

## NEWS RELEASE

### International Forum Commits to A Counter-Imperial Faith as it Links Colombia's 'Bleeding' To U.S. Agenda in Latin America

*Manila, Philippines - April 7, 2009* – The U.S. Empire is making a desperate and brutal assault on the Colombian people to secure its traditional hold over the Americas and over the globe, declare participants representing various faiths at an international forum held March 20-23 in Bogotá, Colombia.

But a new spirituality is rising from the people's shared pain and struggle, noted delegates of *Peace for Life's* Second People's Forum as they celebrated the “emergence of life in the throes of U.S. imperial power” upon hearing powerful and inspiring testimonies from Colombia's women, displaced indigenous people, mothers of the disappeared, Afro-Colombians, labor organizers, social activists and human rights defenders.

They pledged to build on this “new spirituality of breath and life” to counter the religion of empire which claims that Colombia's 'bleeding' and those of people elsewhere are a necessary sacrifice for development and for globalization. “Too many Christian churches preach this theology, condoning the sacrifice of the poor, or becoming complicit by their silence,” lamented the People's Forum in its closing declaration as it vowed to “reject this theology of sacrifice for imperial globalization.”

The People's Forum also endorsed the Colombian people's campaign for a Humanitarian Agreement and Humanitarian Exchange which seeks to free the persons kidnapped by FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the political prisoners being held by the government. The campaign is led by *Colombians for Peace* and opposition senator Piedad Córdoba, one of the keynote speakers at the forum.

*Peace for Life* (PFL) organised the People's Forum in partnership with *Proyecto Justicia y Vida* and a group of Colombian NGOs and social movements. The gathering addressed the theme, “Without Fear of Empire: Global People's Resistance”.

Participants coming from 25 countries across the globe spent ten days in Colombia interacting with hundreds of local activists and victims of military and paramilitary violence under the Uribe regime. A four-day conference in Bogotá allowed them to look deeper into the structural causes of the violence and armed conflict that has gripped Colombian society for five decades.

The international delegation also had an opportunity to experience and investigate first-hand the actual conditions of displaced and dispossessed Colombians during separate solidarity missions organized by the local hosts in Cali and Barrancabermeja.

Cali is Colombia's third largest city and a developing industrial hub with a strong labor movement that continues to struggle for workers' rights and against privatization. In Barrancabermeja, site of Colombia's primary oil refinery, hundreds of families have been displaced as a result of armed conflict as government forces, paramilitaries and leftist guerillas battle for political and economic control of the area.

Inputs from local participants and resource persons described how Colombian authorities regularly limit free assembly, break up unions, target women, harass homosexuals and prostitutes, foster unemployment through firings to promote privatization, license "social cleansing" policies that intimidate, torture, rape, imprison and frequently kill dissident citizens, especially leaders seeking peaceful change.

Through these encounters with Colombian activists, the international participants witnessed how the Uribe government is falsely presenting itself as supporting democratic institutions and structures, when in fact its widely touted "Democratic Security" program masks state violence and often facilitates "social cleansing" programs against dissidents.

These actions, according to local resource persons, support a broader destructive policy of forced displacement and militarization within a system of power and wealth that serve mainly Colombia's elite—three percent of the population that own at least half of the country's arable lands—and the U.S. interests that back them. A similar vicious pattern exists in other countries allied with the U.S., observed the PFL delegation.

The forum's local and international participants shared a common analysis of Colombia's value for the U.S. Empire: Colombia is the third largest Latin American supplier of oil to the U.S., and its strategic geographical location in the region affords the U.S. the foothold it needs to secure its hegemony over the Americas.

Local resource persons talked about the growth and continuing resistance of people's movements across Latin America and the rise to power of progressive governments in such countries as Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, further underscoring the urgency of tighter U.S. control over Colombia.

But there are public officials, whom the international delegation met while in Colombia, who are challenging the lies and repression of the national government. The strong presence and involvement of Colombian social movements in the forum also proved that there exists in Colombia a viable counter-force, led especially by women, Afro-Colombians and indigenous leaders, which will challenge the empire's agenda in the country.

The following Colombian groups, led by human rights NGO *Proyecto Justicia y Vida*, took part in organizing the forum: *Sociedad Latinoamericana de Economía Política y Pensamiento Crítico (SEPLA)*; *Colombianas y colombianos por La Paz*; *Movimiento de Cristianos y Cristianas por la Paz*; *Comisión Interfranciscana de Justicia, Paz y Reverencia con la Creación*; *Movimiento de Maestros y Maestras*; *Movimiento Campesino Colombiano*; *Movimiento Indígena*

*Colombiano; Movimiento de Víctimas de Crímenes del Sector Financiero; and Red Ecumenica.*

Colombians are bringing the same winds of change that have been blowing across Latin America in the last decade, promising to end U.S. hegemony over the Americas. “We have shared in the mourning and rage of Colombians amid their repression, but we are inspired and confident in the new day that their struggle is bringing near,” said Pfl coordinator, Carmencita Karagdag.

The People's Forum is a regular assembly of *Peace for Life*, an international faith-based movement for peace and justice. The First People's Forum was held in the Philippines in 2004.

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