

Urgent Action: Colombia

September 13, 2013

Update 9/14/13: There is now a petition available here!

Ricardo Esquivia, the Colombian human rights and peace activist whose work is world renowned and whom we interviewed in the pages of the last issue of *New Politics* has been targeted and threatened with death on the false accusation of being an organizer for the FARC guerrillas. We urge you to read the information from Lillian Hall of Sembrandopaz below and to take action that could save his life and the lives of those with whom he works closely.

Sembrandopaz works for social justice, integral human development, peace and reconciliation. It is a community that respects human dignity and creatively transforms itself into a restorative space through the pedagogic education of learning through doing, based on non-violence, spirituality, solidarity, dialogue, democracy. and respect towards the environment, seeking to generate wealth through the integral development of people so that they can contribute to a more just and happy society.

Subject: political persecution of Ricardo Esquivia and community leaders in Colombia happening NOW

Some background:

Political persecution in Colombia happening NOW: Ricardo Esquivia, and community leaders of the peace movement that we at Sembrandopaz have been accompanying and nurturing in the Alta Montana of Montes de Maria on the Caribbean Coast of Colombia are under attack. Ricardo is being targeted by Colombian military intelligence for supposedly being a FARC leader who is organizing peasants in our area of Montes de Maria for an eventual return of the FARC. At the same time, several of the peasant leaders we accompany, and with whom we did the April peace march, have received written death threats. Four days ago, one was arrested on trumped up charges of homicide, extortion, criminal conspiracy and other serious (and unfounded) charges. And Immigration opened investigations on two of our Mennonite companions two months ago to see if they are violating their religious visas by participating in peace marches. We now see that these are not isolated incidents, but in fact part of a coordinated plan to isolate Ricardo and the community leaders and decapitate this grassroots peace movement. (You can find out more on Sembrandopaz' facebook page).

Having the Colombian military against you is serious business and we need your help!

The military colonel who is behind this (according to our contact) apparently said: 'Ricardo Esquivia is an old guerrilla who we have not been able to capture for lack of proof, but we are going to get him- and the gringas who accompany him'.

In the style of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a native of this area, we are calling it "The Chronicle of an Announced Detention" as everything our contact forewarned us of is, in fact, happening in the order predicted.

We are convinced that this is a real threat to Ricardo, our community leaders, and the peace movement we have been accompanying and nurturing in the Alta Montana of Montes de Maria on the Caribbean Coast of Colombia.

Yesterday we videotaped our source spelling out the military plan to arrest Ricardo and some of the community leaders in order to dismantle this peace movement of formerly displaced peasants who have been victims of this conflict by the different armed actors in Colombia. In a country where civil protests are often violent, this peasant movement, committed to non-violence is a shining light that the Colombian officials should be grateful for. It is a sad commentary that, instead, they hope to crush it.

We are asking that people contact:

- their ambassadors in Colombia
- the Colombian ambassador in their country
- the State Dept or its equivalent in their country (who should then, in turn, order their ambassadors to pressure the Colombian authorities)
- human rights organizations
- and these Colombian officials (in order Juan Manuel Santos, President of the Republic, Eduardo Montealegre, General Attorney, Andres Villamizar, National Protection Unit, Juan Carlos Pinzon, Minister of Defense)

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Demanding the following:

- the immediate and complete protection of the lives and well-being of Ricardo Esquivia Ballestas, Jorge Luis Montes Hernandez and the other peasant leaders of the Alta Montaña of Montes de Maria, and the staff and volunteers of the Asociacion Sembrando Semillas de Paz, 'Sembrandopaz'.
- the release of Jorge Luis Montes Hernandez from the maximum security prison where he is being held without concrete evidence in what is clearly an attempt to decapitate this peasant movement.
- an immediate investigation into the current political and religious persecution of Ricardo, the

leaders, and others which has been seen in the form of written death threats to the community leaders, the capture of Jorge Luis Montes Hernandez on trumped-up charges, and the plot to arrest Ricardo Esquivia Ballestas for allegedly being a guerrilla leader in this region.

- a face-to-face dialogue with the perpetrators of this persecution to put an end to these false allegations.
- a cessation of harassment against foreign volunteers of the Mennonite Church working with Sembrandopaz as part of their faith as members of a historic peace church.

Given that today is Friday, we would like personal letters to go to these officials before the start of the weekend. At this point, things can change at a moment's notice and we are very concerned for not only Ricardo, Jorge and the other leaders, but for the courageous person, who we cannot name publicly, who at great personal risk confided this nefarious plan to Ricardo and others.

I am profoundly moved by this person's valor and love and respect for Ricardo.

And I am profoundly grateful for all of you whose solidarity I know we can count on.

peace and light,
Lillian Hall
Sembrandopaz
Sincelejo, Colombia