Biblical prophets looked ahead to a day of peace and justice, prophesying a day when nations will abolish war. The prophets also exhorted the people to “seek justice [and] rescue the oppressed . . .” (Isaiah 1:17). The Psalmist and the Apostle Peter called on God’s people to “seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34:14, 1 Peter 3:11). Jesus, when tempted, rejected military glory and chose the way of peace as the way to build God’s kingdom (Luke 4:6–8, Matt. 26:51–56).

Colombia has been caught in the midst of an internal armed conflict that has lasted for almost five decades. Tens of thousands of people have lost their lives, countless others have been disappeared, and more than 5 million have been forcibly displaced from their homes.

Colombian Anabaptist churches, faith leaders, peacebuilders, human rights defenders, and others have been working diligently for many years to bring the biblical vision of peace and justice to fruition in their country. They have called on churches in the United States to support them in this process by advocating to our government to change its policies of militarism towards Colombia.

The good news is that people in the United States can support peace, justice, and human rights in concrete ways. We can stand with our sisters and brothers in Colombia, seeking God’s will for peace in Colombia. ✨
Taking stock of U.S. policy in Colombia

by Theo Sitther

Colombia is at a crucial turning point. Negotiators from the Colombian government and from the largest guerilla group, the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), have been in a process of peace negotiations for almost a year. They are slowly making progress toward a negotiated settlement of the five-decade long armed conflict. While political leaders in Colombia are taking steps towards peace, the time is ripe for the United States to reorient its engagement with the country from militarism to peacebuilding.

Here are some positive changes the U.S. can make:

Reorient aid. Colombia is a close U.S. ally and the largest recipient of U.S. foreign assistance in the Western Hemisphere. Unfortunately, more than a decade of U.S. engagement with Colombia has been overly militarized. This approach has resulted in further entrenchment of the issues that drive the armed conflict.

According to the Just the Facts website (justf.org), Colombia has received almost $9.4 billion in U.S. assistance since the year 2000. More than 70 percent of this money has been in the form of military aid with the remainder going to support social and economic development.

Mennonite Central Committee’s partners in Colombia have long called for the United States to provide economic and social support rather than bolstering the military. The disproportionate nature of U.S. assistance should change to support the full implementation of the eventual peace accords as well as support for land restitution and helping more than five million internally displaced persons return home. U.S. assistance should also focus on sustainable and community-led development efforts, as well as mechanisms for gaining justice for the countless victims of violence and war.

End fumigations. U.S. engagement in much of Latin America and particularly in Colombia often falls under the rubric of the “war on drugs.” In Colombia, much of this plays out through the U.S.-funded program of aerial fumigations of coca crops, the primary ingredient in cocaine. While the intention of this program is to stem the flow of cocaine onto U.S. streets, there is little evidence that this has happened. The real consequence of this program has been the destruction of livelihoods and the environment in many communities. Too often, legitimate food crops are sprayed and destroyed. The box on this page tells the story of a Mennonite Brethren food security project destroyed by aerial fumigations.

The issues outlined here are just some of the many ways in which the United States could begin a new and more positive relationship with Colombia. As Colombian leaders are turning the corner from war to peace, the United States can do the same.

—Rebekah Sears
Challenges ahead for a sustainable peace

by Rebekah Sears

In August 2012, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos announced formal peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the largest guerrilla group, the FARC. After several failed attempts in previous decades, these talks represent renewed efforts for peace.

When talks opened in Oslo, Norway, in October 2012, the FARC opened negotiations with a tough standpoint that many feared to be unmovable. However, talks have continued fairly steadily since November 2012 in Havana, Cuba.

More recently, possibilities have reopened for peace talks with the second largest guerrilla group, the ELN (National Liberation Army), following the release of a vice president of a Canadian mining company who was captured in early 2013.

Victories at the negotiating table

Perhaps one of the biggest victories so far from the negotiations in Havana is a joint statement released in May after 10 rounds of negotiations—an agreement on agrarian reform, the first of five points in the original agenda. This is arguably one of the most controversial points, a constant and complex issue at the heart of the 50 years of conflict.

The details of this agreement have yet to be released, but the press statement about the agreement echoed the words of the original proposal when peace talks were announced in 2012. Such plans include access to land and the formalization of property titles, agricultural development, and more government support and investment in social programs, as well as agriculture and food security plans.

In addition, for the first time the FARC publicly took responsibility for their part in the conflict and the fact that their actions have brought about much suffering throughout 50 years of fighting.

The hard reality: the work has only begun

But the work is far from over. Round 13 of negotiations opened in August to address the four remaining agenda items: political participation for all Colombians, a negotiated peace settlement to the armed conflict, illicit drug trafficking, and the rights and needs of victims of the conflict.

Already it is clear that it will take a lot of work to put the agro-reform agreement into practice. In August agricultural workers from coffee, food and flower farms and workers from other sectors all over the country went on strike. They demanded that the government fulfill promises to subsidize the rising costs of fuel, fertilizer and other necessary expenses. They were also protesting that it is now illegal for farmers to store and reuse their own seeds, as a result of free trade agreements with North American countries. Negotiations to resolve the strike were shaky at best.

The government’s chief negotiator, Humberto de la Calle, is under no illusion that this process will end with the signing of peace accords. He predicts that it will take another 10 years to reach a sustainable peace. Given the immensity of the tasks ahead—including reparations, reconciliation, justice, impunity, political participation—even this may be an optimistic estimate, but let us continue the work with hope and determination. ✪

Rebekah Sears is a policy educator and advocacy worker with MCC in Colombia.

Communities march for land rights

On April 6, one thousand people from 32 communities in Colombia’s Montes de María region began an 80-mile nonviolent march to the governor’s office to demand their rights as citizens and victims of armed conflict.

The state has failed to provide education, healthcare, passable roads and basic services for these communities—an injustice which the Victims’ Law of 2011 is supposed to address. However, the progress has been far from satisfactory, due to delays in implementation and a policy of targeted reparations for only a few selected communities. Additionally, residents fear they may be forced to leave their communities to find employment, as the region’s avocado trees, a staple crop, are dying.

The governor of the state of Bolivar met the communities on the second day of the march. After tense negotiations, the marchers decided to continue the movement but in a different way. Together, they formed a number of working groups and established a stronger relationship with the government’s Department for Victim Attention.

This is the first time these communities have worked together since extreme violence broke out in the late 1990s. The presence of opposing armed groups pitted the communities against each other, generating mistrust and destroying leadership and grassroots organizations. Community organizing related to the march is restoring relationships. Speaking out remains dangerous with many political interests at stake, but people are no longer so afraid. United, they hope for change and continue to move forward.

Anna Vogt is an MCC service worker in Colombia.
Worship resources

Gathering

Call to worship:
Today I want a new world
a world of love
where all people
really love each other.
Lord, give me your breath
so I can sing
to all the nations
that they would live as one family.
I also give you thanks
for all of humanity
and pray that your will would
always be done.
—Gissel (9) and Zuleima (10)
Sampayo and Marta Ortiz

Singing

HWB 55  Cantemos al Señor
HWB 226  You are salt for the earth
STJ 69  Cuando el pobre

Confessing

HWB 756
Response hymn: HWB 358
(Oyenos, mi Dios)

Hearing the Word

If you remove the yoke from
among you,
the pointing of the finger,
the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the
afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the
darkness
and your gloom be like the
noonday.
The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in
parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered
garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations
of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of
the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.
—Isaiah 58:9b–12

Praying

Dear God,
In these times of searching for
peace and resolution to conflicts,
Establish your peace, O Lord!

In the midst of corruption, impunity
and violence,
Establish your peace, O Lord!

In the midst of the journey of your
Colombia people,
Establish your peace, O Lord!

In this searching for justice and peace
for Colombia,
Establish your peace, O Lord!

In the midst of the pain of children,
women and men,
Establish your peace, O Lord!

Establish your peace, O Lord,
according to your will.
Amen.
—Adaia Bernal

STS 1  Praise the One who breaks
the darkness

Sending

Benediction: Psalm 34:14

Excerpted from worship resources
prepared for the Days of Prayer and
Action for Colombia in 2012 and
2013.

Abbreviations

HWB  Hymnal: A Worship Book
STJ  Sing the Journey
STS  Sing the Story
Facts about Colombia

Colombians displaced from their homes

5.5 million

Amount of U.S. aid since 2000 $9.4 billion

72 percent military aid

28 percent economic and social support

25,000 – 60,000
Colombians forcibly disappeared during the war

34 percent
Colombians living below the national poverty line

220,000
Colombians killed since the war began in 1959. Four out of five are civilians.

More than 50 percent
Amount of land owned by the richest 1 percent of Colombians

“We have to recognize that we’ve hit bottom, and that the war has become dehumanized and it has dehumanized us.”

—Juan Manuel Santos, President of Colombia

POLICY PRINCIPLES
U.S. policy toward Colombia should...

1 End military aid.
It is time for the United States to end military assistance to Colombia. More than a decade of U.S. engagement with Colombia has been overly militarized and framed within a failed strategy of the “war on drugs.” As Colombia moves towards peace, the United States must do the same and reorient its aid from the military to social and economic development.

2 End fumigations.
U.S. anti-drug policy in Colombia and in Latin America more broadly needs rethinking. Many are beginning to question the “war on drugs” approach of criminalization, militarization, and eradication. Rather than continuing to pursue the failed strategy of fumigating crops in Colombia, the United States should take a more holistic approach of addressing drug abuse as a public health issue here in the U.S. and providing viable economic alternatives to coca growers in Colombia.

3 Support land restitution and return for the displaced.
Decades of armed conflict in Colombia have caused millions to lose their homes and their lands. As Colombia moves from war to peace, U.S. assistance to Colombia should provide support to the internally displaced population for a safe and sustainable return to their homes and the restitution of land. Furthermore, U.S. economic assistance can help rebuild the livelihoods of those who are displaced.

4 Support victims’ rights for truth, justice and reparations.
The human cost of the Colombian conflict is vast. Tens of thousands have been disappeared, hundreds of thousands have been killed, and millions displaced. The victims of violence have the right to learn the truth about what took place, define what it means to have justice, and receive reparations for the harm that was caused. The United States can support the most vulnerable by supporting efforts for truth, justice and reparations.

Resources for learning more and advocating for peace in Colombia:

Days of Prayer and Action
Each year MCC along with other faith groups organizes the Days of Prayer and Action for Peace in Colombia. Look for this event in the spring of 2014. Contact us at mccwash@mcc.org or (202) 544-6564 if you would like to receive information closer to the date.

Just the Facts  |  justf.org
A civilian’s guide to U.S. defense and security assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean.

Latin America Working Group  |  lawg.org
A coalition working to promote human rights, justice, peace and sustainable development throughout Latin America.