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“The New Masters of Barranca”

A Report from CIP’s trip to Barrancabermeja, Colombia, March 6-8, 2001

By Adam Isacson

Yolanda Becerra, an easygoing, dignified woman of perhaps fifty years, is cheerfully patient with gringos who come to her office asking naive questions. She hardly resembles a “military target,” whatever that means. But the paramilitary thugs who took over her city a few months ago remind her regularly that she is in their sights.

Ms. Becerra heads the Popular Women’s Organization (OFP), a group that provides food, health services, job training, and legal aid through “women’s houses” (*casas de la mujer*) in the working class neighborhoods of Barrancabermeja, the main city in the Magdalena Medio region of central Colombia. She looks tired, like she has not had a good night’s sleep in quite a while. I doubt she has, because the OFP has faced the worst of the paramilitaries’ brutal campaign to clear away the remnants of the city’s once-vibrant civil society.

Barrancabermeja is hard to pronounce, and very little of last year’s billion-dollar package of U.S. military aid for Colombia will end up anywhere near this city. But as Washington edges closer to Colombia’s long, bloody conflict, “Barranca” offers a preview of the nightmare to come. For the first time here, the war is entering a scary new phase of urban fighting that may soon appear in Colombia’s larger cities. It is being spearheaded by the paramilitaries, whose growing power the United States can no longer afford to ignore. The only force left standing in their way is a beleaguered but outspoken group of independent, non-violent human rights groups and community leaders like Ms. Becerra.

An “outlaw city”

Put together, the Spanish words “barranca” and “bermeja” mean “reddish-colored ravine.” I did not see any such natural highlights during CIP’s March 6-8 trip there. But what one can see, from almost everywhere one stands, is a massive oil refinery, its 200-foot flare stacks belching flame and thick smoke twenty-four hours a day. Sulfurous smells and industrial-sounding noises can be perceived from a mile away.

Today, about three-quarters of Colombia’s fuel comes from Barrancabermeja, making it a strategically crucial city. Add its central location along the country’s main roads, its port with access to the Atlantic, the nearby presence of gold and mineral wealth, and its position



The *Cristo Petrolero*, or Christ of the Oilfields, rises out of the swamp next to Barrancabermeja’s refinery.

along drug-transit routes, and it becomes clear why Barrancabermeja would be a difficult place for a country to govern while at war with itself.

Barranca was considered an “outlaw city” well before today’s guerrilla and paramilitary groups came on the scene. In 1916, when the first oil well was drilled, it was a small fishing port on the Magdalena River, Colombia’s 965-mile-long equivalent of the Mississippi. But oil made this stiflingly hot settlement a boomtown for decades, attracting thousands of job-seekers. Until about the 1950s, male oil workers made up most of Barranca’s population, and many of the few women were prostitutes brought in from all over the world.

People kept coming, lured by the promise of jobs and forced out of the countryside by violence. The town’s population exploded from 15,400 in the 1938 census to about 300,000 today. More than 80 percent of the city was formed by “land invasions” – squatters’ settlements, basically – which evolved into working-class neighborhoods on the eastern side of town, away from the riverfront. The names of many neighborhoods are simply dates (20 de enero, 25 de agosto, etc.), indicating the anniversaries of their original “invasions.”

Like fast-growing industrial cities anywhere, Barrancabermeja has long been a hotbed of labor activism, radical populist politics, corruption and violence. Oil workers formed what is still one of the country’s largest and most powerful labor unions (the *Unión Sindical Obrera*, or USO), which over the years has lost dozens of its leaders and militants to violence, much of it state-sponsored. Newly invaded neighborhoods organized to press the government for basic services, often inviting a harsh response. Repression in turn fed the development of sophisticated local human rights organizations.

Inevitably, this mix of strategic importance, ungovernability and leftist political leanings attracted Colombia’s guerrilla groups. By the early 1970s the city was a stronghold of the National Liberation Army (ELN), the country’s second-largest Marxist guerrilla organization, whose urban militias held sway in the eastern slums. The larger Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) arrived in the early 1990s, and a tiny third group, the vestigial Popular Liberation Army (EPL), has also exercised influence. A visitor can read slogans for all three spray-painted on walls throughout the city, a rare sight in central Bogotá or Medellín. Abandoned by the Colombian government, most residents of Barranca’s



guerrilla-controlled neighborhoods developed a live-and-let-live approach, allowing the leftist groups to operate in the open, paying “taxes” on demand, and providing assistance when asked or forced to do so.

But the guerrillas are just one entry on the city’s list of violent groups. Major Agustín Rodríguez, a 34-year-old officer who commands the Colombian Navy’s 61st Advanced Riverine Post, had a very long list. Maj. Rodríguez – whose unit, which must patrol 300 miles of the Magdalena River, is to my knowledge the only security force in the area that receives U.S. assistance – told us about the ever-present guerrillas and paramilitaries; the criminal gangs who operate freely; the narcotraffickers who smuggle drugs made elsewhere and grow coca plants across the river in southern Bolívar department, mainly in paramilitary-controlled zones; a copper cartel that controls the products of the region’s mines; and a gasoline cartel that steals up to a quarter of the refinery’s product by punching holes in the pipeline, filling everything from cans to tank trucks. Some refer to the pipeline as “the flute” because of all the holes punched in it. Much of the gas cartel’s product goes to the southern Bolívar coca fields, where it is used in the process that turns the leaves into coca paste, and later cocaine.

The paramilitaries’ quick conquest of the Magdalena Medio

Doodling visual aids on a piece of paper as he talked (my favorites were the stick figures representing guerrillas and paramilitaries), Maj. Rodríguez candidly acknowl-





The Magdalena Medio Region

edged that the paramilitaries are right now the strongest and the fastest growing of all the armed groups in Barranca and the Magdalena Medio region. The United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC), a gathering of anti-guerrilla militias privately financed by landowners and narcotraffickers, clearly has the momentum in Barranca and its environs. Headed by a 35-year-old former drug-cartel associate named Carlos Castaño, the AUC now controls nearly all town centers and many rural areas in all twenty-seven municipalities (counties) of the Magdalena Medio.

The AUC's takeover happened very quickly. While rightist groups have been active in the region since a death squad called Muerte a Secuestradores (MAS, or "Death to Kidnappers") formed in 1981, these squads of hit men did the guerrillas little damage during the 1980s, choosing instead to target local civilian leaders, particularly labor organizers. This began to change in the early 1990s, when local death squads were integrated into a Colombian Navy intelligence network that killed over 130 union officials, journalists, teachers, human rights defenders and activists. [See *Human Rights Watch's* 1996 report, "Colombia's Killer Networks," on the Internet at www.hrw.org/reports/1996/killertoc.htm.]

In 1993 the "paras" made the transition from hit-and-run death squads to an occupying force, establishing their first permanent presence in the Magdalena Medio region in the town of Puerto Boyacá. From there, the newly formed AUC gained ground quickly through a strategy often

called "draining the sea to kill the fish" – a brutal campaign of massacres, disappearances and forced displacement of the civilian population. Paramilitary-controlled areas spread across the map of the Magdalena Medio like a stain. Paramilitary terror in the countryside sent a flood of refugees into Barrancabermeja, swelling the city's eastern zones and pushing the unemployment rate to an estimated 50 percent by early 2001. By the end of the 1990s the AUC had weakened the ELN so severely that paramilitaries controlled even the guerrilla group's mid-1960s birthplace in the San Lucas Mountains of southern Bolívar department.

Colombian and international human rights groups have thoroughly documented the military support and toleration that eased the paramilitary takeover of the Magdalena Medio. The relationship included the intelligence networks of the early 1990s; sharing of information, weapons and ammunition; failure to respond to paramilitary attacks and massacres; and willful blindness to a very open AUC presence. The relationship continues today; during our trip, CIP heard numerous complaints about activities in the region around Barranca, including regular paramilitary checkpoints 100 meters from the 45th battalion's headquarters across the river in Yondó; paramilitary searches within 200 meters of the police station in the port of Puerto Wilches, the next town downriver from Barranca; and a regular 8 AM to 4 PM paramilitary river checkpoint at a site called La Rompira, a few minutes north of Barranca, where the paramilitaries kidnapped or disappeared eighteen people in 2000. (The Navy told us that the paramilitaries do not maintain river checkpoints, though on one recent occasion they found paramilitaries fleeing from a site where one such road-



A panorama of central Barrancabermeja. The Magdalena River is in the background.



Civil-military operation: Colombia's Army has set up a circus on the site of the 1998 massacre

block had been reported.)

May 1998: The paramilitaries enter Barrancabermeja

By the late 1990s, Barrancabermeja was the only population center in the Magdalena Medio region without a permanent paramilitary presence. In fact, the city was one of only a few breaks in a continuous band of paramilitary control stretching across northern Colombia from Panama in the west to Venezuela in the east.

The first major paramilitary incursion in the city took place on May 16, 1998. In one night of terror, paramilitaries swept through several of the city's eastern

According to a frequently heard rumor, Carlos Castaño paid a visit to Barranca, fulfilling a pledge to have a cup of coffee there by New Year's Day

ELN-controlled neighborhoods, killing eleven people and taking away another twenty-five whom they killed later. The 1998 massacre signaled the paramilitaries' transition from selective killings to full-scale military actions within Barrancabermeja's city limits. Many residents consider the May 1998 massacre a watershed moment for control of the city; one human rights activist said that Barranca's history could be divided between a pre-1998 period and a post-1998 period. [See *Amnesty International's 1999 report, "Barrancabermeja: a City under Siege,"* on the Internet at <http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/aipub/1999/AMR/22303699.htm>.]

After May 1998, the AUC presence in Barranca slowly increased, as massacres and other larger-scale ac-

tivities became frighteningly common. For a time, though, the paramilitaries focused more strongly on other parts of Colombia (such as southern Bolívar department and the Catatumbo region near Venezuela, where massacres took place almost daily in 1999). Though their incursions were more frequent, the AUC still lacked the regular presence in Barrancabermeja that would make them a true occupying force.

The final paramilitary push into Barrancabermeja

This began to change in April 2000, when a twenty-something deputy of Carlos Castaño's named "Julián" made a radio announcement declaring his presence in Barranca and the AUC's determination to take over the city. A terrifying upsurge in violence followed; in 2000, the government's regional Human

Rights Ombudsman's office reported, 539 people were killed in Barrancabermeja – about 25 times the murder rate of New York City. Eighty-seven percent were victims of the paramilitaries.

In late December 2000, the paramilitary offensive began in earnest. Starting in the east-central neighborhoods of Miraflores and Simón Bolívar, more than 1,000 paramilitaries spread throughout the eastern half of Barrancabermeja, and this time they stayed. Taking over neighborhood after neighborhood, they gained control of most of the city in about two months. When CIP staff came to visit in early March, only about one and a half of the city's seven "comunas," or wards – essentially, just the downtown and the area around the oil refinery – were outside of the AUC's dominion. A frequently repeated rumor was that Carlos Castaño himself had paid a brief visit to Barranca's formerly ELN-held northeast at the end of December, fulfilling a boast that he would "have a cup of coffee" there by New Year's Day 2001.



Carlos Castaño

The paramilitary offensive began immediately after a series of Colombian government meetings with ELN leaders in Cuba. At these talks, the government showed itself willing to ease negotiations by pulling security forces temporarily out of two municipalities (counties) across the river from Barrancabermeja. The municipalities, San Pablo and Cantagallo in Bolívar department, had passed from ELN to paramilitary control during the previous two

years. While the government's decision was no doubt unpopular – a similar demilitarized zone granted to the FARC has been the site of numerous abuses, with little progress after two years of talks – the paramilitaries encouraged protests against the zone (at times by force), including mid-February demonstrations during which 13,000 protestors closed key roads for days.

So far, the rule of what one human rights leader called “the new masters of Barranca” has been exceedingly cruel. According to the Technical Investigations Unit of Colombia's Attorney-General's office, the AUC killed 145 people in Barranca during the first forty-five days of 2001. Of these, estimates Ms. Becerra's Popular Women's Organization (OFP), 15 percent were women.

In addition to mass killing, the paramilitaries maintain control by closely supervising all activity in their newly conquered neighborhoods. Residents of the Barrio Kennedy sector, which was being used as a center of AUC operations during CIP's early March visit, are required to keep their doors open day and night so that paramilitaries can enter and leave at will. Paramilitary fighters are forcing some families out of their homes (in Barrio Kennedy in February, they gave the families a half-hour of prior notice), then using the houses as barracks and headquarters. The paramilitaries have cut phone lines into several neighborhoods, and they stop everyone in the street to interrogate them about their destination and their busi-



ness. Many people have not left their neighborhoods in months. Because of Barranca's daily high-90-degree heat, people are accustomed to sitting and walking outside in the cool of the evening – but in the paramilitary-controlled neighborhoods, the frightened residents stay inside.

Local human rights leaders told us that the paramilitaries are actively recruiting 17- to 19-year-old boys, many of them veterans of the ELN militias, and offering them a salary, one month's pay up front, a bicycle and perhaps a cell phone. The new recruits' job is to “clean” their neighborhoods of guerrilla supporters. “While these boys may have been in the militias before, even their own families fear them now,” one community leader told us. When these boys are no longer useful, we were told, the paramilitaries kill them because they know too much – a practice called “erasing information.”

In response to numerous calls for a government response, the security forces have militarized parts of the city. Heavily armed soldiers watched us from street corners, and we saw police mini-tanks parked at the entrances to some conflictive neighborhoods. In January, Bogotá pledged to send 1,000 Colombian Army special forces to keep order, though the mayor, the bishop, and non-governmental organizations protested that the deployment would only add to the violence. To date, only eighty have arrived. January 12 marked the arrival in the city of the so-called “Robocops” – an elite police unit easily recognizable by their black uniforms, wrap-around sunglasses, and wide array of weapons. The Robocops and other measures



Barranca and its comunas (wards): By most accounts, as of early March the paramilitaries had taken all but comuna 2 and part of comuna 1

have made little difference, though: between January 12 and early March, the number of dead in the current paramilitary offensive tripled and the AUC took over three of the city's seven wards.

The presence of police, however infrequent, in the "hot" neighborhoods has not in the least bit hindered the paramilitaries. CIP President Robert White and I saw plenty of them operating openly in Barrancabermeja's eastern neighborhoods during a tour organized by the Popular Women's Organization. Though they quickly removed their AUC armbands as our bus entered neighborhoods like Barrio Kennedy, even the most clueless gringo could identify the men wearing polo shirts, slacks and two cell phones on their belts, standing idly on the sides of streets lined with houses made of scrap wood, cinder blocks and corrugated metal. The young men following us on motor-scooters and bicycles – especially the angry-looking individual staring us down as he rode circles around our slow-moving bus – were unmistakable. It was clear who "the new masters of Barranca" were.

Looking for explanations

How, we found ourselves asking everyone we met, did they do it so fast? Why did it take the paramilitaries little more than two months to take over a longtime guerrilla stronghold?

The answer we heard most often was not surprising, given the recent history of the Magdalena Medio: the paramilitaries took over Barrancabermeja so quickly thanks to the complicity and cooperation of Colombia's security forces. The AUC invasion began on December

23, coinciding with a military operation known as "Operation Merry Christmas." With the stated goal of guaranteeing a peaceful Christmas holiday, military and police units set up a temporary presence in the entire city. At the same time, hundreds of paramilitary fighters fanned out into key neighborhoods. When the security forces withdrew, the paramilitaries stayed behind, and the killings began.

Though fear has silenced most witnesses to military-paramilitary collaboration during the current offensive, CIP heard numerous accounts of military and paramilitary personnel operating separately but in full view of each other, of police officers sharing cell phones with paramilitaries and transporting them in their mini-tanks, and of paramilitaries being warned well in advance of impending "raids" on their bases of operations in the eastern neighborhoods. We heard an account of police catching paramilitaries in the act of breaking into a house, and instead of arresting them telling them to go away "because it could cause trouble for us in Bogotá." We were told that while a January 29 raid brought the arrests of fourteen paramilitaries, eleven were inexplicably set free the following day.

While the security forces' cooperation made the paramilitaries' rapid takeover possible, the guerrillas who controlled Barranca's working-class neighborhoods clearly played a role in their own defeat. Pushed by threats or lured by the promise of higher pay, many members of the ELN's urban militias switched sides. These new AUC cadres brought with them their lists of former guerrilla contacts, which (along with the names of anyone else even rumored to be guerrilla supporters) formed the hitlists for the paramilitaries' killing sprees.

The region's military commander, Fifth Brigade chief Gen. Martín Orlando Carreño, places all the blame for the city's takeover on the guerrillas. "It's all the guerrillas' fault. They pushed the people into the paramilitaries' hands."

(Gen. Carreño – whose predecessor at the Fifth Brigade was fired for allowing paramilitary massacres in the Catatumbo region – is a politically savvy officer and a likely future head of the military. He is also a 1990 graduate of the School of the Americas' year-long Command and General Staff course.)

Certainly, many of the city's exhausted residents probably do welcome the relative peace that comes with living in a zone under one group's undisputed control.



César, my cab driver, was no exception. One evening he accompanied me down to the riverbank near my hotel. Fishermen were just loading up their long, narrow canoes for a night of casting nets, and several people with trucks and wheelbarrows were shoveling river sand through screens, hauling it away for construction material. Once we were out of hearing, César stopped talking about fishing. “I don’t support the paramilitaries and I don’t want to have anything to do with them. But the ELN were abusing everyone in the neighborhoods, and now that the paras are in charge things are better. At least things are calm.” This calm is only superficial, though; Gen. Carreño noted that in many areas the paramilitaries are going too far, mistreating the local population and winning only fear, not support.

A coming escalation?

The outlook for the near future is even darker. By many accounts, the FARC and ELN are teaming up for a counteroffensive, threatening a further escalation in urban violence. Instead of responding directly to Plan Colombia in the southern department of Putumayo, many believe that the FARC is shifting to other conflict zones like the Magdalena Medio, a move that also gives the larger group an opportunity to fill the vacuum left by the clearly declining ELN. During our visit we heard reports

“The ELN never liked us but they never blocked our work,” explained a leader of the OFP.

of open firefights and house-to-house warfare on the streets of Barranca’s eastern neighborhoods in the previous few days, apparently between paramilitaries and the jointly operating guerrillas.

Meanwhile, across the river in southern Bolívar department, the Colombian army was mounting a rare offensive. According to Gen. Carreño, the mission of “Operation Bolívar” is to regain government control and eliminate coca cultivation from the zone that may become the site of the ELN peace negotiations. During the first four weeks of this operation, ten U.S.-supplied Turbo Thrush spray aircraft fumigated 3,600 hectares (about 9,000 acres) of coca with the chemical glyphosate. (These were the same spray planes used from December through February for the first phase of the “Plan Colombia” offensive, far to the south in Putumayo department.) Details about the operation’s targets have been sketchy, though authorities claim that the paramilitaries have been hardest hit by the military engagements and the fumigation. Several times we heard mention of a January raid on a paramilitary headquarters at San Blas, Bolívar department – though the



paramilitaries, obviously warned in advance, had abandoned the site well before the raid. The ELN, which on March 9 broke off contacts with the Colombian government to protest Operation Bolívar, apparently sees itself, and not the paramilitaries, as the offensive’s main target.

Barranca’s besieged community leaders

Amazingly, despite its growing violence and bleak outlook, Barrancabermeja still has a vibrant, outspoken civil society. After years of repression and selective assassination, the remnant of Barranca’s labor unions and popular movements remains mobilized and defiant.

Most of the city’s neighborhood associations, women’s groups, and human rights groups never had a friendly relationship with the ELN. But at least, the Popular Women’s Organization (OFP) told us, when they protested mistreatment the guerrillas generally left them alone. “The ELN never liked us but they never blocked our work,” explained one of the group’s leaders.

Things are far worse now. At this point, Barranca’s civil-society groups are just about the only people the AUC does not control in the eastern neighborhoods. Declaring them “military targets,” the paramilitaries are carrying out a campaign of constant threats and intimidation against the few organizations that remain vocally opposed to them.

The entire board of directors of the Regional Human Rights Committee (CREDHOS, which has lost many members to selective killings) has been threatened within the past few months; three have left Barranca since last September and two have survived assassination attempts.



CIP President Robert White with the OFP's Matilde Vargas (standing)

The Association of Relatives of the Disappeared (ASFADDES), which includes many families of victims and witnesses of the May 1998 massacre, was forced to close its Barrancabermeja office on February 28, 2001. The USO oil workers' union has scaled back its political activities in the last few months.

Government agencies and international organizations have also faced paramilitary aggression. The Colombian government's Social Solidarity Network, which provides aid to internally displaced persons, and regional Human Rights Ombudsman's office admit that they are largely unable to work in Barrancabermeja's eastern neighborhoods. On March 1, paramilitaries detained for hours and stole all supplies from an international humanitarian mission delivering aid to a displaced community in southern Bolívar department. The mission, with representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Program, the government Human Rights Ombudsman, the Social Solidarity Network, and the non-governmental Magdalena Medio Peace and Development Program, was stopped for eight hours at a site only fifteen minutes from the Colombian Army's 45th Battalion headquarters.

Of all agencies, Ms. Becerra's OFP has been the most aggressively and specifically targeted since the paramilitary takeover began.

On January 27, paramilitaries paid two visits to the OFP's "women's house" in southeastern Barrancabermeja, demanding that the house's director hand over the keys to the facility. This demand illustrates the paramilitaries' strategy, Ms. Becerra explained. The AUC has no desire to shut down OFP's food, health and other services, which many of the neighborhood's residents use regularly. Instead, they want the OFP directors out of the way so that they can provide the same services themselves – which is why they want the keys to the "women's houses." The second paramilitary visitor to the OFP on January 27 was so belligerent that the police had to come and arrest him. He was let go the following day.

Most of Barrancabermeja's human rights defenders go everywhere these days in the company of foreign volunteers wearing T-shirts from Peace Brigades International (PBI), a non-profit organization that provides "accompaniment" to threatened activists in several countries. PBI has a long and successful record of protecting dissident voices in some very threatening situations. Several Barranca civil-society leaders credit PBI's European, Canadian and U.S. observers with making their work possible during the current paramilitary onslaught. "Without their accompaniment, I couldn't visit the neighborhoods where we work," said one. Another admitted that PBI volunteers even accompany her to the bathroom when in the affected neighborhoods, "because you never know when they might come for you."

Yet even PBI is facing a serious challenge in



Paramilitaries want the keys to the OFP "women's house" (*casa de la mujer*) in southeastern Barrancabermeja

Barrancabermeja. On February 8, two paramilitary thugs came back to the OFP's southeastern Barranca "women's house" demanding the keys. They took away the cell phone and passport of a Swedish Peace Brigades observer accompanying the house's staff, and declared both the house's director and the PBI worker "military targets."

Perhaps cowed by the international outcry they triggered, the paramilitaries appeared to shift their strategy in late February, directing their threats at the OFP's social base instead of its leadership. Seeking to dry up the group's support, the rightists are spreading word that they will target all women who participate in OFP-sponsored events and activities. The strategy seems to be working. Ms. Becerra told me that on November 24, 2000, the OFP held a street march that attracted 10,000 participants. Now, because of the threats against the neighborhoods' women, she doubts that she can convene a thousand.

During our visit, it became obvious that the paramilitaries had not completely given up their intimidation of OFP leaders. On March 7, AUC members entered an eastern Barranca "women's house" and destroyed literature promoting an OFP event commemorating International Women's Day (March 8). Later that same day, while attending a gathering to prepare for the March 8 event, Ms. Becerra got a call on her cell phone from a stranger telling her to "get ready for what's coming."

Protecting human rights defenders

What can be done to protect Barranca's battered human rights groups in such awful circumstances? We asked the city's new mayor, Julio César Ardila, a former human rights ombudsman whose low-budget campaign defeated the powerful Liberal Party machine largely by plastering his campaign logo – a 1970s-style smiley-face – all over town. Mayor Ardila argued that a permanent military presence throughout the city would force out the paramilitaries and make conditions safe for community leaders. "People don't trust the security forces here because they only come for a little while and then they leave. They never stay." Gen. Carreño agreed with this criticism, blaming it on scarce resources. He added that one of his main goals is to increase permanent military deployments throughout the region.

When I asked their opinion about this proposal, Barrancabermeja's human rights and community leaders disagreed emphatically. Some laughed out loud. Given the history of military-paramilitary collaboration that continues today, they argued, a further militarization of Barranca would guarantee their extermination rather than protect them. They do not see Colombia's state as a potential protector.

Some of Barrancabermeja's best-known human rights defenders

The Popular Women's Organization (*Organización Femenina Popular*, or OFP)

The OFP, a support organization for Barrancabermeja's working-class women, was founded by the Catholic Church in 1972. It became autonomous from the church in 1988 and in 1995 expanded its work elsewhere in the Magdalena Medio region. The OFP offers many services to the region's women: economic aid (inexpensive kitchens, cooperatives, training), education (scholarships, publications and teaching materials), health services, youth services (music and dance workshops), assistance to displaced persons, and legal aid for victims of human rights violations.

The Association of Relatives of the Disappeared (*ASFADDES*)

ASFADDES is a support network for those whose family members have been forcibly disappeared (over 4,600 people have been "disappeared" in Colombia since 1982). ASFADDES offers legal assistance, documentation, accompaniment, education and economic assistance. It fights for verdicts against the perpetrators and reparations for the victims' families. The association has offices in the Colombian cities of Bogotá, Bucaramanga, Popayán, Neiva, and Medellín. Under relentless paramilitary harassment, ASFADDES closed its Barrancabermeja office on February 28, 2001.

The Regional Corporation for the Defense of Human Rights (*CREDHOS*)

Founded in 1988, CREDHOS has a 25-member directorate and a membership of 500 activists who work to defend the human rights of the residents of Barrancabermeja and the Magdalena Medio region. CREDHOS carries out human rights education projects throughout the city, receives and investigates denunciations of human rights abuses, and provides legal aid and technical assistance to victims of violations.

Magdalena Medio Peace and Development Program (*PDPMM*)

Founded in 1995 by the Center for Research and Public Education (CINEP) and the Diocese of Barrancabermeja, this highly regarded, large-scale program carries out development and conflict-resolution projects in some of the most troubled parts of the Magdalena Medio Region.

Peace Brigades International (*PBI*)

Since 1994, PBI has maintained a program in Colombia to protect human rights defenders and communities of displaced persons. Following a strictly non-violent methodology, Peace Brigades workers physically accompany threatened people and organizations, perform periodic visits to conflict zones and meet regularly with local authorities and non-governmental organizations. Currently, PBI volunteers come from at least twelve countries in North America and Europe. The organization operates in Bogotá, the Magdalena Medio region, Medellín, and the Urabá region in northwestern Colombia. In the Magdalena Medio, PBI volunteers accompany the OFP, CREDHOS, and ASFADDES.

(Source: Government of Colombia, *Defensoría del Pueblo*, Resolución Defensorial No. 007 [Bogotá: March 6, 2001]).

The city's civil society groups believe that only international support can allow them to do their work amid the current paramilitary offensive. Specifically, they are asking for two types of help from non-Colombians.

First, they contend that international pressure makes a huge difference. Statements of concern, communiqués, responses to urgent-action requests, and messages from the U.S. government (including members of Congress) – any indications that the international community is watching closely – have strong effects that are widely felt in Barrancabermeja.

Second, the city's human rights groups call for what they call "accompaniment" – the physical presence of international allies alongside them, at their events, in their offices, even on the street. While the PBI presence is essential, we were told, the groups also need regular visits from their allies in North America and Europe. Given the obvious security risk, it would be irresponsible for the Center for International Policy to recommend that individual U.S. citizens go to Barrancabermeja. We nonetheless encourage our counterpart organizations in the United States and Europe, who have the contacts and can take the precautions necessary to minimize risk, to consider complying with the accompaniment requests of the city's human rights defenders, preferably coordinating with their networks to guarantee maximum coverage. We also pass along the Barrancabermeja human rights community's expressions of gratitude to Minnesota Sen. Paul Wellstone, who has visited the city twice, in November 2000 and March 2001.

A long-term approach, if political will exists

International pressure and visits are not long-term solutions, though. Untying Barrancabermeja's tangle of violence and instability – preferably before its experience is repeated in other, larger Colombian cities – will require Colombians to take national-level action. The United States must also be prepared to offer important assistance at key moments.

First and foremost, Colombia's government needs to do much more to stop the paramilitaries. Colombians will not trust their state to protect them until all can agree that the military-paramilitary relationship has been decisively broken. This means arresting known paramilitary leaders and responding quickly to attacks and threats. It also means punishing security force personnel who aid and abet paramilitaries or who knowingly allow abuses to occur. The United States, which has entered into a very close partnership with Colombia's security forces, must apply heavy public and private pressure for a greater anti-para-

military effort. One under-utilized channel might be the denial of U.S. visas to individuals credibly alleged to be financially supporting the rightist groups.

Even though it is frustrating and may take years, Colombia's peace process needs greater support because it offers a quicker way out of the violence than an escalated war of attrition. From military officers to human rights workers, everyone we met with expressed a belief that the ELN guerrillas honestly desire peace. If the government stands up to the paramilitaries and temporarily grants a demilitarized zone across the river, it may pave the way for the smaller rebel group's graceful exit. It may also provide an instructive example for the FARC about the viability of entering into serious negotiations.

Finally, it is quite remarkable that everyone with whom we spoke – from the brigade to the barrio – agreed that Colombia does not need another massive package of military aid from Washington. Conflictive zones like Barrancabermeja and the Magdalena Medio need social and economic assistance. Development aid can alleviate the economic desperation that feeds the conflict, and it can increase Colombian citizens' confidence in their own government's ability to deliver the goods. This assistance

"We've been trying to provide security conditions for thirty years and it hasn't worked. Development projects need to start now, even if we have to start small."

must not be imposed from above – it must be designed in coordination with the recipient communities, and it must avoid inadvertently strengthening the paramilitaries, who are already promoting their own plan for developing the Magdalena Medio region.

I asked several people to respond to the U.S. government's oft-repeated argument that development projects cannot work by themselves until military aid first provides security conditions. Major Rodríguez, the naval officer, had the snappiest response. "We've been trying to provide security conditions for thirty years and it hasn't worked. Development projects need to start now, even if we have to start small. If the projects are successful, they will create support among the population, who will then support the government. That's the best way to weaken the armed groups. More arms will not solve the problem."

There is nothing particularly new or innovative about these proposed solutions. What has been lacking in Bogotá and Washington is the political will to take the risks required for these old proposals to become reality.

We are still waiting for credible and far-reaching efforts to stop the paramilitaries, unequivocal support for peace negotiations, and economic assistance programs instead of dramatic military offensives.

While we wait, the OFP and their colleagues keep trying to do their work. On our tour of Barrancabermeja's paramilitary-controlled eastern neighborhoods, OFP leaders took us to one of the public kitchens where they sell inexpensive meals to the locals. From this hilly zone the flames of the refinery were easily visible, miles away next to the river. A young man followed our group and stood outside the door, sizing us up. Everyone stopped talking.

"Good morning," an OFP leader addressed him, looking him in the eye.

"Good morning," he replied.

A pause. "Can I help you with something?"

"Are you serving lunch yet?" (Nice try – it was just after 10 o'clock in the morning.)

"No. Please come back later."

The paramilitary watcher sidled off, further down the street. The OFP leader launched into her lecture, as though nothing had happened.

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CIP Senior Associate Adam Isacson (left) with CIP President Robert White (right) in Barrancabermeja

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