

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 12, 2011 at 3:35pm

Church works for peace in Colombia

by Mike Ceaser by Catholic News Service

BOGOTA, Colombia -- The Catholic Church in Colombia is actively involved in efforts to bring peace between the government and leftist rebels who have been engaged in a half-century-long war, said a Washington-based priest who recently visited the predominantly Catholic nation.

Father Juan Molina, director of the U.S. bishops' Office for the Church in Latin America, said he was impressed by the church's involvement in efforts to reach a settlement between the warring parties.

The rebels claimed they are defending the interests of the country's poor but finance their campaign through the drug trade, kidnapping and extortion. They also have been accused of widespread human rights abuses.

The Colombian government has been criticized for favoring a military solution to the conflict over negotiations while also committing human rights abuses. The government has argued that its actions are aimed at maintaining order and stability to protect the rights of citizens and private companies.

Father Molina visited Bogota, the capital, and the Armenia region in west central Colombia in late August to see how assistance from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops was being used.

He also attended an administrative meeting of the Latin American bishops' council, known as CELAM, and visited a seminary supported by the USCCB.

Church leaders have served as intermediaries in talks between the government and rebels seeking to install a Marxist government. However, Colombia's last two presidents have refused to talk to the guerrillas, whom they call terrorists.

While no talks among the factions have taken place recently, Father Molina said he learned that the

church continues to work on projects that hopefully will lead to a lasting peace in the future. One such program he visited works to return stolen lands to peasants.

Father Molina also said that Colombia's church is not losing relevance despite the growth of evangelical religions on the one hand and criticisms from secular organizations who have charged that Catholic leaders make the church appear backward because of its opposition to liberalizing abortion laws and the expansion of gay rights.

The church has to "serve as the morality and conscious" of society, Father Molina said. "You could give other examples where the church has had to stand its ground and lose some adherents."

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