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During the 1990's, Latin America underwent significant transformation in its democratic development. While much remains to be done, respect for human rights has also increased. Assisted by the Canadian Government, NGO's and other Civil Society actors, many Latin American governments are in the process of instituting second-generation democracy and human rights structures. This discussion will explore these elements and their possible positive contributions to integration in the Americas.

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I will begin with a general description of the Canadian government's human rights foreign policy, bilateral and multilateral relationships including Official Development Assistance (ODA). I will review the Organization of American States (OAS) and Summit of the Americas process and Canadian involvement with governments in the Hemisphere. Then I will give examples of some contributions from the Inter-American system and challenges we face respecting human rights in the Hemisphere.

The promotion of human rights is an essential part of Canadian Foreign Policy and is a vital element in the development of stable, democratic and prosperous peaceful societies. The creation of an international system in which the rule of law prevails has been government priority. The ultimate goal of the Canadian government is not to chastise offending governments and certainly not their innocent citizens. Instead, it is to engage them in positive dialogue thereby leveraging influence. Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society groups often criticize this dialogue. They question how Canada can deal bilaterally with governments that allow for human rights abuses and an unforgivable level of impunity within governments and their justice systems.

The concept of employing positive measures has been more effective than coercion. They include, direct support for development of democratic institutions and practices, legal and administrative training, support for election processes and provision of observer teams. Human Rights, democratic development and good governance are the basis of Canada's aid program. The main priority in the human rights field is to strengthen the capacity of organizations to protect and promote human rights and to strengthen the security of the individual.

The policy does emphasize the need to support organizations in civil society as key vehicles for articulating popular concerns and channelling popular participation in decision and policymaking. Improving processes such as elections and the rule of law while supporting the strengthening of institutions like legislatures, judicial systems and independent media is the goal. Peace and reconciliation initiatives have become a priority in the hemisphere, particularly with the case of Colombia and the engagement in the peace process.

The Urgent Protection Pilot program ensures refugees in need of urgent protection get physical removal within 3-5 days. The program saves lives. There are other direct links between Canada and the Hemisphere. In the last ten years more than 250,000 people immigrated to Canada from Latin America and the Commonwealth Caribbean. This community in Canada was unidentifiable 20 years ago. Returning resident Canadians to the region also bear an influence on change.

In the multilateral arena the Canadian government is provided with the most valuable means for influencing governments. The United Nations (UN) and the OAS are institutions where internationally agreed Human Rights standards and systems afford both legitimacy and increased leverage. Canadians engage in efforts to improve human rights through the influence held in these institutions. Canada joined the OAS in 1990 and quickly found it to be a crucial and often the only viable channel for effective action of governments within the Hemisphere.

Considerable changes of late have taken place in Latin America. Over the past decade there has been less military conflict in politics. Democracy is a recent phenomenon for a majority of Latin Americans. It came with great expectations for economic progress and democratic rights which were to translate into a greater quality of life. The Hemisphere has moved from state run protectionist economies toward greater economic and trade liberalization with the hopes of achieving more democratic governance and economic growth. In review, the democratic institutions are weak, women are treated like second-class citizens, violence is increasing, the environment is deteriorating and the human rights of the individual are still taken for granted.

From 1990 to date, poverty has remained a critical problem in most Latin American households. One cannot deny that the gap between rich and poor widens daily. Inequality threatens to undermine economic prospects and the fragile democratization process while ¼ of the regions resources continue to be held by 5% of the population. Inequity is the biggest barrier to economic growth and greatest sources of injustice and instability in the hemisphere. Equitable distribution of wealth is tantamount to development that would lead to greater support for human rights, democracy and good governance.

The advent of democratic governments throughout the region involved the reopening of discussions on human rights. In the late 80s and early 90s, a new vision was created within

the Inter-American Human Rights system but there has been backsliding since the mid 90s. Canada's key leadership role at the OAS on Human Rights reinforces partnerships with our neighbours. One of the specific components of the ODA is support funding for the Inter-American Development Bank. The government also supports the mandate and the work of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in the area of internationally recognized core labour standards.

In April 2001 at the Summit of the Americas in Québec, human rights and democracy themes continued to be a leading priority for Canada. The Governments presented specific proposals and measures to improve key aspects of the democracy clause and the administration of justice. Indigenous issues were placed on the agenda of the Summit as a separate item under the poverty and discrimination theme. The Canadian government made possible support for civil society in the elaboration and delivery of policies and the promotion and protection of civil rights. However, Argentina who has agreed to host the next summit is not planning to permit the active participation of civil society

The American Convention on Human Rights and the subsequent covenants that followed entrenched second-generation rights into the summit process. They include political, economic, social and cultural rights, rights of the child, rights of indigenous people and covenants eliminating discrimination. The Summit process provides the momentum to revitalize the entire family of Inter-American institutions and to ensure that they work effectively together.

Canada has not ratified the American Convention on Human Rights nor agreed to accept the jurisdiction of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. The delay in ratifying the Convention is attributed primarily to the division of constitutional powers of the Canadian Federation. Human rights falls mainly under provincial rather than federal jurisdiction. Other impediments are fundamental difficulties with portions of the Convention text. These problems are exacerbated by all the natural polarizing factors: haves-have nots, North-South, Anglo-Latino, Civil-Common Law, Presidential-Parliamentarian, to note a few.

These are the few instruments in the region designed to maintain and promote respect for human rights and adherence to its norms. Out of 34 countries, 25 have ratified the American

Convention on Human Rights, which is not a bad record and 21 countries have accepted the jurisdiction of the court. There are noticeable exceptions. The US has signed but never ratified.

Many Commonwealth Caribbean countries have not joined because they consider their appeal process is not compatible with the Inter-American judicial system. Many still use the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London as an ultimate appeal court.

The other factor is that many politicians continue to support the death penalty. Trinidad and Tobago withdrew from the Inter-American Human Rights system on the grounds that the Convention would require them to give up the death penalty. They have a case, but the case is driven by a popular desire to develop the death penalty as the ultimate and most visible instrument of justice. Guyana has taken a similar step and Jamaica is not far off the same track.

So where are we after more than 10 years of engagement in the Hemisphere? Recognizing human rights as a component of international law and as a moral imperative is the current agreement between member states. Supporting non-governmental organizations and civil society groups in the elaboration of policies and the protection of civil rights is promoted by Canada but not by the entire region. This is where Canada has made great inroads and can continue to leverage influence. Engagement in the Americas has increased markedly over the past decade. Funding by Canadian and other governments to these independent support groups made this possible. Canadian commercial affairs have also increased in the hemisphere and this is where influence on human rights could become part of corporate social responsibility.

In some countries the issue of protection of human rights is less the abuse of the law and more the law that abuses. For example, Cuban laws give legal sanction to human rights abuses by criminalizing peaceful dissent. Crimes include “spreading false news,” “perturbing the social order” and one that deals harshly with the “establishment of independent groups.” With the longstanding exception of Cuba, in widely varying degrees all of Latin America and the Caribbean have constitutional, democratic governments.

The political role of the armed forces has receded dramatically. Nonetheless, the region has not broken fully with the authoritarian side of its heritage. In societies with weak states, the

armed forces tended to be the only institution that could get things done. In the absence of strong actors within society and the state, the military saw its role grow well beyond that of traditional national defence. It went much further and reached out into areas normally seen in a democracy as belonging to the police, civilian intelligence services, border patrol agencies, counter-terrorist forces, emergency assistance for natural disasters and many other fields. Over the years the armed forces came to dominate the politics of the nation as a whole. Even where it was not the norm, civil structures had to adjust to an excessive position of influence of the military within the state. Change will only come over time and will not occur at the same pace throughout the region.

What has been taking place of late in Venezuela, I've heard coined as the "militarization of democracy." President Chavez has surrounded himself with military people whose main common trait is to accept orders without debate. Vertical rule is in; internal dialogue and analysis are out. The most powerful government jobs are held by active duty or retired military officers. The Vice President, Interior Minister, Foreign Minister and Vice Minister, Infrastructure Minister, Head of PVDSA the petroleum monopoly, the telecommunications company and more than a dozen other key agencies. Chavez' popularity has fallen to below 30 percent recently as he fights with the news media, the Roman Catholic Church, academics and business leaders. The polls do indicate however that Chavez would still win an election today against a divided opposition.

President Banzár of Bolivia, who stepped down from his position in mid 2001 due to ill health, was the retired general who overthrew the government in the late 70s in a successful coup d'état. He was democratically elected in 1997 regardless of his clouded military past.

Guatemala is an interesting case with President Portillo married politically to retired General and President of the Congress Rios Montt. Portillo was exiled to Mexico under Rios Montt's military government of the early 80's only to return to broker the deal that together elected them to power in January 2000. The number of senior appointments, including the continued employment of non-civilians as Minister of Defence and the designation of a recently retired general as Minister of the Interior raises concerns about the government's commitment to improving the human rights situation.

Guatemala was slammed by the UN Truth Commission report of 1999 for genocide for crimes committed over the 30 years of civil war of which 96% of the atrocities were caused by the State. Their inability to implement the peace accords, spiralling violent crime and protest in Jamaica, tragedy in Colombia, the situation in Haiti, the assault against democracy in Peru under Fujimori, are grisly and all too accurate images of the work that need be done to protect human rights in the Hemisphere.

Although the past years have been dominated by catastrophes in Colombia, other parts of Latin America experienced positive change. Peru finally closed the door on the previous undemocratic and autocratic administration bringing new hope for democracy and human rights. President Toledo took important steps to strengthen democratic institutions and the rule of law while taking aim at long neglected human rights problems. While reforms give reason for optimism, discrimination and inequality through social, racial and gender marginalization will remain serious concerns, not to mention the previous regime's legacy of corruption. Haiti of course remains mired in political turmoil stemming from fraudulent elections.

Justice has taken an interesting turn with Chile's indictment of Pinochet. This case was a landmark in Latin America's efforts to achieve accountability for past human rights violations, even though the trial of the former military ruler was later terminated on the grounds of poor health. Regardless of the outcome of this case, it surely demonstrated further encouraging proof of the strength of the regional impetus toward justice. Rigoberta Menchú, the Guatemalan Nobel Peace Prize winner, along with several NGOs, were not as successful with the case before the Spanish High Court for genocide against Rios Montt. It ruled that it did not have jurisdiction to make a judgement. The plaintiffs appealed but the appeal will rest on deaf ears now that the UN International Court of Justice has ruled those sitting members of government cannot be tried. International momentum is now fixed on the democratic behaviour of Latin American leaders.

Mexico, Canada's intimate NAFTA partner, ended 71 years of single party rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party marking a considerable change. The administration of President Fox opened itself to international scrutiny and critique of its domestic affairs. There were high expectations that longstanding human rights issues, many deeply ingrained in the

arbitrary practices of the institutions, would be addressed. Fox ordered his government to grant public access to files on “disappearances” that took place between 1980-90. He also appointed several people to his cabinet known for their promotion of human rights. He created the new position of Deputy Minister for Human Rights and Democracy within the Ministry of Foreign Relations. The Fox administration made a crucial break with the past by allowing international inspection by human rights monitors.

Under Fox, Mexico became more active in promoting the concept of the universality of human rights principles, a notion that was an abomination to previous governments. Evidence does indicate though that this new administration has had little impact in protecting human rights or investigating violations. Little progress has been made in underlying problems in the justice system. Judicial oversight of police practices was insufficient and the lenient sentences handed down to convicted torturers reinforced the cycle of impunity. Public safety remains a serious challenge. On the positive side, a proposal to include NGOs in contributing to the design and implementation of Mexican human rights policy has been initiated and we await implementation.

The strength of the human rights movement in Latin America and the Caribbean is evidenced by the multitude of local and regional NGOs dedicated to the cause. In some countries, permanent national human rights commissions, ad hoc parliamentary bodies and other government organs supplemented the work of NGOs.

The best institutions for the protection of human rights are still effective national human rights institutions, such as human rights commissions and ombudsman offices. The OAS plays a valuable role in supporting linkages between these institutions throughout the Americas - high ideals that can translate into transparency throughout the hemisphere with a greater awareness through shared information. Links at the hemispheric level can consolidate democratic practice at home and expand cooperation in a variety of areas. Effective linkages have been made between Canadian NGOs, Church Groups, Union Groups and Civil Society groups to improve awareness of human rights. They deliver the message at home and elsewhere of the atrocities that take place daily against supporters of justice and equality.

Human rights defenders working for these national NGOs are more than frequently stigmatized and threatened for protecting the rights of individuals and groups. In several countries including Colombia, Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico and Brazil, activists have faced intimidation, assaults and death for their advocacy of human rights. Police brutality is often the norm.

Colombia deserves our undue attention. It remains the most dangerous country for their citizenry but particularly for human rights defenders. In a recent conversation with the Political Counsellor at the Canadian Embassy in Bogotá, I asked him what was the most important “human right” needing protection. His response was “the right to not be killed.” Peace Brigades International can only accompany so many people in their efforts to keep them alive. We do have Canadian members operating in Colombia like unarmed bodyguards chaperoning citizens to keep people safe. This is where the individual and the organization have made a proven difference.

The UN believes the international community has an important role to play in facilitating and strengthening human rights protection in Colombia. Efforts have been made to ensure human rights are central to any discussion of the future of Colombia. The Colombian government has been cooperative with the UN and the OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights by inviting members to conduct onsite visits and report on their findings. This would not have been possible ten years ago and is a progressive move.

The Commission reported their concerns for fundamental human rights, given the violence generated by the protagonists of the internal armed strife and the vulnerability of the civilian population, particularly the displaced communities, indigenous and Afro-Colombians, human rights advocates and civil servants in the judicial branch of the government. It is important to recognize that the UN mandate for Special Rapporteurs is a big step forward as Latin American governments had been reluctant in the past to allow for such supervision and in country reporting of human rights abuses.

There can be no lasting peace in the hemisphere without full respect for human rights and Colombia faces the greatest challenge. We cannot analyse Colombia without including the US in the equation. For years aid was calculated by the government's ability to eradicate the

drug trade - known as "Certification." If they didn't meet quotas then they were banned from the receipt of international aid - "Desertification." The drug trade does generate enormous amounts of money to the underground economy and supports insurrection groups.

The current American foreign policy toward Colombia is well known as Plan Colombia: Plan for peace, prosperity and the strengthening of the state. The basis of the plan aims to strengthen the state, reenergize the economy, reduce production and trafficking and restore civil society. The military component, most subject to criticism, is one of ten elements of a grand scheme designed to remake the nation into a secure democracy free from violence and corruption. The central premise of their policy is that drug money feeds the coffers of the guerrillas the FARC-EP and the ELN, whose attacks give rise to the paramilitary - the AUC. The Achilles heel of the program's campaign is insufficient support for the government's alternative development program. The US remains Colombia's largest foreign donor. It also increased military aid to Colombia's neighbours, in an effort to strengthen border controls against both armed groups and traffickers. Despite the efforts of the US and the nations of the hemisphere, the human rights situation in Colombia is deteriorating.

Never far from the minds of leaders in the Andean region is the economic sacrifice they suffer from the war on drugs and the assault on human rights. They are calling not only for a regional approach to the problem but an international one. Peru's illegal-drug industry is reviving, partly because of spillovers from Plan Colombia. The United States said that a fall in coca production since the mid-1990s had halted. Peru and the UN both say coca and opium poppy production is increasing.

As in previous years, a large percentage of the violations of the right to life were in the form of massacres perpetrated in the course of bloody guerrilla and paramilitary incursions. They are designed to terrorize the civilian population and forcibly displace them. Reports of the growing influence that paramilitary groups exert and by the actions and omissions of government agents who sometimes allow and even collaborate in the commission of deplorable violations of human rights is most alarming and well documented.

These groups have more than 8000 members demonstrating an increase of 81% in the last two years. The government claims that agents of the state alleged to be colluding with the

AUC is one of personal conviction or corruption and is not official policy. Nevertheless, complaints are registered to the effect that the government forces choose either to ignore or directly participate in acts of violence committed by the paramilitary, many of which are public knowledge.

The forced displacement of civilians continues to be used as a military control strategy in the armed conflict. Some 48% of the cases of internal displacement were carried out by paramilitary groups, 29% the work of the armed dissidents and 16% by unknown agents. Eliminating the civilian population from large areas of land allows for easy access to the cultivation and transportation of cocaine. Insurgent groups have been very successful in their attempts to control entire regions within Colombia. There is a hidden economic agenda in the displacement of large groups within the population.

For over half a century, generations of Colombians have been raised with war and all classes of violence, breeding more violence. They are an armed population and most are poor. Soldiers moonlighting as paramilitary earn up to \$500 US a month. This amount far exceeds the average Colombian's monthly income. Officers who turn their back on a drug deal receive a commission often a need as a result of poverty. Kidnapping remains a source of income and political pressure for the FARC-EP. Criticism has intensified as evidence mounts against them for using their demilitarized zone to warehouse prisoners and kidnapped civilians and also to plan attacks, including assaults that cause civilian casualties. The bombing of oil pipelines by the ELN and the FARC-EP has caused much human and economic loss as well as environmental degradation. Companies willing to invest in Colombia can expect to pay a minimum of 20% of their profits in bribes to ensure protection from attacks.

Landowners and business people donate heavily to the AUC compounding the situation. The paramilitaries are often accused of being agents of the state in that they indirectly attack the guerrilla, but they massacre civilians while warring. The military is one of the best trained and armed in the region but, the history of civilian rule over the military does not allow for the government to triple its size which is what the US believes is required to achieve peace. This would mean conscription and political suicide for any aspiring politician.

President Pastrana invited the international community to assist in brokering a deal with the guerrilla. They play a role in efforts to resolve Colombia's conflict. Canada, France, Switzerland, Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela, Norway, Spain, Italy and Sweden act as facilitator countries for the peace process. Canada and the US have put the AUC, the FARC-EP and the ELN on the list of terrorist groups. Despite this act, Canada remains part of the facilitation group in order to aid the peace process. Meanwhile, the US has proceeded with the suspension of US based accounts of people who contributed to the groups.

That the insurgent groups voiced loudly their denial of the title terrorist claiming their fight was political, may have raced them back to the table. These peace negotiations are subject to impasses as both sides trade accusations of bad faith and broken promises. Pastrana performed some last minute brinkmanship and on January 20 renewed the decrees to the 42,000 square kilometre demilitarized zone in the south of the country. On February 4<sup>th</sup> the FARC-EP demanded an end to Plan Colombia and the expulsion of US military advisors. The US has given Colombia 1.3 billion in aid over the past two year with a forthcoming \$625 million.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have lobbied US Secretary of State Collin Powell to suspend this financial assistance on human rights grounds due to proven military and AUC collaboration. The deadline of April 7, 2002, had been set for an agreement on a truce with a cease-fire and cessation of hostilities. On February 21st, President Pastrana cancelled any further peace negotiations and the demilitarized zone originally given to the guerrillas in response to the kidnapping of a military helicopter by the FARC-EP.

The Canadian Ambassador to Colombia, Guill Richinsky, is a remarkable man of courage who is personally engaged as a facilitator on behalf of the government. He was asked how he felt about the security situation as a facilitator and did he not feel threatened. No was his answer. Apparently you are assured safety if you are with the guerrillas. They are so well armed and have so many eyes everywhere they miss nothing. He has taken the opportunity to speak directly to the FARC-EP leaders about human rights abuses confirming how these acts are illegal and not looked upon favourably by the international community. Sympathy for their political aspirations diminishes drastically in view of their human rights abuses. The message

was repeated as often as possible. There is no question though, without the intervention of the international community, the peace process would not have existed.

According to a recent poll, 57% of Colombians believe that if peace talks with the FARC-EP fail, the military should go on the offensive against the rebels and 31% want foreign troops to help wage war. This does not bode well for Colombia. It means an all out bloody war, the act many citizens of the hemisphere feel will actually come to fruition. Congressional elections take place on March 10 and Presidential elections take place on May 26. Alvaro Uribe Velez, a Conservative hard liner and critic of the peace process, has an 8-point lead over Horacio Serpa, a moderate leader from the Liberal party. One of the two is likely to be the leading man in the next administration and will inherit the tenuous peace process.

In order to better understand the challenges, I want to give you a view on “the day in the life of a human rights worker in Colombia” and the difficult environment in which they operate. I had occasion to visit in March 1998 as an Officer of Foreign Affairs. The Counsellor and I took a trip to the Uraba, which is the territory that borders on Panama, hot tropical banana and farm country. The FARC-EP and the AUC were, and remain today, fighting over this territory with the military in the middle trying to flesh them out. Our intention was to meet with NGOs and civil society representatives working in the field of human rights and visit a refugee camp that Canada was supporting. We flew to the small town of Apartado and then drove for over an hour on the highway that was peppered with abandoned towns. All of the residents had fled the guerrilla or the paramilitary. The houses and shops had bullet holes in the concrete walls, the garden plots were overgrown, no one around - just ghost towns.

We went to a displaced persons camp where approximately 5000 people, indigenous and Afro-Caribbean mix, had walked for 5 days to flee the insurgents. The military had stopped them at this point and a refugee camp was set up. I felt as though I was in Rwanda and was appalled and deeply moved by the conditions in the camp. These were the lucky ones as they had moved as a community and had all of their leaders to organize and represent them in their drive to survive. We spent the afternoon discussing approaches for assistance with the leaders of the camp. I went outside to take a break from the fleas that were eating me alive and struck up a conversation with a peasant woman who was holding her 13<sup>th</sup> child, only 8 had lived.

I looked up and saw a helicopter flying quite high over the camp. Then it started to fire upon us - warning shots from very high up and then it flew away. I asked if this was normal and was told that no, helicopters were always patrolling but this was the first time they had fired. We finished our discussions and walked the two blocks into the village - which was one dirt strip road with rows of thatched houses along one main drag - no electricity - no plumbing - abject poverty. All of sudden two dive-bombers appeared out of nowhere and started to fire about a kilometre from where we were standing. The military then absconded with our vehicle.

This was not good as it was dusk and we had to travel one hour on a jaw breaking road to return to safety and one should never travel the road at night. You never know if the FARC-EP, AUC or the military were likely to shoot to kill. We located the nuns, it's safer to travel with nuns, and we went to find the Captain. He told us that there were 600 FARC on the other side of the village who were trying to get to the highway (the direction we were heading) and cross to safety in the narco farms. The military was using our rented taxi to move munitions from one end of town to the other.

After an hour we got the vehicle back and headed on down the dark road. There was a sense of fright in the vehicle - we all knew that danger was ahead on this dark road. I asked the driver if the military did this often - take his car. He told me that they did at least three times a week. They had no vehicle of their own. So I asked if he got paid - that is when he laughed and lightened the mood in the car. Then he told me he worked as a chauffeur for two years for the military and they were so unorganized that he quit. We got to a roadblock - spikes of wood tepee shape in the road. There was no one around. That was my moment of fear. We honked the horn - no one came. Someone jumped from the top of the vehicle moved the barricade then put it back and we drove on. We finally got to the highway and we knew we were safe. The military were there to greet us screaming "what are you doing on this road it is dangerous now get into town and inside."

So now we were to stay overnight in a little village on the highway. This was not part of the original plan. The nuns brought us to a tiny hostel - the pension Belgica. Right beside it was a small bar with a terrace full of men. The nuns told us not to drink at the bar. I asked why and was told that it was the paramilitary bar - and these were the guys that could not be found? So I

asked where the paramilitary hotel was in town only to be told that it was just down the street beside the police station. You could hear shelling in the distance. It went on all night. This was just a normal day in the Uraba.

The following day we returned to Apartado and met with the General of the Armed forces who was leading Colombia's best in the fight against the guerrilla. We recounted what we had witnessed the previous day and he told us that we were indeed in one of the most peaceful part of Colombia. Putumayo and Barancabermia were far more dangerous. He then complained that his troops were kids and only had to spend 18 months before they could be released from duty. He could not keep officers. It seemed to me the more lucrative employment was joining the AUC rather than the Colombian military.

Further down the road the next day I got to witness one of the greatest enigmas to be found in Colombia. San Jose Apartado, a small town that has declared complete neutrality. The residents are dirt poor, scratch out a living from a few fruits and coffee- less now due to the drop in the price of coffee. They are confident in their beliefs. They will not cooperate with the guerrilla, the paramilitary or the military. They give no support, no food, no information or any cooperation and armed activists are not welcome. This makes everyone a target but particularly their leader. Many are killed on the road to this town and international observers help to keep the leaders and townspeople a little safer.

The political risk is high when international observers are present. The townspeople have said no to injustice and will not directly or indirectly participate in the struggle. This response is their only way to survive. They are threatened anyway but essentially targeted by all. Human rights workers are known and trusted by the townspeople and are present to question the authorities, essentially a thorn in the sides of all parties in the conflict. They truly believe that by opposing the current conditions they can effectively work toward positive change.

Before departing the region we met with the Human Rights Commissioner, the UN representative, CARE International, and Doctors without borders. The Doctors had just returned from a day of bagging bodies in a village where a massacre had taken place. No one had taken responsibility. All of them complained that the Colombian government had not respected the terms and agreements for supplying food and medical supplies to the displaced.

When I returned to Bogotá I personally spoke to the Interior Minister and registered my concern from what I had seen and heard. He tried to tell me that it was the responsibility of the Commissioner who had been appointed to the job of caring for the displaced. This Commissioner was under the supervision of the Minister of the Interior. There was no immediate political will required to effect any change. Three months later the entire area of conflict was levelled and the displaced were on the move again. The reports I read today are the same as what I experienced four years ago only the statistics prove that the human rights situation is worse than ever.

The short-term outlook for human rights in Latin America is bleak. There is cause for apprehension about the long-term outlook. It is both unknowable and unpredictable because the present trends are pointing in the wrong direction. As the importance of the democratic process loses its grips on the electorate and the electorate is increasing disenchanted, all of the benefits it was expected to bring will be for not. At the same time we have the very serious rise in criminal violence and the culture of violence in many countries. The sort of importance that was given human rights declines as people feel they must give the police/military establishment much more flexibility to attack and destroy the criminal elements.

This does mean that there is an increase in the kind of unchallenged authority that the police have to commit serious abuses in the course duty. What it is doing increasingly ignores human rights and there is evidence everywhere and this is extremely serious. It is a situation that requires a bigger and brighter international spotlight. The democratic process is in seriously bad shape in the majority of countries in Latin America. The Inter-American system will have to find the political will on the part of the member states to make those mechanisms work so this period of fragility and increased abuse can be overcome.