

Saving Lives - Colombian human rights defenders testify to the power of Urgent Actions

"We have never met more courageous, committed and inspiring human rights defenders than those from Colombia. How can we possibly lose hope and become discouraged when they do not?"

Kathy Price, Urgent Action Coordinator, AI Canada

To be a human rights defender in Colombia is, all too often, to put your own life in danger. It is to risk the lives of your family. It is to risk becoming another victim of the conflict that continues to rage between the armed forces, their paramilitary allies, and the armed opposition groups who control a large part of the country.

In recent months, a series of tours organized by AI Canada in collaboration with Peace Brigade International (PBI), have enabled many men, women and children across Canada to hear first-hand evidence of the bravery of the human rights defenders. They have been given the message that their campaigning is working.

Astrid Manrique and Yolima Quintero: "Your support is the oxygen that keeps us going"

"I have boxes and boxes of appeals sent on our behalf by UA letter-writers," Astrid Manrique, whose human rights work was prompted by the "disappearance" of her partner, told her audience in Canada. "I have no doubt those letters saved our lives."

Her colleague Yolima Quintero agrees: "Urgent Actions are a powerful way to show that the international community knows what's going on and that you are holding our government accountable for what happens to Colombian citizens. Your support is the oxygen that keeps us going."



Astrid Manrique and Yolima Quintero ©AI

Astrid Manrique and Yolima Quintero were the subjects of Urgent Actions after they received death threats and Astrid's 14-year-old daughter was also reportedly threatened

by a man with a police identity card. The threats were aimed at preventing them from carrying out their work with ASFADDES (the Colombian Association of Families of the Detained-Disappeared), a non-governmental human rights organization which aims to discover what has happened to Colombia's "disappeared" and to bring those responsible to justice (UA 117/00, AMR 23/32/00, 12 May 2000).

Keith Rimstad, AI Canada's campaigner responsible for human rights defenders and Colombia, reveals that the women's visit to Canada had a number of aims:

"Firstly, we wanted to build the connections between our members and ASFADDES, and increase our capacity and commitment to do work on ASFADDES's behalf. We also wanted to build public awareness of the situation in Colombia and the challenges that human rights defenders have in carrying out their work. Finally, we wanted to press the Canadian government to do more on behalf of defenders in Colombia, by raising human rights issues with the Colombian government in bi-lateral and multi-lateral meetings".

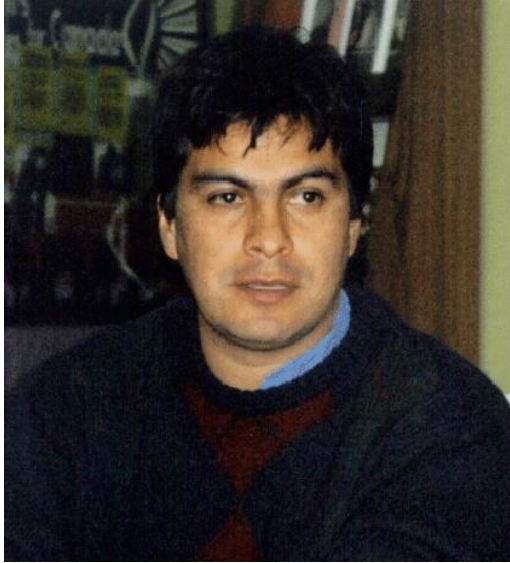
Astrid and Yolima toured all over Canada, taking part in a variety of activities ranging from meetings with local politicians and representatives of government to public meetings and high schools presentations. They also met Canadian non-governmental organizations and carried out media work.

When meeting members of the Urgent Action network the two women had a simple and powerful message: "Urgent Actions save lives."

Kathy Price, who shares the role of UA Network co-ordinator with Marilyn McKim and works with other committed activists on Colombia told us: "I filmed the visit of Astrid and Yolima in southern Ontario, so I know for a fact that audiences were tremendously moved by what Astrid and Yolima had to say.

"But more than that, people were so inspired by their courage in the face of so many threats against them, and their message that AI letter-writing helps save lives. Everyone said they felt re-motivated to continue our solidarity work in Canada after having had the chance to connect with the women on the front lines. I know people here will never forget their visit, their faces and what they taught us about the value of international solidarity".

Danilo Rueda: "We know we can count on you"



Danilo Rueda © AI

Justice and Peace, a church-based human rights organization, has exposed human rights violations committed in conflict regions of Colombia by security forces and their paramilitary allies against civilian communities. This has made its staff a target for those who aim to silence the vital work carried out by human rights defenders.

In February 2003, Amnesty International issued an Urgent Action after an anonymous caller threatened members of Justice and Peace, saying: "Death to human rights guerrillas, we've already warned you."

Two months earlier, a macabre message was delivered against one of the members of the organization, which said: "Danilo Rueda, RIP". The message was signed by a paramilitary group that calls itself Anti-Communists of Colombia against Guerrilla Auxiliaries (UA 42/03, AMR 23/015/2003, 11 February 2003)

The target of the threat, Danilo Rueda, visited Canada to highlight the particular pressures faced by him and other members of the Justice and Peace Commission. He met with government officials in Ottawa and with Amnesty members in the Toronto and Ottawa areas.

Danilo is convinced that the support offered by UA letter-writers enables Colombian human rights defenders like him to carry on their crucial front line work for life and dignity. He thanked members of the UA network for "showing such concern and support". He added "Your response has been important in halting acts of repression... We know we can count on you for long term solidarity."

From quilts to oil companies... AI Canada's campaigning keeps up the pressure



**One of 17 Solidarity quilts sent
to Colombia © Private**

Members of AI Canada have shown their solidarity with human rights defenders in Colombia in a number of ways, from responding to Urgent Actions to placing adverts in support of Colombian human rights defenders in Colombian newspapers, and keeping lobbying both the Colombian government and the Canadian government.

One stand-out project, recalled by both Keith Rimstad and Kathy Price, was 'The Solidarity Quilt Project'. This was a year-long campaign which involved members and supporters from different parts of Canada who contributed squares bearing messages of support which were then fashioned into 17 quilts. These were then given to Colombian human rights and trade union groups in Bogota as a symbol of support, in the presence of the Vice President of Colombia in September 2002. The project was received very enthusiastically by Colombian human rights defenders, who still talk glowingly about the '*colchones canadienses*' (Canadian quilts).

According to Kathy Price, there is currently a great deal of interest in investigating the role of Canadian investments in Colombia. "AI Canada has met with oil companies to talk about what they are doing to ensure that their activities do not contribute to violations of human rights, but rather to an improvement in the situation. One case that particularly touched many people in Canada was the "disappearance" of Embera Katio leader Kimy Pernia, who had visited Canada to speak to parliamentarians and others about the disastrous impact on his people of a hydroelectric mega project which received financing from a Canadian source. We continue to call both for information about what happened to Kimy, as well as action to ensure that those responsible for his "disappearance" are found and brought to justice".

Sharing the vision: how we can all make a difference

"We have heard from so many Colombian human rights defenders about how international accompaniment through UA letter-writing, missions, and the myriads of other creative efforts such as the Solidarity Quilts Project, is the oxygen that enables them literally to survive from one day to the next so they can carry on their vital work for life and dignity," says Kathy Price. "We in Canada continue to do all we can to provide that oxygen,

confident that together we CAN build a different and just future for all."

Kathy continues, "Visits like those of Yolanda, Astrid, Danilo and Kimy Pernia's daughter Martha Cecilia are so important because they enable people to connect and to realize what we have in common -- our shared vision of a world of justice and human rights. Sharing the words and experiences of Colombian human rights defenders via the UA newsletter, articles in AI Canada publications like *The Activist* and videos like the one about ASFADDES that we are now preparing, are also powerful means to personalize the issue and move our members to action.

"Recently, I spoke on the phone with an AI Canada member who had read an article about Martha Cecilia we published in *The Activist* and was asking for addresses to send messages of support. 'I'm a mother and a grandmother', she said, 'and I feel compelled to speak out. We have to stand up and raise our voices for human rights.' Truly inspiring!"