

Mass Graves Used to Cover-Up Atrocities in Colombia

The Bodies of the Innocent

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The biggest human rights scandal in years is developing in Colombia, though you wouldn't notice it from the total lack of media coverage here. A mass grave - one of a number suspected by human rights groups in Colombia - was discovered by accident last year just outside a Colombian Army base in La Macarena, a rural municipality located in the Department of Meta just south of Bogota. The grave was discovered when children drank from a nearby stream and started to become seriously ill. These illnesses were traced to runoff from what was discovered to be a mass grave - a grave marked only with small flags showing the dates (between 2002 and 2009) on which the bodies were buried.

According to a February 10, 2010 letter issued by Alexandra Valencia Molina, Director of the regional office of Colombia's own Procuraduria General de la Nacion - a government agency tasked to investigate government corruption - approximately 2,000 bodies are buried in this grave. The Colombian Army has admitted responsibility for the grave, claiming to have killed and buried alleged guerillas there. However, the bodies in the grave have yet to be identified. Instead, against all protocol for handling the remains of anyone killed by the military, especially the bodies of guerillas, the bodies contained in the mass grave were buried there secretly without the requisite process of having the Colombian government certify that the deceased were indeed the armed combatants the Army claims.

And, given the current "false positive" scandal which has enveloped the government of President Alvaro Uribe and his Defense Minister, Juan Manuel Santos, who is now running to succeed Uribe as President, the Colombian Army's claim about the mass grave is especially suspect. This scandal revolves around the Colombian military, recently under the direction of Juan Manuel Santos, knowingly murdering civilians in cold blood and then dressing them up to look like armed guerillas in order to justify more aid from the United States. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, this practice has been so "systematic and widespread" as to amount to a "crime against humanity."

To date, not factoring in the mass grave, it has been confirmed by Colombian government sources that there have been 2,000 civilians falling victim to the "false positive" scheme since President Uribe took office in 2002. If, as suspected by Colombian human rights groups, such as the "Comision de Derechos Humanos del Bajo Ariari" and the "Colectivo Orlando Fals Borda," the mass grave in La Macarena contains 2,000 more civilian victims of this scheme, then this would bring the total of those victimized by the "false positive" scandal to at least 4,000 -much worse than originally believed.

That this grave was discovered just outside a Colombian military base overseen by U.S. military advisers — the U.S. having around 600 military advisers in that country — is especially troubling, and raises serious questions about the U.S.'s own conduct in that country. In addition, this calls into even greater question the propriety of President Obama's agreement with President Alvaro Uribe last summer pursuant to which the U.S. will have access to 7 military bases in that country.

The Colombian government and military are scrambling to contain this most recent scandal, and possibly through violence. Thus, on March 15, 2010, Jhonny Hurtado, a former union leader and President of the Human Rights Committee of La Cantina, and an individual who was key in revealing the truth about this mass grave, was assassinated as soldiers from Colombia's 7th Mobile Brigade patrolled the area. Just prior to his murder, Jhonny Hurtado told a delegation of British MPs visiting Colombia that he believed the mass grave at La Macarena contained the bodies of innocent people who had been "disappeared."

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