# Marked man: Defending human rights in Colombia

by Alexa Smith in the November 14, 2006 issue

Mauricio Avilez isn't sleeping well. He's jumpy. It's hard for him to concentrate on his studies. He's learned surreptitiously that the paramilitary groups in his country, Colombia, want him dead. So he worries about unfamiliar cars on his street and motorcycles that cruise too close to the curb or near the window of a taxi he is riding in.

Avilez, 26, is a law student and a human rights worker. He organized other lawyers to help displaced people and to document the way Colombian peasants are being forced off their land. His group, the Human Rights Education Center (called CEDERHNOS, its acronym in Spanish), is an outreach of the Presbyterian Church of Colombia. Its office is housed on the grounds of the church's synod headquarters in the port city of Barranquilla.

Avilez was arrested in 2004 on what are widely considered to be trumped-up allegations; he was never formally charged. He spent four months in a Barranquilla jail and was released only after intense international pressure was exerted by church and humanitarian groups.

"This is a repeated process. It goes in cycles," says Avilez. "Every time a human rights movement gains strength, it is repressed. . . . In 1999, all the human rights organizations in Barranquilla disappeared." Because of Avilez's troubles, CEDERHNOS has lost most of its volunteers.

Terrorist activities by guerrillas, paramilitary groups and private armies have displaced more than 3.5 million people, abetted over the years by the negligence or the covert support of factions within the Colombian military. The displacement has taken place over several decades of civil conflict, but most of it has occurred within the past ten years. More than a million people have been displaced since 2002, when the administration of the current president, hardliner Alvaro Uribe, began.

The internal refugees end up in shantytowns on the edge of cities like Barranquilla. Those shantytowns then become centers for drug trafficking, prostitution, and recruitment by armed groups. The refugees turn to the churches for help by the thousands, seeking money, food, medical aid and consolation.

The multinational corporations that are displacing people do so for business purposes; the guerrillas, the paramilitaries and the army do so for political reasons—to control the turf. The paramilitaries have direct ties to the drug trade; reportedly, so do the guerrillas.

Mainline churches in the United States and Colombia have urged the U.S. government to redirect the billions it pumps into fighting the war on drugs to other efforts, such as converting coca fields into the production of other salable crops and building the roads and bridges that would help farmers get their goods to market. They also recommend focusing on curbing the U.S. demand for drugs rather than on squashing the suppliers.

The churches say that the push by multinational companies and private investors to open up Colombia’s oil fields and agricultural areas is robbing millions of the country’s poorest citizens of the land they’ve homesteaded for generations.

Nearly 4,000 labor leaders have been killed in Colombia during the past 20 years, according to the Solidarity Center of the AFL-CIO. Only five people have been convicted of crimes in connection with those murders. The National Association for the Displaced in Colombia has effectively been silenced; its leaders scattered in 2001. In 2004 the Evangelical Council of Churches reported that 45 Protestant pastors were killed in that year alone. Many Catholic priests have also been killed.

The country’s Interecclesial Commission of Justice and Peace (ICJP)—which has both Catholic and Protestant representatives—reported that the government’s military intelligence network offered $1,000 to a man if he would accuse Avilez and three others of working with the guerrillas. The informant said that Avilez was on a hit list along with Milton Mejia, at that time general secretary of the Presbyterian Church of Colombia, and two other human rights workers.

Avilez and Mejia vehemently deny any ties to violent groups, insisting that the church uses only peaceful and democratic means to effect social change.

Mejia and his wife, Adelaida Jiménez, also a pastor, and their two young sons left Colombia in August in the company of a group of Presbyterians who were returning to the U.S. after celebrating the PCC's 150th anniversary. Mejia has a visa for study in the U.S., where he intends to lobby for change in U.S. policy.

As for Avilez, he is reluctant to leave Colombia but afraid to stay. "There is no stability in going away and then coming back, going away and then coming back," he says.

When Avilez was first freed from jail he quickly left for Switzerland, where he met with representatives of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the World Council of Churches. When the investigation of his case stalled for lack of evidence and was finally closed, he returned to Colombia. He says he felt that God was calling him back to hands-on human rights work.

But Avilez's eyes fill up as he talks of how some of his friends have left the country in search of a safe haven. How can he build a future without compromising his convictions? "I want to get married, to have at least one kid. I'd like to live to be 70 or 80 years old. . . . I don't know if I'll ever have the tranquillity to start a family if I continue to live here."

It breaks his heart, Avilez says, to see the pain that his choices have caused his family. But he feels for other families too. "It really hurts when you meet up with displaced people living in such bad conditions." They are facing "threats, persecution, the loss of their farm."

As for the immediate future of rights workers, Avilez says: "If you are going to stay in Colombia, you have to have a visible profile—so there will be a political cost to the government should it decide to kill you."