

CROSS PARTY GROUP: INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

6 NOVEMBER 2012

COMMITTEE ROOM 5, SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT 5.30PM – 7PM

Present:

Sarah Boyack MSP, Siobhan McMahon MSP, John Mason MSP, Hugh Henry MSP, Jamie McGrigor MSP, Alex Guanga, Robert Daza Guevara, Patrick Grady, Louise Winstanley, Mark Camburn, Tuhin Khalil, Carol Clarke, Kris Kelly, Dr David Stevenson, Fiona Trafton, Pat Bryden, Alice Picard, Rachel Heydecker, Katelyn Yodev, Lewis Munro, Julie Gunn, Simon Agiter, Gillian Wilson, Lorraine Currie, John Sharp, Suzanne Fustukian, Katie Hazell.

Apologies:

Jackie Baillie MSP, Patrick Harvie MSP, Humza Yousaf MSP, Carol Morton, Allison Cosgrove, Alan Dixon, Michael Turner, Robert England, James Trolland, Roger Leahey, Ced Hesse.

Welcome and Introduction:

Sarah Boyack MSP chaired the meeting in her capacity as Convenor. She welcomed all attendees and thanked her MSP colleagues for attending and showing an interest in the humanitarian issues in Colombia. Sarah gave a special thank you to SCIAF for contacting the cross party group and for the work that they have done to organise the Colombian nationals to visit Edinburgh and address the meeting.

Mark Camburn, SCIAF's Latin American Programme Officer

Mark provided a brief introduction to the work of SCIAF and their international aid work. He outlined a number of key developmental challenges that Colombia faces; including land ownership issues, illegal drug trafficking, marginalisation of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities and rights to truth and justice. He showed a photo taken just a few days before which was evidence of the destruction caused by mining activities in Colombia.

Louise Winstanley, Programme and Advocacy Manager of ABColombia

Louise highlighted that Colombia has a long standing legacy of conflict and this continues to devastate communities across the region. There is a major problem in relation to human rights: security forces, paramilitaries and guerrilla combatants have specifically targeted the civilian population. Louise suggested that the international community knows more about other conflicts, such as Sudan, but little about what is happening in Colombia. The humanitarian crisis can be seen in the numbers of people forcibly displaced in Colombia which total 5.2 million - even more than the Sudan.

The last President Uribe's Administration rapidly increased mining activities as part of an ambitious Mining and Energy vision 2019 for the future. A central focus of the government's plans was to increase Foreign Direct Investment. Under the current Administration, of Juan Manuel Santos, mining has been singled out as one of the economic driving forces;

however, the policy is unsustainable as it conflicts with policies on the protection of ecologically fragile areas, land restitution and the protection of land for agricultural use. There is also a lack of transparency in reporting by multinationals and as a consequence of the tax regime, many multinational companies benefit from huge tax exemptions. In addition to this the government is planning to cut income tax for corporations from 33% to 25%. According to the Comptroller General, Colombia is at risk of destroying its biodiversity and Louise outlined that the EU is a major player and investor.

Robert Daza Guevara, spokesperson for the Nariño section of the Coordinador Nacional Agrario (National Agrarian Committee)

Robert gave a presentation on the organisation that represents campesino communities in defence of their land and way of life. He showed the group slides which offered an insight into the day to day life of his local community; from planting and growing vegetables, to rearing animals and tending to integrated crops. Robert issued a warning that if large scale mining continues, it will destroy local communities and their livelihoods. He pointed out how the peasant farmers had spent years protecting the water, reforestation etc. in order to gain rainforest certification and free trade for their coffee - all of which could be lost if the mining moved in and contaminated the water supplies.

The group were informed that due to widespread exploitation, water has become contaminated. There has also been civil unrest and there have been reports of police arresting citizens arbitrarily and exercising in violence. He advised that local communities and local authorities are against such extensive mining activities, but it is a national policy.

Alex Guanga, an Awá indigenous community leader and a member of UNIPA- La Unidad Indígena del Pueblo Awá (The Indigenous Unit of the Awá People)

Alex addressed the meeting by emphasising the suffering that many people are subjected to. Colombia is home to huge ethnic and cultural diversity, but it is also torn by conflict. He explained how his people had suffered human rights violations and forced displacements. He stated that large sections of the land are targeted for illegal activities; including illicit crops and for the arms trade all of which had generated further conflict in their *resguardo* with the indigenous population caught in the middle. To accompany Alex's talk, Mark showed harrowing pictures of contaminated rivers. Alex advised that members of the local community regularly carry out environmental checks and this monitoring has highlighted that the landscape is being damaged.

Question and Answers:

During the discussion which followed, concerns were raised that traces of cyanide were being found in the local environment and the government is not taking accountability for this. Jamie McGrigor MSP asked the group if there were any organisations or set laws to prevent the harmful activities and Louise of ABColombia advised that they are ignored for economic gain.

Next steps:

Sarah closed the meeting and suggested steps that can be taken:

- CPG members could write to their MP;

- MSP members should liaise with their colleagues in Westminster;
- Sarah to lodge a motion in the Scottish Parliament (this was lodged on 13 November 2012);
- NIDOS have offered to put an update in their newsletter.

Date of Next Meetings:

- 22 January 2012 – address by Jubilee Scotland.
- 19 February 2012 – the Minister for International Development, Humza Yousaf MSP will address the group to discuss the Scottish Government's work.