

In early August, **Br. Carlos Eduardo Diaz, CSV, Fr. Thomas E. Long, CSV, and Erin Cox**, the Viatorian representative at the 8th Day for Justice, along with eight other people, visited the Caribbean Coast region of Colombia, South America, to talk with the locals who are directly impacted by the multinational coal companies and multinational fruit growers. The peace and justice organization, Witness for Peace, coordinated this ten day trip, which included talking with people at union halls, at community centers, in corporate offices, at banana packing centers, and in local towns and villages. In listening to the testimonies of the local people, the one theme to emerge and that needs to be fronted is the devastating impact to the local population made by the policies and by the “de facto” business practices of these multinational corporations.

The area is rich in coal and for the multinational coal companies this has been an economic boon. However, for the local population, the social, ecological, and health consequences have been crippling. Small farmers have been displaced from their homes and are in “resettlement” villages that lack infrastructure, roads, water, natural gas, electricity, schools, and hospitals. The “resettled” villagers’ prospects are bleak because their land is gone [hence, the key source of their livelihood, security, and stability] and potential employment opportunities are located far from the villages.

The companies have bought portions of the railroad to ship the coal to the Santa Marta harbor and, as the lengthy trains of uncovered coal cars rumble through the towns daily, they are spewing out a constant stream of coal dust. This environmental negligence contaminates the soil and crops, and causes respiratory and skin problems to the local population. When the coal reaches the port, it is first loaded onto a large conveyor belt, then to a small one, and finally to a barge docked far from shore; the harbor is very shallow. As the coal is transported to the barge, it continues to be uncovered; this deliberate negligence allows the dust to contaminate the waters which in turns has devastated the fishing industry.

Small-scale fishermen are now forced to go further out to sea because of the dwindling fish population closer to the shore. They now have to endure more danger and hardship to bring home less fish to sell. Furthermore, many live in villages by the harbor and have been forced to move to whatever vacant land they can find.

We also had the opportunity to talk with representatives of the banana industry and with the local population. The banana industry in Latin America extends back over 100 years with the huge multinational conglomerate, United Fruit Company. It had extensive and exploitative holdings throughout Central and South America which has left bitter memories. One example of its power, influence, and exploitation occurred in 1954; in that year, the United Fruit Company was instrumental in overthrowing the duly elected Guatemalan government because the executives perceived it as a threat to their corporate business interests. Another poignant example of such unbridled exploitation of local customs, land, native resources, and people occurred in 1928. A massive massacre of striking banana workers in the city of Ciénaga, Colombia occurred. Even though the army carried it out, many people believed they did it under pressure from the United Fruit Company. Gabriel Garcia Marquez immortalized the killing in his classic text, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

The United Fruit Company has since gone out of existence; its current successors include Chiquita and Dole. Their first concern is to ensure that they have sufficient land to realize corporate profits. Toward that end, they own vast tracts of land and contract with large landowners. To ensure that the crops have an adequate water supply, the companies have used their connections to commandeer the water from various rivers, depriving the small farmer of the resources needed to live; they are, in turn, forced to sell their land at a reduced price. They are often forced to move to villages that have no electricity, potable water, sewage system, or a school system. The homes are built with whatever material is available, often using mud and sticks for the walls and metal for the roofs.

Violence has plagued the area. Leftist guerrilla groups, such as FARC, operated freely in the area in the late 1980's and early 1990's. As a result, local self-defense groups, hired by the wealthy, began to emerge. They extorted money from the local population and businesses, staking out their territory through the use of certain colors. In an interesting twist, the plantation buildings throughout the region were painted with the various gang colors; on the other hand, the roads were neutral territory that everyone could use.

In the late 1990's, the conflict between the guerrilla groups and the self-defense forces became particularly vicious with the forces of one group going to towns and villages and accusing the residents of being enemy sympathizers. This began a series of horrific mass murders and a process of social cleansing. It was in this situation that the banana companies were reputed to pay "protection" money. The money was supposedly used not only to protect their assets but also to eliminate anyone whom they considered a threat, such as union and human rights workers.

This speculation was proven to be true through an extensive investigation; in 2007, Chiquita Brands International was fined 25 million dollars for contributing more than 1.7 million dollars to a Colombian terrorist, paramilitary, group. Unfortunately, people were not surprised at this verdict given the history of its predecessor, United Fruit Company.

Throughout the trip, people had a strong sense of hope and realized that only through working together could they effect the necessary change that respects their human rights. They were grateful that we listened to their stories and were willing to retell them. They were particularly relevant to us as U.S. citizens because many of the multinational corporations are U.S. based and we are large consumers of coal and bananas. As one person said, "The next time you eat a banana, remember the human cost that went into its production." The same could be said each time we turn on the lights that are powered by coal-generated electricity.

Fr. Thomas Long, CSV