

Over the last few weeks Colombian democratic opposition leaders have received intimidating messages: veiled and false government accusations trying to link them to armed groups; direct death threats from right-wing paramilitary groups; and anonymous messages promising injury and death. What is causing this barrage of scare tactics?

The sin of the democratic opposition, in particular labor leaders and elected representatives of the PDA (Polo Democrático Alternativo), has been to support the wave of nation-wide stoppages by agricultural producers who face certain ruin as a consequence of the “free trade agreement” signed by Colombia’s President Santos and US President Barack Obama.

In terms of agriculture the “free trade” agreement boils down to a) the dismantling by the Colombian government of protections, subsidies and support of any kind to peasants and producers in the countryside, b) the flooding of the country with all manner of U.S. agricultural products, generously subsidized by the U.S. federal and state governments, leading to c) the devastation of Colombian agriculture, much as it happened with the impact of NAFTA on Mexico’s agriculture.

This kind of “free trade imperialism” does not get much press in the United States. But it has caused a country-wide stoppage movement in Colombia beginning in the month of August: producers of potatoes, citrus fruit, rice, onions, beans, tomatoes, chicken, beef, cocoa, coffee and other items are being ruined by the dumping of cheap, subsidized U.S. agricultural products on the Colombian market. The process of “opening” the Colombian home market began in the early 1990s and had already led to the destruction of local wheat and barley production. The FTA (Free Trade Agreement) threatens to destroy ALL domestic agricultural production. These ‘free trade’ policies, and a persistent armed conflict in the Colombian country side, have already driven thousands of peasants into remote zones, and even into national park areas, where they struggle to produce basic staples like bananas and yucca (manioc), and raise pigs and goats. Then, in these areas they often have to endure aerial fumigation which uses glyphosate, the active ingredient of Roundup. This aerial fumigation is part of Plan

Colombia, designed by the United States as part of its “drug war”, presumably to eradicate coca crops. We note in passing that Colombia, along with Israel and Egypt are the three largest recipients of U.S. military aid. But since aerial fumigation is almost inevitably uncontrolled, the use of this well-known carcinogenic product (glyphosate) also causes “collateral damage”: most importantly, the destruction of peasant staple crops and damage to the plant environment in general. It’s as if the only time the government focuses on the *campesinos* is to spray them like cockroaches with poisonous substances.

Labor leaders and elected representatives of the Polo Democrático Alternativo have supported the just demands of Colombian *campesinos* for a fair set of domestic policies on agriculture and protection of Colombian peasants. The response has been hostility and slander from the Colombian government --a regime “friendly” to the United States--, ominous death threats from the drug-trafficking paramilitary group *Los Rastrojos*, and other anonymous death threats in recent days.

Another sin committed by the democratic opposition was to expose President Santos’ proposed Colombian Ambassador to Washington, Mr. Carlos Urrutia, as a sleazy crook who has been deeply implicated in a squalid transnational scheme designed to subvert current legislation and cheat peasants out of land. The exposure led to the embarrassing withdrawal of the nomination after the story was picked up in the international edition of *Time* magazine.

As the misnomered “free trade agreements” take effect in Colombia, vast sectors of the population are feeling the devastating impact to their livelihoods and organizing to survive. Leaders in the democratic opposition who defend the legitimate demands of the people should not be threatened or attacked by the Colombian government or by illegal armed groups, but rather supported in their efforts to assure at least a minimal level of economic security for all Colombians.