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# Colombia

**Peasant Farmer Association  
of the Cimitarra River Valley**





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**T**he Peasant Farmer Association of the Cimitarra River Valley (ACVC) counts as its principle objectives the comprehensive defence of human rights, the struggle for land ownership and land redistribution, and improved and dignified livelihoods for peasant farmers in the short term in order to lay the groundwork to bring about structural change in rural Colombia in the longer term. Based on these principles, the ACVC focuses its work on organizational, political and educational capacity-building centred on the issues of sustainable development, sustainable agricultural, education and health, as well as on the development of what is known as the Peasant Farmer Reserve Zone (ZRC).

The ACVC is a broad-based association made up of 120 Community Action Boards,<sup>1</sup> cooperatives, fisher people committees and other organised groups of rural workers. The organisation has an estimated 25,000 members and carries out its community-based social and political

work in 120 rural hamlets within the eight municipalities of the Magdalena Medio region.

The ACVC's economic development projects are designed to guarantee food security for the peasant farmer population in the Cimitarra River Valley. Projects include:

- » Sugar cane production;
- » Small-scale rice farming;
- » Animal husbandry projects with buffalo and cattle;
- » A community aqueduct system;
- » Construction and maintenance of fish-farming pools;
- » Basic sanitary installations;
- » Housing improvements.

## HISTORY OF THE ACVC

During the 1980s and 1990s, widespread violence displaced many peasant farmers from the Cimitarra River Valley to town centres and cities. Illegal armed groups—both guerrilla organisations such as the FARC and the ELN, as well as paramilitary groups—exerted their influence throughout the region. According to the Consultancy on Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES), the State was unable to establish strong civilian institutions and this resulted in impassable roads, the absence of institutional support for agricultural development, and a lack of education and health services.<sup>2</sup> As a result, it was up to peasant farmer organizations to ensure their own rights.

Several new peasant farmer movements emerged,<sup>3</sup> but they were

**THE ACVC'S PRINCIPLE OBJECTIVES ARE THE DEFENCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS, THE STRUGGLE FOR LAND OWNERSHIP AND LAND REDISTRIBUTION, AND IMPROVED AND DIGNIFIED LIVELIHOODS FOR PEASANT FARMERS**

unable to bring about the social change they desired. In 1996, the ACVC was founded by peasant farmers in the region of Magdalena Medio who were fed up with the unfruitful struggles of previous years. The Association organised meetings and peaceful protests as well as sought dialogue and formal agreements with the government of Andres Pastrana, particularly with respect to the rights of the rural population.<sup>4</sup>

During this same period, rural communities in coca-growing regions such as Putumayo, Cauca, South Bolívar and Guaviare initiated broad-based protests in response to aerial fumigation and its effects on illicit coca and opium poppy production, as well as basic subsistence crops and grazing lands.<sup>5</sup>

The peasant farmer community of the Cimitarra River Valley decided to join the mobilisation in which small-scale miners and farmers as well as coca growers in South Bolívar aimed to halt paramilitary aggression and aerial fumigation. An estimated 10,000 people participated in mobilisations in San Pablo and Barrancabermeja to demand social investment and respect for human rights from the Colombian Government.

Oscar Duque, a leader in the ACVC, explains: "We were tired of being displaced to other regions of the country. It was out of necessity that we looked for the tools that would make the Cimitarra River Valley a region of coexistence, peace and harmony—a region where, in concrete terms, we could implement a development model that would bring social benefit to the community."<sup>6</sup>

In 1998, the ACVC participated in the Peasant Farmer Exodus to Barrancabermeja, organised in response to the forced displacement caused by paramilitary incursions in Southern Bolívar and the Cimitarra River Valley. According to information from the affected communities, this incursion was also linked to the interests of multinational companies in the region.<sup>7</sup> After three months of negotiations, the Government agreed to several proposals including a participative process to develop the regional Development Plan, an Integrated Protection Plan to guarantee the right to life and basic human rights in Magdalena Medio, and social investment in the 25 different municipalities that had

participated in the mobilization. One of the agreements signed by the Government was the conformation of the Peasant Farmer Reserve Zone, which became the focus of the ACVC's efforts.<sup>8</sup>

## PEASANT FARMER RESERVE ZONE OF THE CIMITARRA RIVER VALLEY

In Colombia, the land ownership tends to be concentrated, with consequent effects on agricultural production, including reduced cultivation which has led to food crisis.<sup>9</sup> In order to address this problem, the Government passed an agricultural reform law in 1994, Law 160, which established the figure of the Peasant Farmer Reserve Zone. In addition to promoting both increased and more equitable access to land

for peasant farmers, the ZRC was intended to protect natural resources and promote the peasant farmer economy.<sup>10</sup>

Based on Law 160, the Government initiated a pilot project. Between 1997 and 2002, six ZRCs were established. The ZRC of the Cimitarra River Valley was initiated in December 2002. Its reach included territory in the municipalities of Yondo and Remedios (Antioquia) as well as Cantagallo and San Pablo (Southern Bolívar).

However, on April 10, 2003 the Government of Alvaro Uribe, arguing that the ZRC generated social conflict in the region, suspended its legal recognition.<sup>11</sup> In turn, the ACVC demanded that the suspension be lifted in order to defend the rights of peasant farmers. Their resistance prevailed in February 2011 when the Government of Juan Manuel Santos

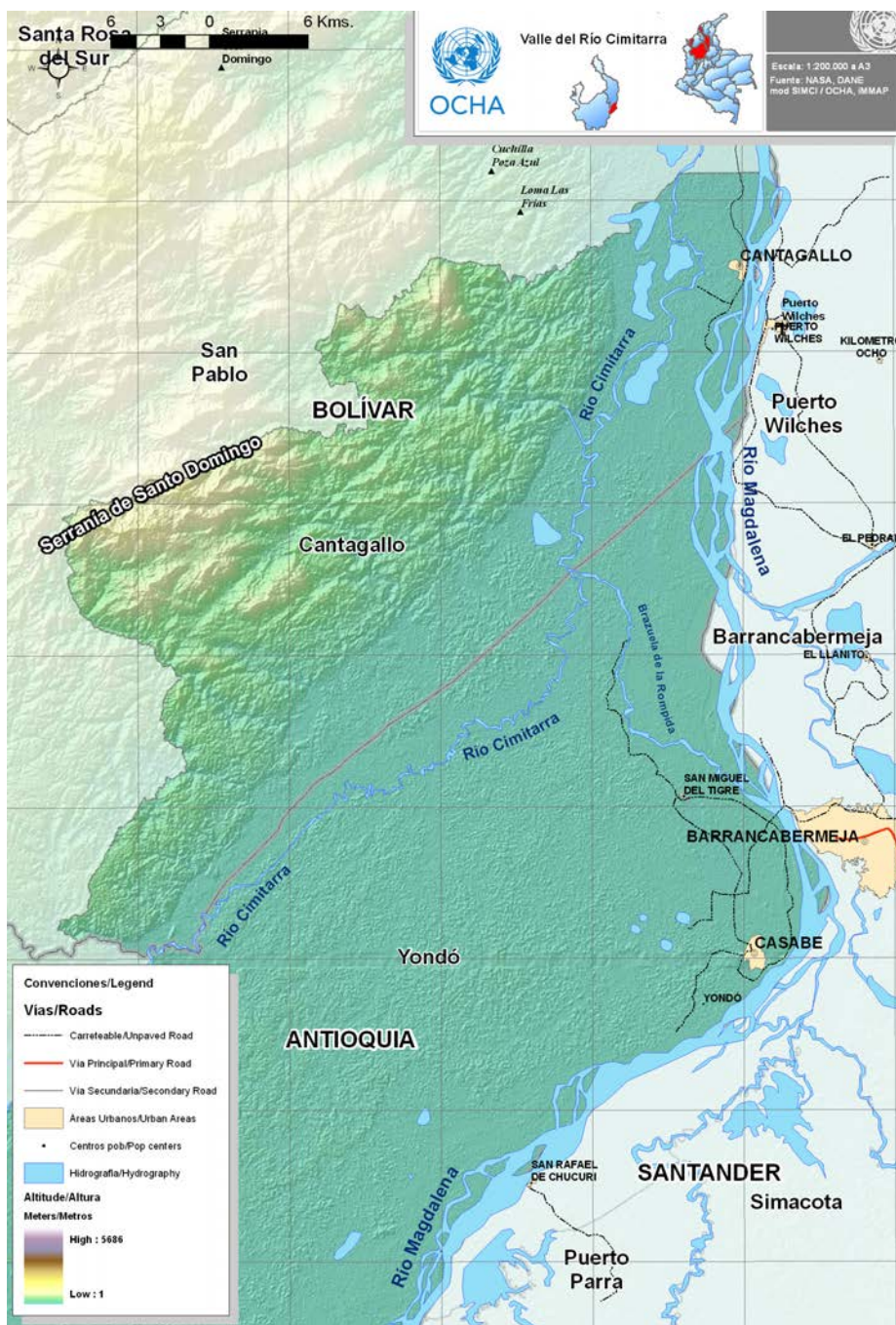


Photo: PBI

### The Peasant Farmer Reserve Zone's primary objectives

- » Contain the expansion of the agricultural border (the border between land dedicated to agricultural production and that which is maintained in its natural state);
- » Correct the inequitable concentration of land ownership;
- » Create conditions for strengthening and sustainably developing the peasant farmer economy;
- » Regulate land use and tenancy, granting preferential distribution to peasant farmers with scarce resources;
- » Establish a comprehensive model for sustainable development;
- » Protect the peasant farmer economy and as food sovereignty.





## NATURAL RESOURCES IN THE CIMITARRA RIVER VALLEY

The region is rich in natural resources such as gold, petroleum, fresh water, forest reserves, and plant and animal life. According to Jesuit Priest Francisco de Roux, "This is a vital part of the north central region of the country. It is where the majority of petroleum refinery takes place, and a crossroads that unites the roadways to the Andean cities. It represents access to the Caribbean, to Venezuela, and to the Southern valleys. It's the route that links Caracas to the Pacific; a land of gold and ecological diversity."<sup>14</sup>

The hydrocarbon industry has played a fundamental role in the economic activity of the region, generating approximately 70% of the total economic value produced there. According to documents produced the Magdalena Medio Peace and Development Programme, agriculture is the second-ranking productive activity. Crops include corn, cacao, yucca, plantain, and sorghum—often produced on a small-scale, but crucial to providing food staples for family consumption.

Cattle ranching and palm oil cultivation have also increased as economic activities in the region, but rather than bringing about improvements in quality of life they have been associated with increased inequality and the intensification of the armed conflict.<sup>15</sup>

## UNFOUNDED ACCUSATIONS AGAINST MEMBERS OF THE ACVC

Since the founding of the ACVC, its members have been victims of threats, killings, arbitrary detentions, forced displacement, forced disappearance, torture, the burning of their homes, and blockades of food and basic supplies. Five members have been killed—three presidents of Community Action Boards and two members of the ACVC's board of directors. Another member, Miguel Cifuentes, survived being shot at during a paramilitary attack.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to these aggressions, members of the ACVC have been subjected to unfounded legal prosecutions. In fact, all the members of the ACVC's board of directors were

## THE PEASANT FARMER RESERVE ZONE WAS INTENDED TO PROTECT NATURAL RESOURCES AND PROMOTE THE PEASANT FARMER ECONOMY

reactivated the Peasant Farmer Reserve Zone of the Cimitarra River Valley, which now benefits some 8,935 families.

Miguel Cifuentes, a spokesperson for the ACVC, points out that the reactivation of the ZRC authorizes the economic development projects carried out there. Cifuentes adds: "The economic development projects have as their priority proper land use planning, improvements in quality of life, the strengthening of the peasant farmer economy, food security, and respect for human rights."<sup>12</sup>

The Cimitarra River Valley ZRC

covers some 550,000 hectares, 370,000 of which are designated as Forest Reserve. For the ACVC, the purpose of the ZRC is to grant land rights to the population within the reserve and to prevent new forced displacements. Members of the ACVC affirm that, "the State should invest in the ZRC because [the population within the zone] deserves to have its rights recognized. Which rights? The right to life, the right to land, the right to housing, health, and education, the right to freedom of expression, and the right to have access to markets and investment as peasant farmers."<sup>13</sup>





In Northeast Antioquia, thousands of families have made their living on artisanal mining, primarily gold.

### Artisanal Mining

In Northeast Antioquia, thousands of families have made their living on artisanal mining, primarily gold. Small-scale miners have survived in the midst of armed conflict and State abandonment with the minimal production they were able to extract from their mines. However, according to plans laid out in Project Vision Colombia 2019,<sup>16</sup> the Government proposes converting Northeast Antioquia into the primary mining region for multinational corporations while reducing artisanal mining. The entry of large mining companies into the region became a reality in late 2010. At the same time, 70 small-scale mines were shut down and 118 people were detained for participating in unlicensed mining.<sup>17</sup>

Violence and militarisation have also increased in this region.

There have been threats from illegal armed groups such as the “Black Eagles”, the “Rostros”, and the “Paisas”<sup>18</sup>; paramilitary presence in rural areas of the Remedios municipality<sup>19</sup>; and killings of mining leaders in Segovia<sup>20</sup> among other incidents of aggression and tension. Given these threats, the miners have organised committees to promote their rights. The ACVC works with these committees offering workshops about current legislation, environmentally-sustainable mining practices, and human rights. Their objective is to provide the necessary tools for small-scale miners to defend themselves and seek an alternative through the Peasant Farmer Reserve Zone of the Cimitarra River Valley.<sup>21</sup>

subject to criminal proceedings and half of them were detained. In September 2007, ACVC board members Andres Gil, Oscar Duque, Mario Martinez, and Evaristo Mena were detained. The National Army and the Department of Administrative Security (DAS) raided the ACVC’s apartment and office in Barrancabermeja and removed computers and documents related to the organisation’s work.<sup>23</sup>

The following day, military spokesmen issued a statement to the press announcing 18 additional arrest warrants against members of the ACVC. This action was perceived by members of the ACVC as an attack meant to disarticulate the Association and hinder organized peasant farmers in reclaiming their rights.<sup>24</sup> Several members who were not captured were forced into exile, temporarily paralyzing the Association’s activities. Four months later, in January 2008, ACVC members Ramiro Ortega and Miguel Angel Gonzalez Huepa were also detained on charges of rebellion.

**SINCE THE FOUNDING OF THE ACVC, ITS MEMBERS HAVE BEEN VICTIMS OF THREATS, KILLINGS, ARBITRARY DETENTIONS, FORCED DISPLACEMENT, FORCED DISAPPEARANCE, TORTURE, THE BURNING OF THEIR HOMES, AND BLOCKADES OF FOOD AND BASIC SUPPLIES**





## ACVC WINS NATIONAL PEACE AWARD

In 2010, the ACVC won the National Peace Award granted by the United Nations Development Programme, the newspaper *El Tiempo*, *Caracol* Radio and Television, the magazine *Semana*, and the Foundation Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. This prominent award in Colombia recognized the ACVC's organizational experience in civil resistance, defending the right to life, improving access to the justice system, and pursuing sustainable development for peasant farmers to live in dignity.<sup>25</sup>



## EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLINGS IN THE ZRC

According to the ACVC, 16 extrajudicial killings have been committed in the ZRC of the Cimitarra River Valley.<sup>26</sup> Initially, the majority of these cases were being processed within the military justice system. Only recently have they been transferred to the civilian justice system, specifically to the National Public Prosecutor's Human Rights Unit.<sup>27</sup>



## INTERNATIONAL ACCOMPANIMENT

PBI has accompanied the ACVC since 2007. During 2007 and 2008 the ACVC publicly denounced threats from paramilitary groups and harassment from the National Army.<sup>28</sup> Given the increased threat against members of the ACVC, PBI expanded its accompaniment, emphasizing political advocacy to raise awareness about the problems faces by the organisation and the region in which they carry out their work.

## ABSOLUTION AND LIBERATION

On April 23, 2008 the Human Rights Unit of the Public Prosecutor Office no. 37 in Medellín closed the investigations against Oscar Duque, Mario Martínez and Evaristo Mena due to a lack of evidence. Ramiro Ortega was also released from detention on May 16, 2008 by the same prosecutor. On June 9, 2009, Miguel Huepa was absolved of all charges after a 17-month trial which, according to *Prensa Rural*, was characterized by multiple delays and contradictory witness testimony.<sup>30</sup>

On July 2, 2009, the Public Prosecutor's Office also cancelled the warrants against Luis Carlos Ariza, Miguel Cifuentes, Exenober Polanía, Eladio Morales, Wilson Vega, Gilberto de Jesús Guerra and Henry Palomo—all members of the ACVC accused of rebellion.<sup>30</sup> According to the decision, the authorities lacked a sufficient basis to detain the men.

In August 2009, Andrés Gil was granted provisional release,<sup>31</sup> though the criminal proceedings against him were not suspended despite their basis on the same testimonies that the Judge in Miguel Huepa's case had dismissed for their incongruence and lack of credibility.

The incarceration of these members of the ACVC was a serious blow to the organisation, given that it had to invest time and resources in defence of the accused. Currently, the organisation is resuming its work with "commitment, will, and strength to support peasant farmers of the Cimitarra River Valley."<sup>32</sup>

## NATIONAL GATHERING FOR PEACE

After winning the National Peace Award, the ACVC proposed and organised "Dialogue is the Way"—a gathering for peace that invited social organisations and indigenous, Afro-Colombian and peasant farmer communities to gather to debate peace proposals. The Gathering was held in August 2011 in the petroleum port city of Barrancabermeja (Santander) located on the Magdalena river.<sup>33</sup>

More than 10,000 people took part in this open dialogue to share and build upon different grassroots initiatives for peace and reconciliation for the Colombian people as well as for the defence of land and territory for indigenous, Afro-Colombian and peasant farmer communities.<sup>34</sup> In some cases, participants travelled as many as 42 hours in bus or by river or brought their entire families to participate.

"We decided to organise a gathering where we could bring to light the different experiences similar to those of the ACVC, because in this country there are thousands of experiences like ours," says Mauricio Ramos, member of the Political Commission of the ACVC.<sup>35</sup>

## SECURITY AND PROTECTION MEASURES

In the year 2000 the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights granted precautionary measures to the ACVC after finding that the Association had been, "declared a military objective by regional paramilitary organisations and subject to systematic threats as well as fatal attempts on the lives of its leaders."<sup>36</sup> The Corporation for the Defence and Promotion of Human Rights (REINICIAR) applied for these measures on the ACVC's behalf.<sup>37</sup>

1. Interview with Ramiro Ortega, ACVC, July 2010. The Community Action Board (JAC) is an autonomous expression of organised civil society, the purpose of which is to promote an integrated development model that is both sustainable and viable and constructed out the democratic participation of the community. (For more, see: [http://quimbaya-quindio.gov.co/apc-aa-filles/36336333313836613338316437623663/Normatividad\\_Juntas\\_de\\_Accion\\_comunal.pdf](http://quimbaya-quindio.gov.co/apc-aa-filles/36336333313836613338316437623663/Normatividad_Juntas_de_Accion_comunal.pdf))
2. "Encerradas por el miedo y por la guerra comunidades confinadas en Colombia," CODHES, 28 de junio de 2005
3. ACVC, "El proceso de construcción de la Asociación Campesina del Valle del río Cimitarra, una experiencia de organización, movilización y resistencia en el territorio [sic]," *Prensa Rural*, 16 August 2011, <http://prensarural.org/spip/spip.php?article6306>.
4. "Una apuesta a la paz y a la vida," *El Espectador*, 30 September 2011.
5. CONAP, "Ponencia en el Encuentro por la Paz: ACVC, una experiencia de organización, movilización y resistencia en el territorio," 15 August 2011, <http://www.conapcolombia.org/?p=876>.
6. "Una apuesta a la paz y a la vida," Op. cit.
7. CONAP: Op. cit.
8. Ibid.
9. Méndez, Yenly Angélica, "Zona de Reserva Campesina - ZRC, un instrumento de la política de tierras en clave de Reforma Agraria," *Prensa Rural*, 13 January 2011. The agricultural crisis that was generated by economic liberalisation in the 1990s provoked the loss of 700,000 hectares of crop cultivation and the impoverishment of small and medium-scale producers due to an increase in imported food.
10. Ibid.
11. The initial years of the Uribe Government were marked by a commitment to a military solution to the armed conflict. The previous government had created what were known as demilitarised zones in which there was an agreement between the FARC and the Pastrana Government that the Armed Forces would not be present in order for the two sides to develop dialogue. With the arrival of the Uribe government, dialogue ceased. In this environment, the Peasant Farmer Reserve Zones were understood by the Government as the new demilitarised zones. According to Méndez, this began the initial phase of stigmatising the concept of the ZRC. For further information, see MÉNDEZ, Op. cit.
12. "Incóder reactivó Zona de Reserva Campesina del Valle del Río Cimitarra," *Vanguardia Liberal*, 17 February 2011.
13. Interview with Oscar Duque, founding member of the ACVC, July 2009.
14. Francisco de Roux is the director of the Magdalena Medio Peace and Development Programme. He received the National Peace Award in 2001 for his work in the region.
15. International Peace Observatory. "Intercambio: en este momento, estamos en cero," 6 September 2005.
16. PBI Colombia, "The mining and energy 'boom,'" Mining in Colombia: At what cost?, *ColomPBI* no. 18, November 2011.
17. "La Policía realiza operativos contra la minería ilegal," *Tele Medellín*, 22 December 2010.
18. ACVC, "Anuncio de presencia paramilitar en zona rural de Remedios y Segovia," 25 September 2011.
19. Corporation for Humanitarian Action and Peaceful Coexistence in Northeast Antioquia (CAHUCOPANA), "Paramilitares saquean los negocios y hurtan mulas a la población de la vereda Santa Marta, Remedios, Antioquia," 28 June 2011.
20. Funtraminenergetica, "Paramilitares asesinan a otro líder minero en Segovia, Antioquia (Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática de Santos)," 28 July 2011.
21. Additional Information in: PBI Colombia, Gold fever in Northeast Antioquia, *Bulletin Colombia* no. 17, March 2011.
22. Press release, ACVC, 5 March 2003.
23. "La Fiscalía emitió órdenes de captura contra 18 miembros de la ACVC y hubo nuevos allanamientos," *Vanguardia Liberal*, 2 October 2007.
24. Humanidad Vigente, "Caso ACVC: sigue vigente orden de captura contra varios dirigentes por negligencia de autoridades judiciales," *Prensa Rural*, 2 July 2008.
25. Constanza Vieira, "La paz busca ruta en Barrancabermeja," IPS, 15 August 2011.
26. This number corresponds only to incidents that have occurred since 2004. Extrajudicial killings in this context are a practice in which members of the public forces kill civilians and present them as guerrilla members killed in combat.
27. Interview with members of the ACVC, February 2010
28. "La ACVC: una organización campesina perseguida injustamente por el Estado colombiano," *Prensa Rural*, 26 October 2007.
29. "El dirigente campesino de la ACVC recupera su libertad. Absuelto Miguel Ángel González Huepa, Asociación Campesina del Valle del Río Cimitarra," *Prensa Rural*, 9 June 2009.
30. "Se cancelan órdenes de captura contra líderes campesinos de la ACVC," *Prensa Rural*, 14 July 2009.
31. "En libertad Andrés Gil, dirigente de la ACVC encarcelado por el régimen durante casi dos años," *Derechos Humanos Colombia*, 1 September 2009.
32. Constanza Vieira, "La paz busca ruta en Barrancabermeja," IPS, 15 August 2011.
33. "Presentación de encuentro por la paz en Barrancabermeja," *El Espectador*, 18 Junio 2011.
34. "Barrancabermeja: Más de 10 mil personas en Encuentro por la Paz," CONAP, 13 August 2011.
35. Vieira, Op. cit.
36. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Precautionary Measures 2000, <http://www.cidh.oas.org/medidas/2000.htm>.
37. REINICIAR, "Reiniciar se une a la celebración del Premio Nacional de Paz que hoy recibe la Asociación Campesina del Valle del Río Cimitarra - ACVC," Press Release, 24 November 2010.

## CONTACT THE ACVC

Address: Edificio La Tora, 5° piso, Oficina 502, Barrancabermeja, Colombia  
Telephone: 622 30 16 – Cellular phone: 3142481526  
E-mail: [asociacion.campesina@gmail.com](mailto:asociacion.campesina@gmail.com)





## PROTECTING HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN COLOMBIA SINCE 1994

Peace Brigades International (PBI) is a non-governmental organisation recognised by the United Nations, which has maintained a team of international observers/accompaniers in Colombia on an ongoing basis since 1994. PBI's mission is to protect the working environment of human rights defenders, who face repression due to their non-violent human rights activities.

PBI Colombia teams remain in the field, at the request of local organisations, accompanying persons and organisations under threat. This fieldwork is complemented by significant dialogue and advocacy with civilian and military authorities, as well as with NGOs, the Church, multilateral bodies, and the diplomatic corp, in order to promote human rights and disseminate information on the human rights situation in Colombia.

If you believe PBI's presence helps protect persons who carry out human rights work, you may do the following:

- » Support us economically on a personal or institutional basis.
- » Join the nearest PBI country group and support the international network from your place of residence.
- » Apply to become a volunteer with one of the PBI projects.

[www.pbi-colombia.org](http://www.pbi-colombia.org)

PBI International Delegation  
Development House  
56-64 Leonard St., London  
EC2A 4JX, UK  
Tel. (+44) 20 7065 0775  
[admin@peacebrigades.org](mailto:admin@peacebrigades.org)

PBI Colombia Project  
Rue de la Linière, 11  
1060 Brussels (Belgium)  
Tel. (+32) 2609 4400  
[info@pbicolombia.org](mailto:info@pbicolombia.org)

PBI Delegation in Colombia  
Apartado aéreo 36157  
Bogotá (Colombia)  
Tel. (+57) 1287 0403  
[info@pbicolombia.org](mailto:info@pbicolombia.org)

