraying toxic chemicals from airplanes on crops far below is not precise, and many legal food crops (some of which are funded by U.S. government alternative development programs) and even rural villages have been sprayed, killing crops and gravely sickening villagers.



I wonder if the U.S. government realizes that it just spent a whole lot of money killing the corn it helped me grow!

## Don't they say on the news that things are getting better?

Whether things are better or not depends on who is talking. Many wealthy Colombians say that Colombia is now a safer place -- and it's true that the numbers of kidnappings have gone down, certain highways are safer to travel on and some big paramilitary bosses have demobilized.

But in the countryside, many people will tell you that things are the same, if not worse. Numbers of displaced people continue to rise and 2010 saw more massacres -- 38 as of November 2010, and 8 in one week in November -- than any year since 2005. President Santos, who took office in August 2010, has a milder approach and has not openly criticized human rights defenders as his predecessor Uribe did. But despite his public image, there is every indication to believe that Santos will continue with an agenda that favors corporate investment and transnational companies over policies that favor people and the land they live on.



## Wouldn't more development in Colombia help address the problems there?

Development is tricky business and the way it plays out these days usually favors corporate interests over people. The USAID projects mentioned previously, for example, don't work because they spray and kill the crops that were initially promoted as an alternative to coca, all the while putting money in the pockets of the companies that produce the planes and chemicals. Other ways that rich countries get involved in the development of poorer ones include through the Inter-Development Bank, the World Trade Organization and through the passage of free trade agreements.

Free trade policies are promoted as a way to eliminate poverty, but when we look at what happened in Mexico after the implementation of NAFTA in 1994, we understand that these policies have many negative impacts for people and their lands. There, subsidized U.S. grains flooded the Mexican market, provoking a 70% drop in corn farmers' income. In the first ten years of NAFTA, two million small-scale Mexican farmers were displaced, many then seeking work in the United States or border areas. Various U.S. studies have demonstrated that NAFTA has led to a larger U.S. trade deficit and a loss of tens of thousands of U.S. jobs.



I like development!  
I want YOU to support  
free trade!



Still awaiting U.S. Congressional approval is a Free Trade Agreement with Colombia that would relax trade restrictions and promote U.S. corporate investment in Colombia, in the name of development. Opportunities to take advantage of this investment will favor those with control of land and the resources on and under it, including drug traffickers and other armed groups. Displaced people will be left out, however, as will those who organize to defend their rights, like union members. For years Colombia has had the highest rate of union member murders in the world, and many predict that a free trade agreement would worsen this phenomenon, in addition to the many other negative social and economic effects.

Development for whom?



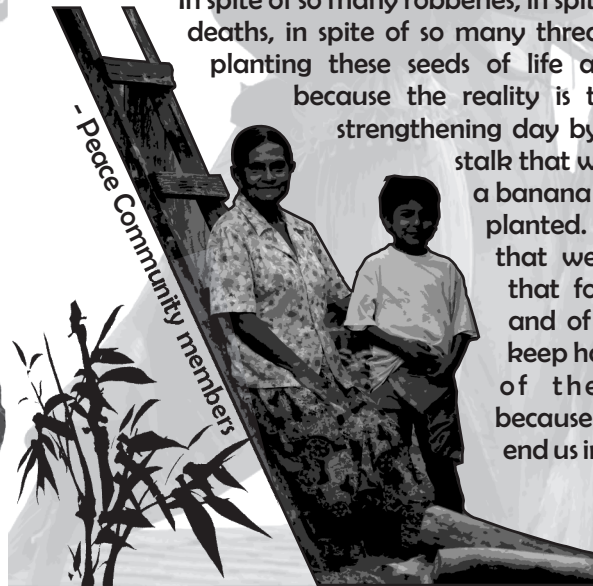
## So, is there any hope for people who resist?

Many courageous communities continue to resist displacement and demand justice for the violence committed against them.

One such group is the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, a peasant community in the northwest of Colombia that in 1997 declared itself neutral in the conflict, as a strategy to return to its lands and protect its members from the conflict. The community has sustained many massacres, murders and threats, but continues to serve as a model of civilian neutrality and resistance.

"In spite of so many robberies, in spite of so many deaths, in spite of so many threats, we keep planting these seeds of life and of hope because the reality is that we are strengthening day by day a corn stalk that we planted or a banana tree that we planted. Each plant that we sow is like that force of hope and of life that we keep having in spite of the attacks, because they won't end us in that way."

- Peace Community members



Another such community is that of the Humanitarian Zones of Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó. After violently displacing this Afro-Colombian community from their lands in Colombia's northwest, paramilitaries began planting oil palm for biofuel exportation. The community has won their land back, though they continue to have to struggle against paramilitaries and their oil palm company allies.

"We were really happy on our farm--it was thriving. In 1997, they murdered my two sons and I fled with my wife and children. They stole everything so that they could plant oil palm. Now I am trying to reclaim my land. There are huge threats against my life every single day, but I will never let them displace me again from here. As a small scale farmer, I have no choice--without my land, I am nothing...nothing."

**Enrique Petro**

Displaced family farmer from Curvaradó, Urabá



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The U'wa are a peaceful Indigenous community of roughly 6,200 people who live in the remote Andes of northeastern Colombia, along the border with Venezuela. Both the U'wa and the cloud forest they inhabit are among the last of their kind in the world. The U'wa traditional belief that oil is the blood of Mother Earth has supported a consistent and strong opposition to any oil operations within their ancestral territory. In the 1990s, the U'wa organized to oppose oil development plans to be carried out by Occidental Petroleum (OXY). In 2002, OXY announced that it was pulling out of the oil project. The U'wa continues to resist oil, gas, and mining projects on their land.



"Our cultural principles are based on the defense of the right to a dignified life, respect for Mother Earth and the environment, essential and sacred elements that we should leave as an inheritance to our children, grandchildren and their descendents."



Mother Earth, despite being violated, silently continues to feed and sustain us. She doesn't feel envy. She talks but very few listen to her voice. She insists through cries but everything continues the same. This worries us, but we, the U'wa and friends of the U'wa of Colombia and the World will continue to defend her with our voice, our sacred fasts, our songs and our faith."



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## What can I possibly do about something so big and complicated?

It is true that violence in Colombia has continued for many years, and that the multinationals looking to take advantage of the violence in order to exploit the country's resources are pervasive and powerful.

But as Rodolfo Maya, Nasa indigenous community leader, killed October 14, 2010, said, "We must continue to struggle on our feet, until the sun goes out."

There are things that folks in the U.S. can do to further peace and justice in Colombia and support communities in resistance.

- Multiply your knowledge: talk to friends and family about what you learn, and pass this booklet on to them!
- Educate yourself further about Colombia and U.S. involvement. See the next page for more resources.
- Keep informed and take periodic action by signing up to FOR action alerts (see [www.forusa.org](http://www.forusa.org))
- Help stop the free trade agreement with Colombia. USLEAP has a toolkit (see <http://usleap.org/colombiamurderandimpunity/toolkit>) and check out WOLA's website, too ([www.wola.org](http://www.wola.org)).
- Visit Colombia with a Witness for Peace delegation (see [www.witnessforpeace.org](http://www.witnessforpeace.org)).
- Participate in the Days of Prayer and Action for Colombia every April (see Facebook group).
- Buy fair trade bananas, coffee and chocolate and be conscious of other things you buy, so you're not supporting companies involved in Colombia's violence (see [www.usleap.org](http://www.usleap.org) for more on problematic industries).

## How can I learn more about Colombia?

Of course, what goes on in Colombia is much more complicated than what's been presented in this little book. To learn more, check out:

### Books

Colombia and the United States by Mario Murillo  
The Dispossessed: Chronicles of the Desterrados of Colombia by Alfredo Molano  
More Terrible than Death by Robin Kirk

### Films

Documentaries by Holman Morris:  
<http://www.contravia.tv/>  
Golpe de Estado  
Portraits in a Sea of Lies (Retratos En Un Mar de Mentiras)

### Websites

[www.aiusa.org](http://www.aiusa.org)  
[www.forusa.org](http://www.forusa.org)  
[www.lwr.org](http://www.lwr.org)  
[www.pbi-colombia.org](http://www.pbi-colombia.org)  
"Stand for Land Rights in Colombia"  
Facebook group  
[www.usleap.org](http://www.usleap.org)  
[www.usofficeoncolombia.org](http://www.usofficeoncolombia.org)  
[www.wola.org](http://www.wola.org)

## NOW WE HAVE SOME QUESTIONS FOR YOU!

**INSTEAD OF FUMIGATING AND FUNDING  
THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY, HOW DO  
YOU THINK YOUR US\$ TAX DOLLAR\$  
\$HOULD BE \$PENT?**

## Where did all those statistics come from?

## HOW MIGHT YOU ENVISION A MORE PEACEFUL AND BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE U.S. AND COLOMBIA?

## HOW MIGHT YOU HELP STOP THE WAR BEING FOUGHT OVER YOUR BREAKFAST?

(hint: passing this booklet on to someone else counts as one thing!)



The information in this booklet is based upon extensive reading and on the ground experience. The more specific numbers and data quoted come from the following:

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"Poverty, Inequality and Drugs," ABColombia, [www.abcolombia.org.uk](http://www.abcolombia.org.uk).

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"Terrorism and Bananas in Colombia," Time, Sibylla Brodzinsky, 2 May 2007, [www.time.com](http://www.time.com).

(as well as the resources listed on page 30)

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