

Responding with Life

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, May 11, 2005

The war on terror has eclipsed the war on drugs. If Americans do hear about drug control efforts, it's likely in the context of Afghanistan, which in the post-Taliban era has reclaimed its position as the world's leading poppy grower and heroin producer. But Colombia, plagued by a 41-year civil war, remains the lifeblood of the international drug trade and the source of 90% of the cocaine and 50% of the heroin sold on American streets.

The US is a key supporter of "Plan Colombia," a strategy designed by the Colombian government, in part, to eliminate the country's drug trade. Our aid focuses on military solutions. About 75% of American assistance goes to the Colombian army for drug eradication and provides those forces with training, equipment, and intelligence to root out drug traffickers and eliminate coca crops. The program makes Colombia one of the largest recipients of US military aid, after Israel, Egypt, and Iraq.

Only 25% of American support for Plan Colombia supports vital initiatives like crop substitution to give villagers an alternative to coca, help for people displaced by the fighting, and protection of human rights. Reporting on the role of civil society in Colombia's struggle against drugs, the US Institute of Peace found that our counter-narcotics and anti-terrorism efforts aren't really working. Despite the United States' three billion dollar, five-year counter-narcotics effort, Colombia remains mired in violence, besieged by political instability, and the center of the world's cocaine trade. Colombia produces more "internally displaced persons" than almost any other country. By and large, they live without clean drinking water, sewage systems, health care, electricity, employment, and education. Desperation makes them easy prey for recruitment by paramilitary and guerrilla forces offering money and food. It's easy to see how the cycle of instability rages on. To find real answers, we need to invest in "inclusive security," bringing into the peace process not just the warriors and politicians, but all the players.

The violence has intensified in its reach and cruelty as drug money and corruption have strengthened the government troops, leftist guerrilla militias, and right-wing paramilitary forces. Despite these daunting challenges, a vibrant civil society finds ways to promote peace and development. Churches, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local and regional authorities are presenting alternatives to violence.

Martha Segura has been a leader on civil society's front lines, overseeing a network of 1,100 organizations. Established in 1989 as a UN project, her Colombian Confederation of Non-governmental Organizations is coordinating the peace-building work of government, private sector, international agencies, and NGOs. Her petite frame belies her strength and determination to end Colombia's struggle, and her dark eyes light up when she talks about the critical role of grassroots organizations. She insists that civil society will transform the conflict in Colombia, even when some government and military officials are skeptical.

Building confidence in NGOs, Martha's coalition drafted a formal agreement with four key principles to guide the work of member organizations: adherence to the Constitution and rule of law; protection of human rights; decision-making by coalition; and the people's rights to public goods and services. Agreeing on these ideals, NGOs have demonstrated that they're working together, despite disparate histories, goals, and cultures. Martha acknowledges that civil society remains fractured but insists that they have a unified position about the essential: peace. Passionate about her mission, she explains, "If we can do this... all of the aid money for Colombia will have a reason, an order, and a common path."

Martha has bridged daunting divisions within civil society, built trusting across divides, and developed strategies for cooperation among diverse actors: farmers, the government military, church leaders, guerrillas, educators, and paramilitary forces. In a country where illegal drug trade fuels civil unrest and ineffective government policies, it makes sense to raise the voice of people like Martha, who help bring communities together to address common problems.

Accepting his Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982, Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez said: "To oppression, plundering and abandonment, we respond with life. Neither floods nor plagues, famines nor cataclysms, nor even the eternal wars of century upon century, have been able to subdue the persistent advantage of life over death." Colombians like Martha Segura are doing just that: responding to the chaos of war with inspired and inspiring life.