

Accompaniment program launched in Colombia

by [John Zarocostas](#) in the [November 15, 2011](#) issue

An ecumenical accompaniment program has been launched to assist victims of violence in Colombia, where internal armed conflict has driven nearly 5 million people away from their land and property, according to the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI).

"The churches have been asked to break the silence and communicate all the atrocities taking place in Colombia," Carlos E. Ham, program executive for Diakonia and Latin America-Caribbean with the Geneva-based World Council of Churches, said in an interview October 18.

In December 2009, Colombia's attorney general reported 2,520 cases of forced disappearances of people, out of a total of 35,665 crimes confessed by paramilitary forces. A reported 2,388 burial pits were found in the country and 2,091 bodies exhumed, the report said.

Ecumenical accompaniers participate in the life of communities and work with local organizations that carry out nonviolent actions to promote and defend justice and contribute to the protection and implementation of human rights. After volunteering in local communities, accompaniers return to their own communities to educate others about the crisis and advocate for an end to the violence.

The Latin American Council of Churches inspired the new initiative, which has "a strong ecumenical embrace with the involvement of many churches," said Ham, who took part in the launch meeting October 6-8 in Bogotá, Colombia. The meeting was attended by representatives from the Lutheran World Federation, ACT

Alliance, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, CLAI and other groups.

Participants in the meeting named Chris Ferguson, a United Church of Canada minister, as international coordinator. Ferguson was a cofounder of a similar international monitoring program in Israel and Palestinian areas.

Over the next year, places that are of acute interest to member churches will be identified and a more focused effort at accompanying the process in those places will develop, said Jim Hodgson, who represented the Canadian human rights organization Kairos at the meeting.

The WCC's Ham said the idea is to select people from the Global North and the Global South "to spend three to six months living in communities in rural areas" where people have been threatened, killed or disappeared. —ENInews