

Colombian peasant, indigenous groups nominated for Nobel Peace Prize

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PHILADELPHIA – The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker humanitarian service organization, has nominated two Colombian groups for the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for their extraordinary commitment to nonviolence in the midst of the country's 50 year-old conflict and their exemplification of organized efforts by many Colombians to end that conflict justly.

The conflict among guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the Colombian armed forces has destabilized the already precarious living conditions for many of Colombia's most vulnerable communities for decades. The Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó (Peace Community of San José de Apartadó) and the Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca (Association of Indigenous Townships of Northern Cauca - ACIN) have responded both creatively and nonviolently to avoid becoming enmeshed in the crisis while protecting their communities and their land.

San José de Apartadó declared itself a peace community in 1997. Residents of the 1,300 member, rural community pledged not to engage in war, either directly or indirectly, and to look for peaceful and negotiated solutions to the conflict. This declaration caused the armed groups to declare San José de Apartadó as aiding the "enemy."

Although San José de Apartadó displays white flags and constructed fences to indicate its neutrality, armed groups, including Colombia's armed forces, have continued to attack and kill its residents. These attacks forced many living in San José de Apartadó to seek refuge in a nearby village to avoid further attacks and persecution.

In 2005, these constant human rights abuses led the Inter-American Court for Human Rights to rule that the Colombian government was obligated to "safeguard the right to life, personal integrity, security, freedom of movement, dignity, and respect of each individual domicile" of the residents of San José de Apartadó.

The Association of Indigenous Townships of Northern Cauca (ACIN), is a grassroots organization of the indigenous Nasa people, whose members describe themselves as "communities in peaceful resistance." Founded in 1994, ACIN strengthens the ability of indigenous townships and reserves with a combined population of 250,000 to address their disputes with both the Colombian state, armed groups and the economic interests of landholders. ACIN also supports the communities in creating nonviolent mechanisms of self-protection such as developing security procedures, strengthening community organization, promoting sustainable agriculture projects, and developing national and international ties to other groups. ACIN has received Colombia's National Peace Prize on two occasions and the United Nations' Equator Prize for outstanding development projects.

Northern Cauca is rich in minerals and provides one-third of the water resources needed to irrigate Colombia's sugar crop. These abundant resources, combined with their strategic location,

have made the region a prime site for commercial interests that have attempted to drive people from the land to make way for development projects.

Through the work of ACIN, Nasa communities can respond collectively to disputes or to threats of violence from the country's various armed factions and resist external pressure to side with any of Colombia's armed actors. Over the course of the conflict many leaders have been assassinated and threatened. In 2005, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ruled that 9 of ACIN's leaders be granted protective measures and that the government investigate threats against them.

"The fact that indigenous people are opening the way for peace is significant because they bear the brunt of the violence and are too often the victims of the conflict," said Mary Lord, AFSC Assistant General Secretary for Peace and Conflict Resolution.

ACIN's resistance to war is rooted in traditional Nasa teachings, which say all actions affect the balance on which life and well-being depend. Therefore all activities must protect life and strengthen the culture. This commitment includes protecting the land and its resources, asserting the communities' rights in order to defend their autonomy, and abstaining from all violence.

The Indigenous Guard is an example of how ACIN has responded to the conflict. The Guard is an organized, unarmed group of 7,000 men and women who volunteer to protect Nasa communities. Carrying with them only a staff to symbolize their office, members of the Guard reject the intrusion of armed factions into indigenous territories and refuse any form of support from armed groups. The Guard has also been a recipient of Colombia's National Peace Prize.

"We've had to confront the guerrilla, the paramilitary, the army, and the police—and we've been successful. Before, an armed group would come into our community, and because we had no protection, the people would flee. They would become displaced. The armed groups would say, 'If you don't leave, we'll kill you'," said one founding member of the Guard.

In 1947, AFSC, along with the British Friends Service Council received the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of Quakers worldwide for humanitarian service during and after two world wars. AFSC has its national headquarters in Philadelphia and offices in 22 countries. Its programs emphasize the inherent dignity and worth of all people.

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YACHAY WASI, NGO/UN ECOSOC & DPI, NYC and Cuzco, PERU

"Yachay Wasi means House of Learning in Quechua"

Email: yachaywasi@nyc.rr.com

<http://www.yachaywasi-ngo.org>