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Colombia: They are Killing Us

Colombia has become the bloody laboratory for the nations of the north's attempt to once again impose the failed neo-liberal model for development. There has been a growing movement in many countries against neo-liberalism. Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador (for a brief moment), Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, and México have all broken with neo-liberalism and are searching for alternative political and economic solutions which guarantee sovereignty and dignity. In Central America people are leaving by the thousands as the neo-liberal model has raped their lands, added to climate change and has left people at near starvation levels.

In April the Government of Duque attempted four reforms that were designed to weaken the people's uprising and to impose again a neo-liberal model. What started as a nation-wide protest against tax-reform has turned into a much broader protest encompassing the Colombian people's outrage over the Duque government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, a weak healthcare system, lack of progress in the peace process and excessive use of force by government officials. Unions are calling for a withdrawal of a proposed health reform and a guaranteed basic income of one million pesos ($260) for all Colombians, as well as the demilitarization of cities, an end to the ongoing police violence and the dismantling of heavy-handed riot police known as ESMAD.

Since April 28 dozens of Colombians have been killed, thousands more have been injured and hundreds have disappeared. Pictures and videos coming out of Colombia, especially Cali, document beyond belief the excessive use of force. Bloodied faces, corpses on the streets and the repression of peaceful demonstrators tell a story of planned responses to popular uprisings. This plan could be implemented in other countries as popular unrest rises in a number of Latin American countries in a post-Covid-19 economy, where the gaps between the very rich and rising number of poor only increases.

Colombia is the heart of Latin America. Its geo-political importance was seen and understood by the Obama-Biden administration as 7 military bases were built in Colombia in less than 8 years. Israeli arms have been sold to Colombia, and Israel has advised and trained many of the intelligence agencies in Colombia. Colombia is a strategic country for nations of the north as they seek to impose once again a failed neo-liberal economy. Colombia is a strategic weapon with international support. The Colombian people are now paying the price as these forces attempt to re-establish a neo-liberal model in a post-Covid-19 world.

The image of the Jesus as the Good Shepherd comes to mind as we religious leaders organize to stand in solidarity with the people of Colombia, the poor and exploited. The Good Shepherd knows how to protect his sheep and keep the thieves out of the flock. It is clear who the thieves are in Colombia. It is clear who is supporting them. It is clear that a military solution and a militarized Colombia is not the work of the Good Shepherd. The Vatican recognized the excessive use of force in Colombia by the government this past Sunday as he addressed the people gather at St. Peter's Square. «Quiero expresar mi preocupación por las tensiones y los enfrentamientos violentos en Colombia, que han provocado muertos y heridos», dijo el papa, en un mensaje después de la oración dominical. Hay muchos colombianos aquí, rezamos por su patria», manifestó Francisco, quien saludó a las varias decenas de colombianos que hoy acudieron con banderas de su país a la plaza de San Pedro. En un mensaje pronunciado al final del rezo dominical del ángelus asomado a la plaza

de San Pedro, el pontífice tuvo un momento para dedicarlo al conflicto social que estalló en Colombia a raíz del intento de aprobar una reforma tributaria y la violencia sistemática contra líderes sociales y excombatientes de las FARC-EP.

As religious leaders we must stand in solidarity with the poor and exploited in Colombia. While we call for the cessation of the excessive use of force against the Colombian people, we must also look at the root causes for the current popular uprising. We must stand against the increased militarization of Colombia. We must support an internal peace process that addressed the deep social and economic divisions within Colombia. We must stand in solidarity with those few religious leaders and organizations working inside of Colombia to defend human rights. We must find ways to support leaders involved social movements to defend the land and environment.

Colombia is a model for Latin America in many ways. If these regressive economic policies being advanced by Duque, combined with the excessive use of force, succeed in Colombia, much of Latin America is at risk. This is the time we celebrate the Resurrection and New Life. Pentecost is soon coming and a new church filled with the Holy Spirit will emerge. Let us be part of that new life and a renewed church!

- If you are in Colombia and have witnessed violations of human rights, tell your experience to the High Commission of Human Rights of the United Nations
- Ask that the Rapporteur for the Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations send immediately to Colombia a fact finding team to investigate the situation and to meet with the Government of Duque to demand a respect for human rights and a cessation of the use of excessive force against the Colombian people.
- Human rights activists and religious leaders need to demand that the Organization for American States send a delegation to investigate and condemn the excessive use of force by the Duque government against its people.
- Religious leaders need to demand that the Duque policy of assassinating local organizers working on environmental issues, land reform and human rights cease immediately.
- Religious leaders in the USA need to demand that the Biden administration and US Congress speak out against the violence of the Duque government. All military and law enforcement assistance needs to be ended. US military bases need to be removed from Colombia.

Cristo es luz y vida
Christ is light and life