

Bogotá, July 1, 2007

Dear Sisters and Brothers;

We send you greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. May your time together at the Assembly be a blessing for all the Mennonite Churches in Canada.

Thank you for the opportunity to share about the grave situation in Colombia, South America, and the effects that the armed conflict are having on peace workers and church ministries like Justapaz, the peace office of the Colombian Mennonite Church, and partner of the Mennonite Church in the US.

Justapaz is the Christian Center of Justice, Peace and Nonviolent Action and, along with other church organizations and ministries, has worked for 17 years to promote nonviolence and the gospel of peace through church training programs and local, national and international peace initiatives. These include conscientious objection, conflict mediation and accompaniment of churches that are suffering the consequences of war and yet live out their faith in the midst of fear and adversity.

However, in our context following Christ sometimes leads to hardship.

The early morning of June 14th 2007, our office was broken into. Assailants stole two computers. But given the other computers and items of value left behind, they were after the contents of the PCs. This included sensitive case information about church members who are victims and witnesses to violations of human rights and personal information about individuals and a national network of churches active in the promotion of peace-building and human dignity. The assailants broke into the desk of the coordinator of a program for the protection of persons at risk.

The assailants demonstrated a sophisticated ability to intrude on the organizations most sensitive information by stealing the PC used by the documentation program. This joint effort of Justapaz and the Peace Commission of the Evangelical Council of Colombian Churches registers human rights violations, including threats, assassination, and torture, against members of Evangelical and Protestant churches. We have found, for example, that in the last five years, some 160 pastors have been assassinated by different armed groups. Last year, we published "A Prophetic Call," the first edition of a report sharing the suffering of churches at the hands of all parties to the armed conflict as well as their _hope_ detailed through courageous peace ministries. Through highlighting churches' experiences, the program aims to educate, provide recommendations for public policy reform and ultimately contribute to a non-violent solution to the conflict.

Victims trust us with their deepest grief so that their voices may be amplified and truth be known. For many church people, this is their only hope to do so. This apparently politically motivated theft violates this trust and jeopardizes the safety of witnesses and aims to intimidate those carrying out the truth-telling project. This attack signals that participating churches, individuals and Justapaz staff are at risk. Nevertheless, protection of victims is necessary in working towards God's vision, one where human dignity is respected and people live unafraid.

This attack against Justapaz's office is at least the sixth in a series break-in and information thefts targeting peace and human rights organizations, however this is the first time a church organization was violated in this way. Some workers from other organizations also received death threats. These violations take place in a context of the Colombian government "democratic security" policy and of reluctance of the US Congress to approve the Free Trade Agreement with Colombia, in part because of the

Colombian Government's human rights record.

Justapaz and the Colombian Mennonite Church reaffirm our commitment to non-violence, justice and peace, which we understand as part of our call to follow Jesus and resolve differences nonviolently and promote solutions to the armed conflict within a framework of justice and truth, the call to repentance, reparation and reconciliation.

We call again for respect of the right to religious freedom, the respect for our physical church spaces, and our ministries intended to contribute to peacebuilding.

Beloved Sisters and Brothers, today we share with you our fear. Paraphrasing the apostle Paul, "...if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; and if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." (1 Cor. 12:26). We extend a heartfelt thanks to those churches, organizations and individuals who already accompanying us during this difficult time. We invite you, brothers and sisters, to unite your prayers with ours for the continuity of our work and for the transformation of those who are responsible for these acts.

We invite you to support Colombian churches working for peace and Justapaz through sending letters of support to your governments and ours. We would gladly receive copies to share with our churches here. (Sample letters and additional information is available on the Justapaz website <http://www.justapaz.org/-English-> and through <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/420>) Also, we invite you to consider joining us in our Days of Prayer and Action, held in each May and Bread and Peace the 21st of September, International Day of Peace and Nonviolence. Some may also feel called to enter into relationship with a Colombian sister church. These efforts strengthen the global family of faith, seek the transformation destructive international policies and contribute to a non-violent solution to the armed conflict.

In closing, we share this passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians that has been important to us at this time:

II Corinthians 4: 7-11: Yet we who have this spiritual treasure are like common clay pots, in order to show that the supreme power belongs to God, not to us. 8We are often troubled, but not crushed; sometimes in doubt, but never in despair; 9there are many enemies, but we are never without a friend; and though badly hurt at times, we are not destroyed. 10At all times we carry in our mortal bodies the death of Jesus, so that his life also may be seen in our bodies. 11Throughout our lives we are always in danger of death for Jesus' sake, in order that his life may be seen in this mortal body of ours.

It is our prayer that through this act Jesus will be seen and our witness will be strengthened.

Blessings in the Christ of Peace,

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