

Where there is SOA, there is Witness for Peace

Patrick O'Neill | Nov. 24, 2008

COLUMBUS, GA

When it was founded 25 years ago, Witness for Peace would send delegations of North Americans into Nicaraguan war zones where the US-backed Contra rebels were waging a guerrilla war that had deadly consequences for Nicaragua's campesinos.

Once in place, even in the areas of heaviest fighting, the presence of North American civilians would force a Contra pullback. The rebels feared the consequences of killing a North American peace activist.

Putting North Americans in harm's way is still part of WFP's presence in Colombia, the South American nation where the US has poured in \$6 billion in military aid, said WFP executive director Melinda St. Louis, but in the other four nations - Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Mexico - where Witness maintains a presence, the group's emphasis over the years has looked more and more deeply into the economic realities of US policy on these Latin American nations.

Under the motto: Stop the War Against the Poor, Witness for Peace "started as a one-issue organization," St. Louis said. "Our goal was just to stop the Contra war, to stop the US funding for the Contra in the 1980s in Nicaragua.

"When the war was over we did ask ourselves what our role will be."

St. Louis, who came to the SOA Watch events last week with her Washington DC staff and four regional coordinators, said WFP concluded: "There will be no peace here without economic justice."

WFP comes to the fall SOA events each year, holding a traditional Saturday breakfast with large numbers of its supporters.

In a recent visit to Southern Mexico, "the birthplace of corn," St. Louis saw once vibrant communities in economic ruin as a result of US free trade policies.

Communities that have cultivated corn for centuries no longer had a market for their products. Since implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, genetically modified corn from the US "has been dumped in Mexico," St. Louis said.

The US-subsidized corn has displaced "upwards of two million farm families," St. Louis said, resulting in huge migrations of men to the US, often breaking up families forever.

St. Louis recently visited an indigenous community in Southern Mexico "where there were only women and elderly people and young children," she said. "All of the men in the community -- I did not see one man between the age of 18 and 50 -- had all gone to the United States, and we've seen that throughout Southern Mexico.

?We?ve been really trying to make the connection between US trade policy and immigration. What we see is that some of the most xenophobic, anti-immigrant members of Congress voted for NAFTA. They?re not making the connections to say that our economic policy is actually driving people here. So, if we?re really going to talk about comprehensive immigration reform, there?s absolutely no way that we?re going to solve the quote/unquote problem unless we?re able to really try to invest in sustainable development in Mexico and Central America where people are being forced to migrate.?

For more information: www.witnessforpeace.org

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