

International Pre Election Observation Mission to Colombia

From February 3-14, 2010, 22 development professionals, human rights analysts and other citizens of more than seven countries including the Canada, United States, Germany, the U.K. and Mexico participated in an extensive pre-electoral observation mission, an effort led by the U.S. based non-governmental organization Global Exchange. The Canadian contingent of the mission consisted of Barbara Wood and Ricardo Miranda, both representatives of CUPE (Canadian Union of Public Employees), Carleen Pickard, of the Council of Canadians and Tim Bood, a physician from Halifax and previous election monitor in El Salvador.

The objective of the Mission was to assess the conditions for the March 14 congressional elections by gathering information from diverse actors including governmental institutions, political parties and non-governmental organizations. The team participated in intensive orientation and training as well as in-field observation and research. Pre-electoral conditions were observed in the federal departments of Antioquia, Córdoba, Valle del Cauca and Santander. A full description of the agenda and those interviewed can be found in the report.

Key Findings

The initial press statement from the Mission, issued on February 15, 2010, garnered over 60 articles in Latin American and international media, and focused on problems associated with election-related human rights violations and the persistent human rights crisis in Colombia; the related climate of fear that exists; electoral crimes, including the lack of implementation and application of electoral laws (guarantees); and finally concern with the continued existence of illegal armed groups exerting control over electoral processes. The press statement (English) can be found here:

<http://americasmexico.blogspot.com/2010/03/international-delegation-issues.html>

The Mission's final report synthesizes information from the interviews, meetings and testimonies that were carried out in February and presents more detailed explanation of the findings included in the press statement. Most disturbingly, the mission's report highlights:

1. The involvement of illegal armed groups in the elections, including paramilitaries and drug traffickers, who benefit from campaign financing as well as determining outcomes;
2. Electoral fraud and corruption, including vote buying, voter intimidation, use of fraudulent identification cards and vote rigging;
3. Illegal campaign financing including the use of public funds and contracts, the use of drug trafficking profits and exceeding campaign financing limits; and
4. The manipulation of social programs designed to assist the poorest of the poor – recipients of such programs have been told to vote for certain candidates, otherwise the state-funded program would be cut and with it, their benefits.

Subsequent to the Mission's visit, on March 5, Colombia's Constitutional Court issued a decision to not allow a referendum in support of a third term in office for Colombian President Alvaro Uribe. The petition process was found to have substantial irregularities including improper campaign funding and the way in which it was passed through Congress. The court's decision

signifies an important step forward for Colombia's justice system and democracy which the pre-electoral mission hopes will continue in order that the impunity around electoral crimes ends.

Canadian Context

The report of the pre-electoral observation Mission comes at a key time for Canadians as Parliament once again begins debate on the implementing legislation for the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (CCFTA), formally signed in November 2008*. Months previous to the signing, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on International Trade (CIIT) stated that the CCFTA should not proceed without further improvements in the human rights situation in Colombia and a comprehensive and independent human rights impact assessment (HRIA)**. Since then the CCFTA has been the source of heated debates within Parliament and the broader public. With the Parliament resumed this month, the government has re-introduced the legislation as Bill C-2, signalling their intention to move forward with the CCFTA. The serious concerns which led to the CIIT to call for an HRIA still remain, however, and most recent information to come out of Colombia, including the pre-electoral Mission report continues to support that need.

Conclusion

The serious concerns raised by the pre-electoral mission combined with the ongoing human rights violations and the continued climate of impunity in Colombia further support the immediate halt of the CCFTA and the call for an independent and comprehensive human rights impact assessment. Canada entering into a free trade agreement with Colombia now not only sends the wrong message to Canadians and the Colombian regime, it also may make Canada and Canadian companies complicit or passive supporters of continued violence in Colombia.

*<http://www.pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?category=1&id=2321>

** http://www.ccic.ca/working_groups/apg_e.php